

**A STATE OF LIMINALITY
AND A LIMINAL STATE.**

Georgia's political-geographical liminality 'in-between' conflicting powers (European Union and Russia) and the effect of trauma on the built environment.

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**Transient Liquidities along the New Silk Road IV
Power Regimes and Practices of Bordering**

Theory Essay

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A LIMINAL STATE.

The day of Georgia's parliamentary elections, October 26, 2024, I arrived in the capital, Tbilisi. The city did not hide its political tension—not one building in the centre escaped graffiti displaying slogans and symbols of resistance against the Russian-occupied territories in Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, solidarity with Ukraine in its war with Russia and the hope of European integration. These visible marks of struggle capture Georgia's tense position between two divergent geopolitical powers—Russia to the north and the European Union (EU) to the west. Georgia's political-geographical liminality entails a tension between the desire for integration into Western frameworks and the historical and political ties to Eastern, particularly Russian, influences. Georgia exists in a constant state of negotiation, straddling Western ideals and Eastern realities. While the European Union represents a vision of economic opportunity and democratic ideals in a capitalistic society, Russia symbolises historical allegiance and strives towards a more equal socialist way of society.

The EU dictates how others at and beyond her borders should behave; if you want to become a part of the empire, you need to meet its standards. A characteristic of empires is that they tend to “move away from the centre”, but only “if not confronted by another power”, which would, in this case, be Russia.¹ The EU has built a buffer zone around its empire, concluding into a ring of countries that are “neither actually within the EU, nor really outside the Union” and might never gain a more ‘EU-status’ or enjoy a secure European Identity.² Countries like Georgia or Turkey function as buffer zones is kept alive, perhaps encouraged, by EU policy.³

After a few days in Tbilisi, I witnessed the first post-election demonstration on the 28th of October, where EU flags were waving in the air as much as—if not outruling—Georgian flags. Whereas in Tbilisi the size and attention of the protests shrunk because people seemed to get tired of fighting for a lost cause, Western European mainstream media gave the struggle in Georgia some attention. But, the attention and help from the EU came too late and was too little according to Georgians with whom I got in contact. The EU can be seen as an empire with a clear centre-periphery order with a gradation of power and influence and it therefore takes a while before a scream of help from the EU's periphery reaches Brussels (think of the time Greece almost went bankrupt partly because the lack of monetary policy flexibility of the eurozone).⁴

Despite accusations of robed election votes, it looks like the pro-Russian party, Georgian Dream, will rule the country for the coming four-year term. Georgia's ‘Foreign Agent Law’, together with an upcoming Russian-orientated government will jeopardise Georgia's candidate status for EU membership.⁵ As Georgia continues to navigate its position on Russia's and EU's periphery, its struggle serves as a poignant reminder of the complexities of integration, the weight of historical ties and the resilience of a nation caught between competing worlds. It is not merely about transition but rather a condition of perpetual negotiation—politically, culturally and spatially.

This socio-political landscape of Georgia provides a setting scene for exploring the concept of political-geographical liminality. The concept of liminality provides a lens for understanding the broader challenges Georgia faces as a nation caught in between these competing spheres of influence. The following essay argues that a country's political status influences the construction of its identity. In the case of Tbilisi, this liminal state and the search for its own narrative impacts Georgia's built environment, particularly its post-Soviet heritage.

¹ Bahar Rumelili, “Liminality and Perpetuation of Conflicts: Turkish-Greek Relations in the Context of Community-Building by the EU,” *European Journal of International Relations* 9, no. 2 (June 1, 2003), 223, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066103009002003>.

² Jan Zielonka, *Europe as Empire*, Oxford University Press eBooks, 2006, 1, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199292213>.

³ Rumelili, “Liminality and Perpetuation of Conflicts: Turkish-Greek Relations in the Context of Community-Building by the EU.”

⁴ Herfried Münkler, *Empires: The Logic of World Domination from Ancient Rome to the United States* (Polity, 2007).

⁵ Gavin, Gabriel, and Dato Parulava. “Georgia'S EU Dream in Tatters as ‘Foreign Agent’ Bill Becomes Law.” *POLITICO*, May 28, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/>.

A STATE OF LIMINALITY.

