



**BLACK MATSONI:
THE PRAGMATICS OF THE TBILISI STREET CODE**

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Abstract: Using material gathered during fieldwork carried out by the author in Tbilisi from 2007 to 2012, the article examines the urban street code as an example of Soviet and post-Soviet *principles* ('ponyatiya') in a non-Russian-speaking society. The street code, as a component of a street culture that has penetrated all strata of society, is derived by those who adhere to it from universal Soviet criminal principles, and is at the same time associated with national ideas of manliness. Evaluations are placed within a framework of a discussion of codes of behaviour, whereby the article combines ethnographic and ethnomethodological approaches to their study. Using the examples of mediation and settling of accounts on the streets, the author shows that the code determines the key parameters and specific procedures of public interaction, and also the rhetorical forms of disputes within the bounds of communicative commonality, thereby forming a social reality.

Keywords: code of behaviour, rules, street culture, thieves in law, masculinity, culture of dispute, means of argumentation.

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Using material gathered during fieldwork carried out by the author in Tbilisi from 2007 to 2012, the article examines the urban street code as an example of Soviet and post-Soviet *principles* ('ponyatiya') in a non-Russian-speaking society. The street code, as a component of a street culture that has penetrated all strata of society, is derived by those who adhere to it from universal Soviet criminal *principles*, and is at the same time associated with national ideas of manliness. Evaluations are placed within a framework of a discussion of codes of behaviour, whereby the article combines ethnographic and ethnomethodological approaches to their study. Using the examples of mediation and settling of accounts on the streets, the author shows that the code determines the key parameters and specific procedures of public interaction, and also the rhetorical forms of disputes within the bounds of communicative commonality, thereby forming a social reality.

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Introduction

Despite the special place which the experience of prison and the cultural phenomena which developed under its influence held in Soviet and post-Soviet society, research into *the principles*² — the prison or street codes of the post-Soviet area and, retrospectively, the Soviet Union — has not yet reached that stage of development which may be observed, for example, in the traditions of American anthropology regarding the prison and street codes of the USA. However, *the principles* have been attracting the attention of Russian-speaking intellectuals for quite a long time [Likhachov 1935; Shalamov 1989]. In Russian anthropology, Vadim Volkov and Svetlana Stephenson have examined *the principles* in their work on 'violent entrepreneurs' during the last decade of the twentieth century and the first of the twenty-first [Volkov 2002; Stephenson 2015; Stephenson 2016].

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An interest in codes of behaviour is traditional for ethnographers. Ethnomethodology provides an alternative approach to their study. While ethnographers concentrate primarily on how codes influence behaviour, ethnomethodologists focus on the actual practice of appealing

¹ *Matsoni* is a type of Georgian sour milk product resembling yogurt.

² *Ponyatiya*, lit. 'concepts', 'what is understood', the notions of how things must be done that collectively make up the rules of behaviour on the street and among criminals [Trans.].

to codes. This practice is examined within the framework of discussions of accounts of social actions — the utterances whereby one actor explains his / her behaviour to another in such a way that other people accept his / her actions as justified [Wieder 1974].

One of the most recent and most prominent pieces of ethnographic research into street codes is that by Elijah Anderson, who described life in the Afro-American ghetto in Philadelphia. For Anderson the code is an actually existing set of rules which are partly fixed and partly variable and which regulate interaction in the public space, in particular the use of violence. Breaking these rules results in sanctions [Anderson 1999]. The ethnomethodological view of street codes is represented in the work of D. Lawrence Wieder, who examined the code of prisoners undergoing a compulsory adaptation programme. For Wieder the code is not a set of norms, but rather a continual process during which the code is automatically re-created as an instrument of persuasion which allows someone to present his / her actions as orderly, regular and in accordance with the norms of morality; it is a process of creating a social reality which is accessible to the perceptions of the participants in the interaction in which appeals to the code are observed [Wieder 1974: 186]. Thanks to its flexibility the code is perceived as a set of rules which predetermine behaviour, but in reality it is used only to explain or justify behaviour [Ibid.: 197].

In analysing another example of codes of behaviour, that which is in force on the streets in Georgia, I shall make use of the achievements of both methods, following Jimerson and Oware, who combined them [Jimerson, Oware 2006], in considering that they do not contradict each other, but only emphasise different aspects of the functioning of the social phenomenon under consideration.

Also interesting, in connection with the norms of the code that circulate on the street and the ways they are applied, is the classification of rules which Alena Ledeneva gives in her work on informal practices in the Russian economy, based on Douglass North's ideas [Ledeneva 2001: 5–8]. She follows North in dividing rules into formal, informal and 'unwritten'. The difference between the first two is a matter of degree: in other words, formal and informal rules represent a continuum, at one end of which are customs, taboos, traditions, etc., and at the other written law codes, constitutions, etc. When this classification is projected onto the realities of the Georgian street, those norms which are imposed by the state correspond to the formal rules, and those which are represented by the street code will be the informal ones.

Unwritten rules are neither formal nor informal. They are the ways by which it is possible to get round the formal and informal rules, or observe them only in part. The unwritten rules are thus metarules, or rules about rules. They are the knowledge which allows one to navigate the sets of formal and informal rules and the ways in which

they are enforced. Though unarticulated, they provide guidelines that help one to understand which rules to follow in a particular context. Observing one formal or informal rule and neglecting another, or carrying out some decisions and ignoring others are all examples of how the rules are manipulated. The unwritten rules do not contain actual prescriptions, like the formal and informal codes, but possibilities for manipulating those prescriptions. The ability to apply them is only gained through practical experience. By their very nature, these rules are of the sort that will always remain unwritten. They defy any formulation that takes no account of context. The way unwritten rules work is best illustrated by demonstrating the practices that assume that they are being followed [Ledeneva 2001: 5–8].

The Tbilisi street code is what organises the format of street ‘negotiations’ — debates within the framework of the settling of differences on the street. It is precisely the context of settling differences on the street, and a variant of this, street mediation (section ‘The code as embodiment and instrument of the maintenance of justice’) that will be used in solving the basic problem of this exposition: the discovery of the pragmatics of *the principles*, that is, when the methods and contexts of the application of the informal rules making up the code are described (section ‘The street code: From a system of rules to the art of manipulation’). Consideration of the practice of the application of the code would be impossible without examining it as a system of informal rules (in the same section). An understanding of the moral and social foundations of these rules would in turn be impossible without an examination of their interrelationships with the underworld, the milieu on which their moral authority relies (section ‘The street code and the underworld in Georgia’).

The case of the Georgian street code is interesting as an example of Soviet and post-Soviet *principles* in a non-Russian and non-Russian-speaking society. Georgian *principles* are also worth consideration by researchers because in Georgian cities they are a component of the palpable street culture that has penetrated every section of society. Unlike the street cultures of the ethnic districts of the USA, which were those most often studied by anthropologists, the Georgian street in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods was neither ethnically coloured, nor marginalised, nor stigmatised [Jankowski 1991; Venkatesh, Levitt 2002; Garot 2007]. Furthermore, participation in street culture was not, in Georgia, correlated with belonging to any social class. The son of an academician in a street gang, or a university professor offering to ‘sort it out according to *the principles*’ are examples from recent everyday life [AFM 2007; 90 tslebis kriminaluri tbilisi da saqartvelo, e. ts. sadzmoebi 2016].

In Georgia the sphere in which street *principles* functioned was not confined to the street as such: they could be appealed to in the most

diverse social contexts and situations, reference to them being made in politicians' public speeches, business negotiations, etc. The extension of street *principles* to all sections of society is raised as a problem in Georgian social discourse (the mass media, internet fora) and private conversations [qurduli kontrkulturis shesakheb 2001; dzvelbichoba khalkhshi da politikashi, quchuri gagebis gavlena saqartveloshi 2007]. '85% of Georgians live according to street principles' is a typical judgment [kai bichoba, qurduli gageba da skhva idiotobebi, saqartvelos didi problema 2007]. This sort of evaluation is evidence more for the attention paid in society to the problem of the street and the operation of *the principles* than for the real extent of their spread. The sense that the rule of *principles* is ubiquitous is helped by the noticeable presence of the language of the street in Georgian speech (including the pronouncements of public figures).¹ At the same time the norm 'don't grass', the cornerstone of the street code, really can be heard in the most diverse social contexts; for example, it is commended to children by their schoolteachers.

Like urban 'street culture' as a whole, *the principles* are an urban phenomenon. Although local examples of the spread of *the principles* may also be found in rural Georgia, their operation outside the urban milieu is the result of the penetration of urban culture into the village ('In the village you can't explain things to a man [according to *the principles* (*po ponyatiyam*)], he won't understand') [AFM 2012–1].

In Georgian towns 'the street' as a social institution functioned first and foremost in the form of male neighbourhood communities, typical examples of the 'street corner society' described by W. Whyte from Boston's Italian district in the 1930s [Whyte 1993]. In Georgian slang 'street corner societies' are called *birzha* (pl. *birzhebi*), i.e. 'exchanges',² probably by analogy with the 'exchanges' where people who worked at a particular trade gathered in the hope of being hired (e.g. cabmen's exchanges). Opinions about the 'institution' of the street can often be heard in Georgia. The street is called 'the academy', the school of life that every man has to pass through. In the present article I shall examine the code and the practices and relationships based on it in the contexts of their functioning in neighbourhood male communities in Tbilisi.

The people who belong to this culture usually speak of the code (*the principles*) as 'a million nuances', the exposition of which is either impossible or pointless. The code in its strict sense — of informal rules — is indeed those norms of behaviour which are understood as

¹ Compare Putin's 'drown them in the bog' [*mochit v sortire*] [Putin's 1999 comment, *my ikh zamochim v sortire*, aimed at Chechen terrorists, hinged on a double pun: *mochit* means both to soak something in water and to 'wipe them out' in the sense of killing them, while *mochitsya* is to urinate. The verb *mochit* is an unmistakable reference to criminal slang and the statement made a huge impact. Eds.].

² From the Russian *birzha truda* 'labour exchange' [Eds.].

such on the street itself and are marked as ‘principles’, ‘criminal’,¹ and so on. The spectrum of what I understand by the street code is wider: it includes all the rules and metarules of behaviour which are connected with the idea of masculine honour and reputation.

The actuality with which this article is concerned belongs to the period from 1970 to 2010. This period is reflected in interviews with people of various ages living in Tbilisi which I conducted from 2007 to 2012 during several seasons of fieldwork within the framework of my dissertation project, which was devoted to the streets of Tbilisi. It was a period of large-scale political, social and economic changes in Georgia, and the street, being part of society, changed along with it. Nevertheless the logic of a normative culture represented by the street *principles* remained unchanged.

In the course of my field research I conducted semi-structured and so-called ethnographic interviews, when the researcher takes part in naturally occurring discussions. A total of more than a hundred interviews were recorded in the course of the project. All the interviews but three were in Georgian. Since I was living with a family for most of the time, I undertook observation of interactions within and around the family (participant observation) in which the ‘street’ factor figured; I was also able to observe interactions on the street (non-participant observation). Most of the people whom I interviewed were young men aged 18 to 30, for whom the ‘street’ stage of life was the recent past, though I also conducted interviews with men aged 30 to 70. There was also a small number of interviews with women of various ages and young girls. All names, and in some cases the names of the areas of the city mentioned in the fieldwork, have been changed. As well as field sources I have used material from the Georgian mass media and internet fora.

Only after the transition of power in Georgia in 2012, when Mikheil Saakashvili ceased to be president, did I understand how powerfully the conditions for my fieldwork had been predetermined by the campaign against organised crime that he had initiated and which coincided with the period of my fieldwork. All the time I was in the field I was refused interviews on only a few occasions, and only once or twice did I hear the people I was talking to make joking remarks about the contents of the interview, saying that ‘they would be locked up for that’. It was only in 2012, when the subject of the street —

¹ In this article, the terms ‘criminal’ and ‘underworld’ are used in the analytical discussion where the Russian original uses ‘thief’ and ‘thieves’ world’, since the Russian term *vor* has a considerably wider semiotic force than the English word, which suggests a level of criminal specialisation. In direct or indirect citations of street language, however, ‘thief’ has been used below [Eds.]. Thief in law (sometimes simply ‘thief’), a literal translation of the Russian *vor v zakone*, a hardened criminal (not necessarily an actual thief) of high and recognised standing among his fellow-criminals. Perhaps the nearest equivalent in the English-speaking world is the ‘made man’ of the American mafia [Trans.].

which before then had been heard of almost exclusively in the context of the struggle against one or other of its manifestations — began unexpectedly and distinctly to appear in the Georgian mass media, popular television series, and so on, that it became clear to me how strongly tabooed it had been in the public sphere all that time.¹ Now I connect my interlocutors' tendency to answer with generalisations unconnected with individual experience not only with the difficulty of narrating everyday experience, as I did before, but above all with a caution which was completely understandable in the political context of those years.

The gender factor seems to me to be a less significant limitation. On the one hand, a male researcher's access to participation in the practices of the street would still have been problematic, albeit to a lesser extent. On the other hand, a female researcher may be assumed to provoke fewer suspicions of having a hidden agenda (for example, the choice of a woman to carry out some hypothetical investigative mission concerning the street will seem less likely), nor is she a judge in matters of street values. It seems to me that there are both advantages and disadvantages in the position of a woman studying an area of particularly masculine practices.

The street code and the underworld in Georgia

A distinguishing feature of the Georgian street is its interconnection with prison and criminal culture. This connection does not stop at 'the romance of crime'. Among the key values of the 'street' in Georgia are respect for the criminal world and an orientation towards its authority. Moreover, in Georgian society induction into the society of the street was understood — assuming that the person being inducted had such intentions — as a possible step towards making a criminal career. (Thus one of my informants told me how his father, seeing that his son was getting seriously involved with the street, asked him anxiously, 'What, are you going to be a thief?' [AFM 2011].) In particular, the demonstrative rigidity and radicalism in questions of saving face and following the code characteristic of a particular status on the street, that of *dzveli bichi*, literally 'an old lad', was connected first and foremost with the possible prospect implied in that status of making a criminal career.

In considering the correlation of the criminal and street codes, it may be said that in Georgia the street code is a language of which the creation and interpretation of its normative laws are ascribed and referred to members of the underworld. At the same time *the principles*

¹ In the late Soviet period the shadow economy and corruption had probably been equally taboo areas of everyday life.

in Georgia are associated with a universal morality and particularly often with Georgian ideals of manliness. ‘Incidentally, if you were to call my father *dzveli bichi*... the only thing is, that he has a job. Apart from that he lives an ordinary *dzveli bichi* life. Masculine and criminal principles have a lot in common. Or at any rate they did have. <...> if you’re a man, you can’t stay under *abaroti* [the effect of “reverse”, the need to get your own back after an offence]’ [AFM 2011].

The connection between the street code and criminal culture is reflected in one of its emic names in Georgian: as well as *quchuri gageba*, lit. ‘street concept’ or ‘street understanding’, or simply *gageba*, ‘concept’, the names *qurduli gageba*, ‘criminal concept’ or *shavi gageba*, ‘black concept’ are also used. (Criminals, and those close to them in authority, are also called ‘black’ in Georgia, as will be described below.)

The street code in the Soviet and post-Soviet area has been examined in the research of Vadim Volkov and Svetlana Stephenson devoted to Russian gangsters from the late 1980s to the early years of the present century. Gangsters are members of groups formed on the basis of street communities; they engaged in racketeering and other forms of economic activity.

Unlike ordinary criminals, gangsters did not have any significant biographical relationship with the traditional underworld and used the techniques of their former professions (sport, service in the police, etc.) in their activities [Volkov 2002: 90]. Both authors consider the correlation between the criminal (prison) and gangster codes, and stress the fundamental differences between the social order and, consequently, codes of the criminals and gangsters. From their point of view, the difference between them is rooted in the conditions under which they were formed: whereas the criminals’ *principles* reflect the almost constant incarceration of members of this group, within the framework of hierarchically organised prison groups, the bandit code is primarily organised around illegal business activities [Stephenson 2015: 182]. Considering Russian gangsters, Vadim Volkov sees their codes as the criminal *principles* reinterpreted and adapted to new forms of activity [Volkov 2002: 91]. In other words, Volkov is inclined to see a relationship of succession between the criminal and gangster codes. Svetlana Stephenson too correlates their codes in a similar manner [Stephenson 2015].

In her efforts to localise the sources of the gangster and street codes, Stephenson speaks of the profound influence that criminal traditions had on the street culture of young people in the Soviet Union. She connects the increase in this influence with the death of Stalin, when liberated prisoners began to transmit the culture of the GULAG to the ‘civilian’ population. Criminal *principles* gradually became part of street knowledge and, like the later gangster *principles*, are still

widely used by members of street groups [Stephenson 2015: 180]. However, although the criminal world transmitted some of its key cultural norms and models of organisation to the gangsters and the street, it could not impose its own order on them, since its code and principle of social organisation did not correspond to the new Russian realities. As a result, criminals lost their cultural influence in post-Soviet Russia [Ibid.: 186], giving way, in practice, to gangsters.

Although the criminal world of the USSR had internationalist inclinations, and tried to efface ethnic distinctions within its own milieu, it is obvious that Georgian thieves in law were a special case, both with regard to the nature of their internal organisational structure, and to their interrelations with society. That there was a special connection between Georgia and the phenomenon of the criminal world, which was taken for granted by the older generation who had grown up in the Soviet Union, is illustrated by the figures: at the beginning of the 1990s people from Georgia made up a third of the thieves in law, no fewer, in fact, than the Russian criminals, which is obviously disproportionate when one takes into account the relative sizes of the populations of Russia and Georgia [Glonti, Lobzhanidze 2004: 45]. In the opinion of the criminologist Gavin Slade, the period from the 1920s to the 1950s was the time when the thieves in law who acted across the wide spaces of the USSR represented to a significant extent a cultural unity, but from the middle of the twentieth century ethnic (or regional. — *E. Z.*) differences began to manifest themselves more and more within the criminal underworld. According to Slade's hypothesis, whereas in Russia criminals were forced to surrender their position to the new violent entrepreneurs ('the authorities') in the 1990s, in Georgia this did not happen. Slade explains this by saying that by this time, although they retained the symbolic part of criminal culture as a façade, Georgian thieves in law had managed to adapt to the new conditions and had become practically indistinguishable from the entrepreneurs [Slade 2007: 275].

Glonti and Lobzhanidze connect the specific features of the evolution of thieves in law with the scale of the development of Georgia's shadow economy in comparison with the other Soviet republics. In Georgia many underground 'workshops' (*tsekhebi*)¹ were set up — businesses that produced off-the-record goods out of raw materials stolen from legitimate factories. By Mars and Altman's reckoning, in the 1970s the shadow economy made up more than 25% of the republic's GDP [Mars, Altman 1983: 546]. They date the appearance of the 'workshops' to the 1970s, but according to my field data it had become possible for underground businesses to operate much earlier,

¹ From Russian *tsekh*, a factory workshop or work collective [Eds.].

immediately after the death of Stalin [AFM 2011]. Georgian criminals were quick to realise both the economic potential and the vulnerability of the ‘workshop people’, and were able to take control of them. As a result, a new type of illegal clan came into being in Georgia, ‘uniting professional criminals, representatives of the shadow economy, the high-level bureaucrats who protected them and corrupt members of the law-enforcement agencies’ [Glonti, Lobzhanidze 2004: 48]; that is, Georgian thieves in law changed one of the main principles of the criminal code and started to make use of state administrative resources.

Typical of the Georgian underworld was yet another series of peculiarities regarding the role and image of its representatives in Georgian society, which are important for understanding the context in which the street code functioned. These were above all the authority and prestige which thieves in law enjoyed. ‘Thieves’ justice’ was connected, in the minds of people belonging to Georgian culture, with opposition to state power, particularly Soviet power; criminals in Georgia were called ‘black’, in contrast to the ‘reds’, i.e. party members, Soviets. Nationalist and separatist feelings were already running high in Georgia in the 1970s and 1980s, and the protest image of criminal culture answered these feelings.

The character of the interrelations of the urban elite (*the intelligentsia*) and the criminal world is also evidence of the special place of thieves in law in Georgian society. Paul Manning writes in his essay on the transformation of the elite of the Georgian city (Tbilisi) that the anti-Soviet disposition of the Georgian intelligentsia found a sort of countercultural utopia in criminal ‘antisociety’, opposed to the norms embodied by the state [Manning 2009: 77]. However, one may find arguments in Georgian writings on public life that question the assertion (which is also frequently encountered in Georgian public discourse) that the Georgian intelligentsia and organised crime were united by protest against the existing authorities [mkhedrioni]. As a counterargument in discussions of this sort those facts are brought forward that show that the relationship between criminals and intelligentsia was that of patron and client. ‘The leading criminals would often give a share to famous actors, directors, artists, writers, poets and so on, since they knew that they would be a “roof” for their illegal business; who, after all, would lift a finger against a “workshop” that was under the protection of an actor or director who was famous throughout the whole country?’ [qvelmoqmedeba da gadasakhadebi]. Without drawing any definite conclusions about the extent to which the ideological orientations of these two key sections of Georgian society really coincided, one can certainly say that representatives of them might not only sit at the same table, but also be ‘friends with the whole family’ [AFM 2007; mkhedrioni].

A distinguishing feature of Georgian criminals was the way they were assimilated into 'legal' society. Thus it was usually known within the neighbourhood community where a criminal lived, and moreover it was considered that the presence of such a neighbour guaranteed the security of the residents of the neighbourhood. This openness was partly the result of the arbitrating function fulfilled by criminals and people who enjoyed similar authority to theirs. In Georgia, the performance of this activity, which was usual for thieves in law, extended far beyond their own circle: people who had no other connection to the criminal world could seek justice from it. Slade cites the criminals' wide experience of mediation as one of the reasons why in Georgia, unlike Russia, they could preserve their niche in competition with the new forces [Slade 2009: 9].

Thanks to its flexibility in the 1990s after the fall of the USSR, the Georgian criminal underworld not only kept afloat: according to the evaluations of Glonti and Lobzhanidze, at the time when Georgia was establishing itself as an independent state (the presidency of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the first period of Eduard Shevardnadze's presidency) the clans which had formed with the participation of criminals 'became so influential that they effectively replaced the state power structures and practically controlled the entire economy of the republic' [Glonti, Lobzhanidze 2004: 53].

In this way Georgian criminals achieved considerable economic and political success during the period from the end of the 1960s to the middle of the 1990s, and also, essentially, a social position in which they enjoyed prestige and moral authority. The success, influence and 'respectability' of thieves in law in Georgia were the main reasons why the Georgian street did not simply absorb 'the romance of crime': adolescents who were attracted by the street considered a criminal career as one of the possible pathways through life, and often a desirable one. Since everyone in Tbilisi went through 'the academy of the street' (only the degree to which individual adolescents were involved, and their personal life stances, varied), the street in Georgia, as a milieu for particular discourses and practices, really was 'management training' for the criminal world. Besides those competences that a young man had acquired by completing his Soviet school education in Georgia, he had received in parallel on the street that knowledge and experience which allowed him to consider a career in the criminal world as a possible prospect.

Since 'street' socialisation was universal in large Georgian cities, the influence of the criminal world on the rising generation was also obvious to the leaders of the state. The decree of the Georgian Ministry of the Interior of 31 August 1982 'On the State of the

Internal Affairs Department's Struggle with Persons Upholding Criminal Traditions, and Measures for Reinforcing This Struggle' bears witness to the dissemination of 'criminal traditions' among young people [Glonti, Lobzhanidze 2004: 55]. The decree was concerned with the schools and technical colleges, and mentioned among them the most prestigious schools of the city — for example, the historic First School (now First Grammar School) on Rustaveli Prospect.

In the conditions of unemployment, lawlessness and disorganisation that prevailed in society during the 1990s, the significance of the street as a career option was only reinforced, and for many young men it became almost the only possible sphere of activity. The street became more organised: the male neighbourhood groups began to take the form of gangs and to fulfil their functions, and on the basis of street resources the politician and criminal 'authority' Jaba Ioseliani formed the paramilitary 'Mkhedrioni' organisation.

Mikheil Saakashvili, who became president as a result of the Rose Revolution, initiated large-scale reforms. One of the flagship initiatives of this period was the war on organised crime and corruption. A law was passed providing for punishment not for the commission of a crime, but for the very fact of belonging to the criminal world. It is important that the law punished such important practices for members of the underworld as collecting funds for the support of criminals, arbitration, etc. A significant measure was the confiscation of the property of members of the underworld. Reform of the Ministry of the Interior, the police and the prison system, which implied *inter alia* their restructuring and restaffing, undermined the connection between the criminal world and the departments of government concerned with the maintenance of security and order [Slade 2012: 38–48]. A criminal career no longer offered obvious prospects, and thus lost its attractiveness. State propaganda designed to dispel the aura of romance around the ideals of 'criminal justice' contributed to a significant (but not absolute) diminution of thieves' authority.

The campaigns undertaken against crime and corruption led to a blurring and marginalisation of the entire system of relations of which the street code had been one of the regulating forces. Previously it had hardly been possible to ignore the norms of the code: for example, in Soviet times, according to what my informants told me, in a case where there was a conflict, say, between members of the Komsomol who did not take part in street life, and someone who did share the culture of the street, it would still be sorted out according to criminal *principles* [AFM 2007]. Under the influence of anti-street propaganda, alternative values and norms came more and more often to be placed in opposition to the street code.

The code as embodiment and instrument of the maintenance of justice

Informants with street experience, even after they have left street life behind and re-evaluated it, usually, in one way or another, connect the idea of justice with thieves in law and their judicial processes, recognise their authority and have a positive view of their influence on the street, and on order in society generally. ‘A thief?.. You know what sort of people they were; now in our time [the speaker was born in 1981] there were still some of the thieves of the old generation, Kettle’s, left. (They used to have nicknames like that.) <...> Now they were really, how should I put it?.. At least, they were educated people. Not academic education. But they were clever, that is really they were people, thinking people, because in reality they controlled the situation, they managed the chaos and were the real authorities’ [AFM 2009].

The code, or the thieves’ *principles* were sometimes metaphorically called ‘crystal’ on the street, meaning their absolute purity and transparency. The bearer of the justice embodied in the code and the supreme arbiter was the thief in law. He could not be wrong, since he was one of those who had made the rules, and so he had the final right to apply or modify them. The ideal scenario implied that going to see the thief would finally decide who was right and who was wrong in a conflict. Refusal to ‘go up and see the thief’ (and they did, indeed, go *up* to see the thief, as to a higher being: in Georgian this action is denoted by the verb *asvla*, which means upward movement) automatically meant that the person who had refused was in the wrong. “‘Come with me, let’s go up to the thief, [and sort out] if that is so.” If you refused to go, that was it, even if you were as right as the heavens, you were still busted. Refuse, and you’re automatically in the wrong. The thief had asked for you. Then it would come to his hearing that “we invited him to come to you, and he didn’t.” Then he would say, “What do you call that, not coming to see me? Why not? We had to find out the truth, and that’s all.” [AFM 2012-1]. In the course of a conflict, once one side had made it known that ‘the thief’s intervention is taking place’, or ‘the case has been taken up to the thief’, no independent actions in that conflict were considered permissible — it had to be settled with the thief’s mediation.

However, usually these respectful and enthusiastic descriptions relate to the thieves of bygone years, semi-mythical heroes of the ‘golden age’, none of whom are left nowadays. Real examples of criminal justice often fail to live up to the ideals. ‘But really <...> if one side involves a thief or *dzveli bichi*, however much in the wrong they might be, if they are the side that has involved him, he will find some way of finding for them, and, perhaps, finding against you. And it all goes for a settlement. Objectively it’s very rare that they try to find out who’s right and who’s wrong, you can count it on the fingers of your

hand' [AFM 2011]. According to data from the interviews, only recently did thieves start accepting money for arbitrating. 'When the terms "my thief" and "your thief" appeared, that is, when they're sorting things out, imagine what "my thief" is — that is, I pay him money, and you pay yours — those aren't thieves any more. They didn't use to pay money [to thieves for settling cases]. But in my childhood [the 1990s and early 2000s] they were already doing it. There were, for example, hundred-dollar thieves' [AFM 2009]. The idea that the thieves of old took no payment for their services undoubtedly helps to idealise them. One way or another, the services in settling conflicts provided by thieves and other 'authorities' who relied on the code and their closeness to the criminal world, were in demand both in the 1990s and the following decade, and earlier, and also among people who were a long way from 'street life'. Even though only men who spoke 'the language of the street' were recognised as subjects of this law, this did not stop other people from having recourse to it. If, for example, a woman preferred to have her question settled by the street 'authorities', she could do so via an intermediary, for example, a male relative who knew his way around the relationships of the street. Or a woman might be offered the 'street' route of settlement if her dispute was with someone for whom that method was preferable: for example, in the course of a quarrel with a neighbour about a roof he had built which obstructed the view from the windows of someone I knew in Tbilisi, he invited her to 'bring her people', that is, to ask for some male go-betweens with whom it would be possible to settle the question 'according to *the principles*' [AFM 2011].

The street offered a possible and accessible means of solving situations of conflict — they would choose that alternative which promised to be most effective. An important role here was played by the mistrust of state institutions, particularly institutions of coercion, which had formed in Georgian society to a large extent under the influence of the attitudes of street culture. Calling the police was considered in the first place a sign of inability, unworthy of a man, to solve his problems by himself, and secondly was associated with informing, one of the worst 'sins' in the eyes of street culture. It is important that in the context of opposition to a foreign (since 1921, Soviet) state, even an antagonist and offender was seen as 'one of ours' [Zakharova 2012].

I will cite the reminiscences of a young man, who worked at a bank and did not identify himself with the street, of his 'street period', which was the end of the 1990s and early years of the next decade. 'You had to pay both sides¹ [i.e. both the criminals and the police]. But still, the milieu where I grew up, [where] the thief was still the

¹ Thieves traditionally took 20% of the estimated value of the object of the dispute.

ideal, did influence me, because I always thought that it was better to deal with thieves than cops. Partly, say, for the sake of my name [i.e. reputation], and partly because they would be more help' [AFM 2011].

The path of solving a question with the help of a thief or 'authority' may be considered as a softer one that avoids making the situation more acute: 'I remembered Vakhtangovich, there was such a man, he had a big company, a business man, knew what was what and everything. But when he needed something, had to get money [that was owed to him by somebody], he would go to an "authority". And he did that because he didn't want to make even more serious trouble for him [the debtor] — you can still understand his position, the guilty party's. But if the police had turned up on his doorstep, he'd have got the full works. Been locked up and everything. But if it's an "authority" demanding it of you, at least he won't lock you up. If you're in the wrong, you're in the wrong' [AFM 2011].

The reconciliatory function of criminal justice places it alongside traditions schemes of mediation in the Caucasus. The practice of regulating conflicts through mediators, which has been described from material from the North Caucasus in Soviet and post-Soviet times, was regarded and functioned as an instrument that allowed the parties to be reconciled, thereby avoiding putting the mechanism of the blood feud in motion [Albogachieva 2014: 96–7; Babich 2014: 81; Bersanova 2014: 117–9].

It may be supposed that conflicts that concern questions of honour, be it between individuals or between groups, follow the principle defined by Gregory Bateson as symmetrical schismogenesis, or splitting. This principle of relations implies a progressive intensification of the opponents' behaviour as they exchange symmetrical moves. For example, if the answer to boasting is boasting, the opponents begin to push each other towards bigger and bigger boasts. According to Bateson, if nobody or nothing imposes limits on this process, it leads to more and more acute rivalry and finally to the collapse of the whole system [Bateson 1972]. Street mediation 'according to *the principles*' allows schismogenesis to be halted, and the conflict goes no further. This is possible because the street arbiter is acknowledged to have the right and ability to determine 'who is in the wrong' in a conflict in such a way that the parties are satisfied with the mediator's decision. For this very reason it is believed that a social order that relies on *the principles* makes it possible to restrain violence on the street.

The arbitration services offered by thieves and 'authorities' are a more effective and swift means of solving the question when the injured party does not care about the punishment for which formal law provides (via the state). The choice between the two jurisdictions was relatively free, but 'according to *the principles*' in every particular

case it must be final: a case begun ‘on the street side’ must be concluded ‘on the same side’. There is a perfectly rational explanation for this: ‘Say, I lent you some money, and you won’t give it back... The person I’m going to talk to on your side <...> must also belong to my world. And besides, going from here to there causes problems for both sides, and then in the investigation it’ll start: “Who came to see you?” — I think you understand what I mean. And there is a sort of dogma, that if you trouble someone on the street side, you mustn’t go, mustn’t put yourself in the hands of any agency. And that has already hardened into a dogma. But where it had its beginning... But it is justified, yes’ [AFM 2011].

I shall permit myself to give in some detail a street mediator’s story about one of his interventions. Street mediation is a practice that is based on an appeal to the code. From the example of the following story it becomes clear that street mediation is quite an onerous and meticulous process of investigation, negotiation and making sure that the parties carry out their obligations.

Inf. 1: There was a case like that, about money. The mother-in-law of the bloke who came and asked us had lent money to a woman she worked with — there were women [involved in the action] — and then the other woman had gone abroad. In this case the money had to be got back [i.e., that was the task that faced the narrator as mediator]. The one we had to go to here [to sort it out] was her son, and the one whose mother-in-law it was had begun to sort this problem out for himself.

Int.: Himself?

Inf. 1: Incidentally, there’s a difference here: if someone comes to you and says ‘Help me,’ then some part of that sum will belong to you [the mediator]. If he sorts it out himself, then he keeps all the money. That is, he came to that woman’s son [and said], this is the situation, and the lad promised, said, I have to get the money from the bank and I’ll get it back to you in a month, maximum. And after this, after this first promise, the lad promised three more times, a year passed, and in the end he [the son-in-law of the woman who had lent the money] came to us. Well, <...> he came to see my friend, and he phoned me, saying, I need you, we have to talk, this is what’s happened. And I’m like: ‘By all means.’ <...> So we began all that, then we spoke to the lad in person <...> We knew that he’d already promised about six times, so I wasn’t happy that he should just give me a promise <...> He didn’t dare put it off any more, but he probably didn’t have any money either, so he brought someone else from Sololaki [i.e. another ‘authority’ from Sololaki, the district where the narrator lived], told him what was going on, two of them in fact, and they came and we talked. <...> So it turned out they were convinced that the money should be paid, too. They said that the money must be paid, too. We left, so did they, and the next day he was supposed to bring the money, ‘I’ll bring it by evening,’ he said. They [the

mediators] on his side had also been troubled [i.e. had taken part in the case], and now, if he didn't bring me the money, I could demand it from anyone who had come with him, that is, he takes responsibility, since he had come with him. And of course we also reminded him, if he didn't bring the money, just in case, give us your number, so we can get in touch with you. Everything was sorted out officially. He went, and before it was evening, the lad who'd come with him [i.e. the mediator] rang us up, saying 'I want to meet you' — 'Go ahead, we're in such and such a place, come right here.'

Int.: There was some sort of problem.

Inf. 1: Yes, and this is what the problem was <...> It turned out that his mother-in-law had not just made a loan, she was charging interest. I didn't have the faintest idea about that, I thought she'd just lent her the money, 'Give it back in two or three months,' here the time doesn't matter [when interest is being charged], in general, she'd just lent the money. She could have had that debt for ten years, so long as she paid the interest. People don't ask for that sort of money [interest on a debt]. And what sort of situation is that — now you're in a bad position.

Int.: Why didn't he tell you before?

Inf. 1: That's what I wanted to know then.

Inf. 2: And if you were to tell [the mediators on] the other side that 'I didn't know,' [they would say] 'Why didn't you know? If you didn't know, what are you doing here?'

Int.: So why didn't the other side say that?

Inf. 1: The other side didn't know either. Then the lad, that is, the one whose mother was supposed to pay the money back, found out, his mother rang him up, she was over in Greece¹, she was a fugitive, and a fugitive here too because of some debts. In a word, we found it out for sure, and there was a woman, Tamuna, she could confirm that she really had lent the money at interest. And just as the other side takes responsibility, so you've got to take responsibility too.

Int.: And in this case did anything happen to you for being in the wrong?

Inf. 1: No, it didn't, except at the level of our self-respect. But it could easily have been that he would have asked officially, 'Why didn't you know?' <...>

Inf. 2: You take responsibility and you have to know all the details, even the least significant... That is, you can sit there with a Dictaphone and record it [laughs].

Int.: And in this case, why was it you they came to?

¹ Greece is a popular destination for economic migrants from Georgia.

Inf. 1: They came because they're neighbours, the one who rang me up and the one who was supposed to get the money back, they're friends. He, that Ramaza, told my friend, and my friend, I don't know — if you like I can ring him up and ask him why he thought of me [laughs] [AFM 2011].

The word 'officially', which the narrator used twice, is very telling. It is evidence of the high degree of 'procedurality' of the interactions that rely on the code, of the distinct separation of such interactions into a particular format, within which everything is said 'officially', which means that the speaker is ready to accept responsibility for what he says.

The active force on which street mediation is based is the reputational capital of the mediators who are involved, which serves as the guarantee that they will fulfil their obligations. It is the reputation laid on the line that determines the responsibility that the narrator speaks of. By guaranteeing to fulfil his obligations, he risks his honour. The mediator takes responsibility for the words and deeds of the person whose interests he represents, and also that the substantive and procedural aspects of the case that he has taken on will correspond to the code.

In this case the mediator made an error in respect of the substantive aspect of the question, because he was not sufficiently *au fait* with the case. The money — the subject of the quarrel — had been lent at interest, which the mediator did not know, and consequently he was proceeding from a false idea of the conditions of the bargain. According to the norms of the code, which disapproves of the sort of economic relations which are called 'usury', street mediators may mediate for the return of the principal, but not for the payment of interest. Since the premisses on which the mediator who told this story was acting were false, the agreement which he had managed to reach in the course of the negotiations was void.

The mediator refers to the same norm when he recounts another situation, where, acting as a mediator for the return of money to a creditor in a private mortgage agreement, he could only negotiate the return of the principal, but not the interest [AFM 2011].

What is the reputational capital of a mediator based on? In respect of the mafia and the violent entrepreneurs of Russia, who also provide mediation services, Vadim Volkov writes of the reputation for decisiveness, which he opposes to the commercial reputation [Volkov 2002]. While a commercial reputation is founded on clients' collective belief in their supplier's capacity to fulfil his obligations, a reputation for decisiveness indicates a readiness to use force. The reputation for decisiveness belongs to the sphere of relationships between those who have the means for violence and has no immediate connection with the clients or buyers. It is based on precedents

of a decisive, coherent and successful use of force in conditions of strategic competition. While ‘in the case of the mafia or the state at an international level or any other organisation which has the capacity to use force at its own discretion, their commercial reputation as a supplier of security services will depend on their reputation for decisiveness and the other qualities which ensure the effective deterrence of potential threats,’ the commercial reputation of a street mediator as a supplier of mediation services will depend on his reputation as a representative of a world in which a reputation is something more complex than simply a readiness to use physical force: it is the reputation of a negotiator, an expert on the methods of the street, and a man with connections [Volkov 2002: 113]. If a commercial reputation is directed at clients, and a reputation for decisiveness at competitors in the use of force, the mediator’s reputation is addressed to the urban community of ‘good lads’, a community of people who are equals in honour and whose status is determined in the categories of the street code. A negotiator’s commercial reputation is similar to the reputation for decisiveness of violent entrepreneurs, because, just as a protection business is recognised by its clients as a result of its being recognised by other potential users of force, a negotiator’s reputation is the result of his recognition by other potential negotiators, but unlike it is not based on competition.

The street code: From a system of rules to the art of manipulation

The ability to use the code comes only with practical experience, since the rules themselves contain no indication of the situations in which their application is necessary, appropriate or justified. It follows from this that no one who does not belong to the community of rule-bearers will be capable of applying them, even if he knows what the actual rules are. This incapacity is connected with the fact that only someone who is ‘one of us’ will be adept at the background practices which are based on the implicit practical knowledge that unites the community of rule-bearers. The background practices contextualise the use of the rules and help to determine their application. The ability to use the rules is a sign of belonging to that community. Someone who can speak the language of the street — the language of the code — has the right to claim a place in that community of equals.

The code is built on the opposition between everything approved by and associated with the ideals of ‘thieves’ justice’, and ‘grass’ — everything which is disapproved of and associated with the cops,¹ the prison administration and their minions, above all informers. The moral and ethical foundations of the code are usually implicit, that

¹ In Georgian slang the police are called *dzaglebi*, literally ‘dogs’.

is, there is no discussion about why one should behave in such and such a way. But the moral significance of these norms is indicated by the way people who break them are labelled: ‘There is a name for every sort of behaviour: *nasedka*, *prochi*, *fufloshniki*, that is what they called them <...> so they called someone a *krisa* because of his behaviour’ [AFM 2012-1]. I should explain the meaning of the statuses listed in the quotation: a *nasedka* (broody hen) is someone who secretly engages in spying and informing at the behest of the law-enforcement agencies,¹ a *prochi*² is what they call someone who cannot be trusted because he has proved dishonourable or weak in particular situations, *fufloshniki*, a ‘fibber’,³ is someone who fails to pay his gambling debts on time, a *krisa*, ‘rat’ is someone who is dishonest with money or steals from his own people.

The confirmation of the legitimacy according to the code of any physical or speech act on the street might be required, especially when it comes to accusations or insults and so on: ‘However much he may have been in the wrong, when you came, it just did not happen that you hit him straight away, you would explain [to the guilty part from the point of view of the code] that “you’ve done this, you’ve gone wrong here”, and then you would hit him. So that the people with an interest in the matter would understand that this and that had happened, and so you were hitting him. If you’d hit him straight away, then they’d have made you explain afterwards [why you had hit him without explaining], so you explain first’ [AFM 2012-1].

Adolescents pick up the code both from each other and from their ‘grown-up brothers’ who are from seven to ten years older and under whose patronage they are. ‘The grown-ups’ may give the younger ones direct instruction in how, according to *the principles*, one should behave in this or that situation. ‘Either we’d go with them to sort things out [as mediators], or instead we’d tell them what to say, this is basically when they were little, younger than us, we’d teach them, “Mention this and that”’ [AFM 2011].

A person’s level of competence in the area of *the principles* depends on the degree to which he is involved in street life and on whether he has career plans that are connected with the street. But a rudimentary knowledge of the code is essential to every urban adolescent. ‘The rule existed. Unwritten laws, which I couldn’t entirely comprehend even then. I didn’t know everything, I wasn’t interested. I knew the everyday rules, so to speak, which you needed to get on with people. I wasn’t thinking of a criminal career <...> and so I didn’t need to know everything’ [AFM 2007].

¹ In British street English, grass [Eds.].

² *Prochi* (Georgian, vulgar) — ‘arsehole, anus’.

³ From Russian *fuflo*, ‘flannel, nonsense’ [Eds.].

A significant part (if not the overwhelming majority) of the slang vocabulary of *the principles* is borrowed from Russian jargon: *razborka*, *spravedlivi*, *abaroti*.¹ People are aware of this as a specific lexicon, and call it ‘the terms’.

Not only would an all-embracing description of street methods be an impossible task, so would an exhaustive record of the street code as a set of rules. Therefore, in order to give an idea of the contents of *the principles* and the methods of their manipulation, we shall give only a few examples of the norms, and then examine some cases that illustrate how they are used in the context of specific interactions.

All the norms which the street code represents may be divided into two groups: those which regulate physical acts (primarily violence) and those that regulate speech acts. It is interesting that a verbal insult does more harm to one’s honour than a physical one.

Outside the boundaries of the field described by the norms of the code there is arbitrary action (*besprideli*),² groundless, and, therefore, ‘unjust’ violence. Arbitrary actors are aggressors who deliberately ignore the whole system of relationships based on the code and respect for the authorities who depend upon it.

The norms of the code create an ideal space in which every act is accountable. A lad on the street must not lose control of himself. In this respect Georgian urban street culture is the opposite, for example, of what James Diego Vigil describes in respect of the Mexican-American street culture of the chicanos of Southern California. One of the important values of the latter is the concept of *locura*, which means the particular condition of a man in a fight when he turns into a sort of berserker, losing control of himself and committing ‘wild’ or ‘mad’ actions. Most of them attain this state with the help of alcohol or drugs [Vigil 1988: 439]. The Georgian street aims for a strict observance of procedure and a pedantic scrutiny of every action. Here no one can ‘go off the rails’ even in a fight: the code regulates whom you may hit, how and with what, and anyone who breaks the rules will be ‘called to account’. Only the limits on speech acts are lifted in a fight: things can be said without consequences that outside a fight situation one would have to answer for.

Here I shall give a few norms from the first group, that regulates physical acts:

- the prohibition against ‘actions’ (meaning violent actions) in a domestic setting;

¹ ‘Sorting out’, ‘just’, ‘reprisal’ [Trans].

² From Russian *bespredel* (lit. ‘without limits’), or arbitrariness [Eds.].

- the prohibition against violent actions against anyone squatting on his heels;
- the prohibition against beating anyone who is lying down, drunk, and against kicking or hitting with an ‘object’ (i.e., fighting is permitted only with the bare hands);
- the prohibition against violence against anyone who is accompanying a woman;
- the prohibition against fighting over quarrels arising from gambling;¹
- the prohibition against carrying a weapon, if the nature of the meeting has been defined in advance by the participants as non-violent (negotiatory);
- the obligation to reply with a violent act (a blow) to certain challenges (for example, *dedis gineba*, an obscene insult to one’s mother);
- the prohibition against taking part in a settling of affairs when under the influence of drink or drugs.

The norms which regulate spoken behaviour define the communicative format of settling affairs on the street, the aim of which is proclaimed as the establishment of ‘the truth’. Street settlements relate to practices where the participants’ attention to observing the code is at its most acute.

A significant part of the norms that regulate spoken behaviour regulate the argumentation and instruments of persuasion that are permissible in the process of resolving a conflict, including how the participants bear witness, that is, make affirmations concerning facts. Thus the linguistic form of utterances within the framework of street disputes is subject to regulation. Such a tendency towards formalisation and detailed elaboration is described in the literature as a characteristic feature of legal language [Danet 1980: 540]. The norms that regulate spoken behaviour are on the one hand procedural rules for the regulation of customary law, and on the other, elements of a rhetorical culture, of formalised communication. Let us examine a few examples of such norms:

- the prohibition against using certain insults (classified as offending his honour) against a person without accompanying ‘grounds’ or *aprvdania*,² i.e. an explanation of why he deserves them;
- the prohibition against asserting facts and events which the speaker has not witnessed. Connected with the logic of this prohibition is, for example, the norm relating to gambling,

¹ This prohibition originally related to card-playing, which has a particular significance in criminal culture. It is interesting that nowadays this prohibition may be extended to computer games played over the web. I was told a joke connected with it — ‘If you play, sort it out with the admin’ [AFM 2012-1].

² From Russian *opravdanie*, ‘justification’ [Eds.].

according to which a man can only be called a ‘fibber’, and have the corresponding negative status allotted to him, by the person to whom he has lost money;

- the prohibition against using information obtained from a woman as an argument, still less opposing it to an adversary’s words in a settling of affairs. This is explained by the fact that a woman may not be ‘called to account’, and that, besides, according to the principles of the street women are ‘multi-coloured’, that is, neither ‘black’, revering ‘criminal justice’, nor ‘red’, i.e. on the side of the (originally Soviet) state authorities, and therefore cannot be trusted;
- the prohibition against mentioning facts of which one is in doubt; this implies that such expressions as ‘perhaps’, ‘I thought’ are excluded;
- the prohibition against the conditional mood, i.e. against making suppositions and presumptions about the person one is talking to while settling accounts (‘If you had done that...’);
- the prohibition against expressing doubt about the truthfulness of an answer to a question. The logic of this norm is: if you ask, be satisfied with the answer, and if you know the answer, don’t ask;
- the prohibition against the intervention of a third person in a conversation between two others;
- the prohibition against direct questions about the street status of the person you are talking to (you must not ask, ‘Who are you?’, you should ask ‘What sort of life do you live?’);
- the prohibition against arranging a *strelka* (a meeting with the aim of settling affairs) over the telephone. Anyone who breaks this norm may be accused of *bozoba*, i.e. of ‘behaving like a grass’, of being an informer. This prohibition is explained by the fact that telephones may be tapped by the law-enforcement agencies. It is supposed that the premisses for this norm are the aim of excluding all forms of communication other than face to face, since these facilitate third-party manipulation of a kind that is not identifiable when one of the participants is not present (when someone is being held at gunpoint, say).

Knowledge of these norms, and others like them, is absolutely necessary in order to make a career on the street, and the more profound it is, the greater the arsenal of instruments for manipulation.

It is possible to speak of the assumptions that create the particular significance for the code as a culture of communicative interaction for the Georgian street. While, for example, Russian gangsters and members of street groups who also use *the principles* in the final analysis rely on the argument of force [Volkov 2002: 99], in Georgia physical strength takes second place to the word. This is another indication of the connection between street and ‘thieves’ law’ in Georgia.

As in the thieves' world, the most valuable competence on the Georgian street is the ability to argue — to demonstrate that one is in the right and someone else is in the wrong. For this very reason the standard image on the Georgian street of the aforementioned *dzveli bichi* by no means assumes a threatening athleticism. The *dzveli bichi* is thin and stooping. Unlike the Russian street, where gangs grew out of various sports associations and weightlifting clubs, on Georgian exchanges athletic success was not of primary importance. The Georgian street itself is aware of this difference. 'Sportsmen' are spoken of with scorn, they are the butt of contemptuous remarks like 'I'll cut your muscles off,' or 'what are you pretending to be a thief for, lad, are your muscles getting excited?' [AFM 2011]. According to the logic of such utterances, the culture of the Georgian street is the triumph of the word, not of the fist.

The importance given to words here may also be traced in the range of punishments to which the thief or whoever is determining 'who is right and who is wrong' may 'sentence' someone on the basis of the force of *the principles*. Retribution must be either verbal or physical, and if someone has been given a demeaning status, then he must not get a physical punishment as well. Unlike a physical punishment, such a status does irreparable harm to his honour, and the most severe is considered to be a verbal *gapucheba* or 'ruining' ('ruining' may also be effected by means of homosexual rape; thus the term *gapucheba* has a direct parallel with *opustit* [to take down] in the Russian criminal world), which in fact leads to reputational death.¹

People who are particularly gifted virtuosi at operating within *the principles* are called 'talkers' on the street, and it is they who play the leading role in the process of 'sorting things out'. A talker was capable of turning virtually any situation to the advantage of his group, and naturally such talents were highly prized on the street:

Inf.: A man who had a real gift of the gab, there were people on the street that they always took to sort things out, they'd even put it off for a day if he was out of town, so that they could take him, so good at speaking

¹ Obviously, the street needs physical force, and uses it, but it stresses its contempt for people who use it as their primary means: 'The serious authorities, who stood on the street, didn't do the business themselves, they would step aside, and they would have someone called, in thieves' slang, a *ganetsi* [courier] or, begging your pardon, *shniri* [a thief's stooge]. But the *shniri* didn't know he was a *shniri*, he thought he was a fine fellow, but for the thieves he was an *aripi* [*arif* in the urban koine of old Tbilisi meant an ingénu, a gull, an ignorant person. Here and further on my interlocutors, talking to a woman, were probably using the word as a euphemism for *kle* (lit. 'penis'), denoting low status in the street hierarchy], he would be told, so-and-so needs to be done over, go and do him over <...>. For example, wrestlers, sportsmen of some sort, street blokes, they were used' [AFM 2012-1]. The secondary role of physical force is also explained by the more and more frequent use of weapons on the street, which can be dated to the 1970s. Stories of how knives were not allowed in fights on the streets of Tbilisi in the 1950s and 1960s, despite an obvious idealisation of the past, do have a basis in fact. Later on, the use of firearms became more and more widespread. It is understandable that if someone has a pistol or a knife that he can use, his physical condition becomes less significant.

that he could talk a dead man back to life, could make the guilty party look whiter than white. Of course, among thieves that wasn't chesni [fair],¹ to get a guilty man off, but in the end we had all this Georgian stuff... [By 'Georgian stuff' is meant the determination to support your own folk. The informant explains that this is not 'fair', i.e. it does not correspond to the ideals of 'criminal justice'.]

Int.: But all the formalities were observed.

Inf.: Formally yes. He was in the wrong, but he talked in such a way that he would catch people out in their words, shut them up at once <...> mostly the arifs. While the discussion was going, he would be talking, talking, talking, and there was a chap standing there and he'd suddenly ask him a question out of nowhere, he'd be taken aback, say something moronic and [claps his hands] he's caught out, so, you understand, you're talking and talking to him, and his dzmakatsi² is standing beside him, not paying attention, perhaps not even listening, and you catch him with that word [AFM 2012-1].

This example describes one of the many ways or methods that let people remain within the bounds of the legitimacy defined by the rules and rely on the rules, while doing things that might be diametrically opposed to what the rules prescribe.

Now we come to examine the metarules, the unwritten rules, or rules about rules. Since, as was said at the beginning of the description, they are inseparable from their context, we shall examine some concrete instances of their application.

As we remember, a direct question about someone's street status ('Who are you?') is regarded as unacceptable. It is taken as a challenge to that status which demands an answer, especially if it is clear that the person who is asking knows what that status is. I shall give an example of this rule being broken. The parties to a dispute had met to settle their differences. The representative of one party makes a mistake and, despite the norms of the code, asks that question of the representative of the other group, a young man who was aiming at a criminal career. The young man accepts the challenge, jumps up, ready to answer, and the man who has offended him suggests that they should go outside to settle the question by fighting. But the group to which the offended young man belongs, which consists of people whose status is higher than his, wants to avoid a fight and does not let the conflict go any further. The man who had broken the code has no claims to a criminal career, so that his mistake 'doesn't cost much', and they do not want any complications, so they forgive him

¹ From Russian *chestnyy* [Eds.].

² *Dzmakatsi* (Georgian street slang) — friend, pal. On the relationship between *dzmakatsebi*, formalised, ritualised friendship, see: [Zakharova 2015].

his blunder. Thus the norms of the code have been broken once. The young man is offended, all the more in that by declaring his aspiration to rank as a criminal he has made himself extremely vulnerable: the purity of his reputation is especially important to him, which means that he cannot allow himself to ignore any challenges issued to him. What is he to do, if he cannot go against the wishes of the more highly placed people in his group? He pretends that the person who offended him did not really question his status and that the question was asked ‘in a different sense’. The norms of the codex have been got round again. People appeal to the rule only when it is to their advantage to do so, otherwise they try to represent the situation in such a way that it is not subject to the rules [AFM 2012-1].

Very important in the technique of ‘street negotiations’ is the art of catching your opponent out in his words, that is in violations of the norms that regulate spoken behaviour. This technique allows a participant in the discussion who has caught his opponent out in a mistake (or led him on into making one) to avoid discussion of a question on which his own position is shaky, so that ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in a quarrel change places.

People can, of course, be caught out not only in their words, but in their actions, as the following story illustrates:

Once we were negotiating at a settling of differences, and [on the other side] they were arifi, they did not know [the principles, the street] that well. He [the narrator’s dzmakatsi] was in the wrong, but he was trying to turn the conversation away from the matter, to something else <...> bang-bang-bang, and he [the dzmakatsi] was squatting down, and he said something to the other one to which he would have to react, and he hit him, squatting as he was, so everything turned over onto that [focused on the breaking of the rule not to hit someone in a squatting position]. But the other fellow was in the right [AFM 2012-1].

Amongst the norms governing spoken behaviour the prohibition on using information of which the speaker doubts the truth or accuracy was mentioned. I shall give a fragment of a conversation with and informant which illustrates the manipulation of this norm:

Something else: out on the street, when we were talking, we began to say, who’s right, who’s wrong [i.e. in a discussion the object of which was to establish who was in the wrong], ‘I thought,’ now if you let slip that word, ‘I thought, brother,’ he’d come straight back at you, ‘What did you think, brother?’ and that’s where he’d catch you out — ‘I thought,’ ‘I don’t remember exactly.’ ‘What does that mean, you don’t remember exactly?’ You’d had a drink, you’d got into a fight, you’re telling us, this is how it happened, just telling us quite sincerely, but suddenly during the conversation you say ‘We were walking along, and suddenly some people appeared, I don’t remember exactly how many...’ And that’s where he’ll

catch you. Now you're an unreliable man in that conversation, and, begging your pardon, then he'll say to you 'And do you remember how they shagged you?' 'Who shagged me?' 'Well, if you don't remember one thing, perhaps you don't remember that either?' [AFM 2012-1].

The norm that forbids expressing doubt about an answer once a question is asked, or to ask a question to confirm existing information, provides a similar opportunity for manipulation. I shall give another fragment of an interview:

The mistake everyone used to make on the street... those who were arifs, they would come and say, 'Brother, is this how it happened?' You say to him: 'That didn't happen.' 'What?' he says, 'didn't it?' And you're there! He may have been in the right, you understand, a hundred percent in the right, but if he asks that, that's it, you've caught him out. Many people made that mistake, very many [AFM 2012-1].

Another example of manipulation of the norms is a formal observance of them that turns into an action that is the opposite of what the norm establishes. Thus the meaning of the norm that forbids coming to a negotiation with weapons is to guarantee the peaceful nature of the meeting when the participants have made that a condition for it. However, this norm may be used to make a gesture intended to intimidate the opposition. The parties come to the meeting and demonstratively lay down some impressive weapon. The meaning of this action is: 'We are doing right by you, but we are able and willing to use force.'

As well as manoeuvring within the limits of the code, people with charisma and a high street reputation can allow themselves to act in defiance of the norms quite openly. Let us, for example, return to the prohibition on fighting because of gambling quarrels, mentioned above. An informant with a solid reputation on the street, noting that that sort of thing was 'not done' on the street, and unacceptable 'among thieves', told of an instance where he and some lads from his local community went to sort out some people who had been rude to his brother and mother during an on-line game:

It was my brother, my brother and my mother [the insult had been *dedis gineba*, a category of insults that were regarded as particularly serious and requiring an immediate reaction], *I couldn't leave it be, though I knew that he* [his brother, who had started the settling of accounts] *wasn't right* [to have started it] *because of a game, but I'm very much that sort... in cases like that I don't give in, it was an insult, and off we went, and ended up fighting* [AFM 2012-1].

The same informant, who of course knew that it was forbidden to use information obtained from a woman, thought it possible to make an exception in the case of women that he was close to: 'I always used to say, unlike them, that... she is my girlfriend, my relative, my sister,

I believe her, but who are you that I should believe you?’ [AFM 2012-1]. The motif of a clash between the need to observe the code, at least formally, and the urge to remain loyal to one’s neighbourhood, family or friendship group was often heard in the interviews.

The freedom bestowed by high repute and charisma allows someone to switch between normative codes, appealing at need now to the principles of the street, and now to other normative values such as religion, nationalism, general ethical principles, etc. For example, a young man of high repute on the street who has started to work in the state administration, thereby breaking the rule of the code that forbids collaboration with the state, explains his choice by referring to popular nationalist values, and at the same time seasoning them with rhetorical devices from the street: ‘I won’t only be with the “Nationals”,¹ I’ll be anywhere my country needs me and where I can do good. I won’t do any *prochoba* [from *prochi* (see note (2) at the page 265), a base or despicable action], even though I’m set among a thousand grasses, I’ll still act according to my own lights and I’ll still be in the right. That’s my *apravdania*. Wherever I am, nobody will be able to make me behave like a grass’ [AFM 2012-1].

People on the street are obviously aware that people use the norms of the code for their own ends, instrumentally, and give this the corresponding moral evaluation: ‘That often happens, when you’re a bit on this side [“streetside”, i.e. streetwise], however much you’re in the wrong, you get out of it, catch people out in their words or something else. Hence all this filth, it’s very bad’ [AFM 2012-1]. It is, however, obvious to all that anyone who follows the code blindly will not survive in this milieu — it is breaking the unwritten rules: ‘It’s like that on the street too. They don’t want people on the street who speak too much truth. If you’re going to shout out the truth too much, someone will get rid of you’ [AFM 2012-1].

The criminal principles — in the sense in which they are spoken of as pure and transparent crystal — should of course be the same everywhere and for everyone. Can there be any variation in questions of absolute truth? This is the sort of discourse about the code that predominates at the normative level. However, at the practical level it is a different matter. Thus it turns out that different districts (urban neighbourhood communities) ‘understand the same criminal concept differently, if, of course, they really don’t have experience, they haven’t lived the life [i.e. have no experience of direct contact with thieves in law, and have not been in prison]’ [AFM 2012-1]. While people on the street do not deny the idea of a single criminal law which the mythical ‘real thieves’ obey, which embodies the idea

¹ Meaning the ‘United National Movement’, the party founded by Saakashvili.

of justice and is in fact it, they are aware that at the urban neighbourhood level thieves' law is beginning to live a life of its own.

I shall use the example of a story that one of my informants told me to demonstrate the mechanism by which the norms of the code are changed. A young man was standing with a group of other people on the street and talking with some 'serious blokes' (i.e. people to whom respect had to be shown), when his *dzmakatsebi*, who had had a few, approached him, making a noise and carrying on a loud conversation. His friends took no notice of his request that they should behave more quietly, as a result of which he beat them up. The next day the *dzmakatsebi* came to him to sort things out, since he had broken the rule that prohibits beating a drunken man. The young man, who was an eloquent and convincing talker, managed to explain that of course he would forgive a drunken man for being 'unsteady on his feet', but he was not prepared to put up with it if every time he got drunk he was going to start scolding him with *dedis gineba*. 'They were silent. <...> When I said all that, they all saw that it was so, that that was fair. And afterwards, when anything happened, everyone would say, "Alright, brother, you're drunk, go away, I'll forgive you for being unsteady on your feet..."' From this short episode it becomes clear that the law of the street depends on precedent and its norms may be reviewed, so long as that review is initiated or supported by a charismatic and authoritative leader or group.

Street law, or *the principles* by which young men in the various districts of Tbilisi live, is created, debated and transformed within the confines of the street communities which form a real communicative commonality. If at any moment a norm is inconvenient to a person or persons who have sufficient authority to bend it to their will, the rules are changed. As a result every district in the city has its own legal peculiarities.

I shall sum up the above with the characteristic thoughts of one of my informants:

Every year, in 2010, in 1995, there were always different principles, but the principles are the same, by their nature they are the same. But you know what the trick here is? There were four of us, and something happened. We'd done something bad to someone, we were in the wrong. But we wanted to come out of it right. So we got a hundred people together, and if we say that it is so, and they nod their heads, then from that day on it changes, and it is so. And because of that... only some dzveli¹ who has actually been in prison and lived the life, only he can tell you the case [can

¹ In this case the speaker uses the word *dzveli* to mean 'an authority from the "old guard"'. *Dzvelebi* are understood as being representatives of the thieves' world of the past, in which, as it is believed, the thieves' principles had not yet been subject to distortion and devaluation. An etymological interpretation that connects the appearance of the term *dzveli bichi* with this usage can be heard on the street.

say how things ought to be from the point of view of genuine ‘thieves’ justice’. *It changes, it all changes. Like they change laws in parliament, they change the laws there [on the street] too. For example, I’m strong, and you’re in a weak position, and you don’t want to have a confrontation or problems with me <...> and I tell you that matsoni is black, and if all that company, all that district knows that that’s how it was decided, then that’s how it is. After that you won’t say that I was wrong, and nobody will argue with it, everyone will say that’s how it is. And then it becomes a principle that matsoni is black. That’s the trick* [AFM 2012-1].

* * *

Here I sum up the basic theses that were set out and illustrated in the text.

On the one hand, the street principles are derived by people belonging to that culture from the criminal code and in their strict sense (as a system of informal rules) they have some features in common with it. On the other hand, the people who adhere to them identify them with the Georgian ideals of masculine behaviour and morality, and even more so with universal human ethics. The perceived connection of *the principles* with the criminal code, combined with the special features of the Georgian underworld (its inclusion in ‘legal society’ and its high prestige) has facilitated a wide distribution of *the principles* and underpinned their moral force. In the period examined, the 1970s to the first decade of the present century, *the principles* were used by representatives of the underworld as a means of ruling the street, and the moral force of the code and a belief in ‘thieves’ justice’ strengthened each other. However, the most substantial element in the question of the interconnection between the street code and the criminal underworld seems to be the fact that it is leadership among the ‘black’ that bestowed the right to interpret and modify the norms of the code.

At the same time it may be supposed that with today’s changes in the disposition of forces on the street, that right may potentially be bestowed on any leader, irrespective of his connections with the criminal underworld, and that the code will nevertheless retain its social and legal niche.

The street code divides the world into three parts: ‘criminal’, ‘grass’ (the police and their informers) and ‘arbitrary’, which is beyond its bounds. The code is derived from a unitary ‘thieves’ justice’, but it is acknowledged that *the principles* in force on the street are subject to change. Changes take place within a real communicative commonality — urban neighbourhoods. Argumentation relying on the norms of the code has the greatest force on the street, but outstanding leaders may allow themselves to switch codes and bring forward non-traditional arguments and appeal to alternative value systems.

The law of the street is based on precedent, and the same charismatic leaders have the right to initiate and maintain the introduction of amendments to the code. *The principles* are a dynamic system, which does not remain unchanged and is subject to manipulation. There is an idea on the street that it was once stable, and that free interpretation of the rules is an innovation of recent generations, but apart from the existence of this idea in discourse, there are no real grounds for believing that it ever was so.

The code is the instrument of assertion and measure of the reputational capital which acts as a guarantee in the practice of street mediation. An appeal to the code allows the decisions of mediators to be understood as just and as putting an end to conflicts. In the period in question street law proved to be more effective and more socially approved than state law.

The code that operates in the neighbourhoods of Tbilisi is undoubtedly real, both from the point of view of the people who practice it and from that of a researcher observing it. The code is an unstructured set of informal and unwritten rules, i.e. norms that are reasserted and rewritten in the course of their application, and also ways and means of applying these rules. The vagueness and malleability of the code are not unlimited, but in practice the ways and means of its application are endless. Like the rules themselves, the social agents and institutions that maintain them possess moral authority in the community in which they operate. The code in the sense in which the people who practice it understand it is explicit, but the moral foundations of the rules are implicit. Thanks to the existence of the relevant procedures and conditions, the code allows the ascription of status and the taking of legal decisions to be legitimised.

Paradoxically, the language of street disputes — ‘settling of accounts’ — is notable for a feature that is typical of legal language, the reglamentation not only of the kinds, but also the forms of argumentation.

The code is a prescriptive as well as an interpretative medium, but its prescriptions are used strategically. Thanks to its moral authority, the code is used both for justifying actions and for urging people to corresponding actions, and it makes up the general legal field and terminology of disputes. The code not only arranges the format, but determines concrete procedures of public interaction, and also the rhetorical forms of disputation. In other words, the code determines the parameters and language of interaction within the communicative community that practices it, thus forming a social reality.

Abbreviations

AFM — author’s field materials.

Author's field materials

AFM 2007 – August-September 2007, Tbilisi

AFM 2009 – October-December 2009, Tbilisi

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