This essay examines political-geographical liminality as a theoretical concept and its influence on the built environment. I will argue that liminality is strongly context-dependent and dynamic, highlighting how border regions often oscillate between ideological paradigms. The main research question of this essay will be: 'How do liminality and oscillation between ideological paradigms influence the built environment?' The essay will show that the effect of liminality takes form in a constant reshaping of a country's narrative. To fit the imagined identity, the built environment can become subject to alteration, as architecture and urban design can serve as physical manifestations of political agendas, cultural ideologies and historical memory. Shifts in geopolitical power and identity aspirations frequently leave their mark on cities, reshaping landscapes to align with dominant narratives and rejecting elements that contradict them. By exploring the connection between the large geopolitical scale and the smaller urban scale, the essay underscores how global and regional dynamics are inscribed into the local environment.

The concept of liminality, stemming from anthropological studies of rites of passage by Arnold van Gennep and later reinterpreted by Victor Turner captures the essence of 'in-betweenness' and will be explained more in-depth in the first chapter, *Defining Liminality*. The concept is characterised by ambiguity and has been interpreted in multiple ways, in the realm of political-geographical liminality, there is more consensus about what the concept entails and will, therefore, define the rest of this essay. The concept of liminality is very much spatially-bound and therefore chapter two, *On the Periphery*, will be about marginal spaces. Political-geographical liminality not only describes an in-between state but also underscores the tension between forces that shape identity, autonomy and spatial development, in chapter three, *Trauma and the Built Environment*, the attention will be drawn to the effect of liminality of a city's built environment.

Defining Liminality.

'Liminality' first appeared in the anthropological work *Les Rites de Passage* dating from 1909 by Dutch-German-French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep, depriving of the Latin words *limen* and *limes* meaning threshold, boundary and frontier. Van Gennep describes 'liminality' as a temporal phase within a structured and ritual process. The person undergoing the transition is first excluded from his social grouping—commonly in a truly territorial manner—only to be incorporated again into the next social grouping (and their territory) after successfully having 'transformed'.⁶ During this phase of transformation, a person is 'liminal'. Liminal entities are not only "neither here nor there", but they are also "neither this nor that" and at the same time both, "they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial".⁷ Because of the translation to English of van Gennep's work and the new interpretation of liminality by Richard Turner in *The Ritual Process* of 1969, the concept of liminality got worldwide attention.

Thus, in anthropology, liminality refers to a state of 'in-betweenness' that is related to sacredness, which is appointed to people by others in the course of ritual, socialisation and identity building. The original meaning of liminality from *rites of passage* is not very useful anymore since our societies have simply grown too complex. In different literature sources, people started to adopt, reform and use the concept of liminality freely to fit their case—it has been applied to describe nearly any situation of transition, uncertainty or marginality—resulting in mass confusion concerning the concept. If 'liminality' is applied too broadly it risks becoming a vague catch-all term and loses its importance.⁸ This phenomenon is often referred to as "conceptual stretching" in academic discourse. This variability of use suggests that liminality is a complex and ambiguous concept that needs to be assigned with caution in certain situations. Various research on the usefulness of the concept tried to make order in the chaos and divided the concept into cultural-geographical liminality and political-

⁶ Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 1960, 192, <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB28772791>.

⁷ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 95, 98-99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3031914>.

⁸ Arpad Szakolczai, *Permanent Liminality and Modernity: Analysing the Sacrificial Carnival through Novels* (Taylor & Francis, 2016).

geographical liminality. Both forms of liminality have spatially bound characteristics and are thus context-dependent, explaining the addition of '-geographical'. Cultural-geographical liminality is about the transition of one thing to another, which is irreversible and concerns a personal experience of a state of in-betweenness that is related to the course of life. Examples of this are immigrants leaving their country, a pilgrim going on a transformative journey or even a tourist. Also, people in the hospital undergoing cancer treatment can be categorised here. Political-geographical liminality, on the other hand, is about political inequality concerning a group of people struggling for recognition within power structures and is a rather static or semi-permanent condition marked by continual negotiation. Think of the situation of Cyprus, divided by a UN buffer zone, reflecting a prolonged state of political tension and unresolved sovereignty. Whereas cultural-geographical liminality is still very broad and may refer to every facet of life, political-geographical liminality is a more coherent group.

In the next chapter, I will focus on the form of political-geographical liminality as a state of 'in-betweenness' of regions located at the edge or intersection of major geopolitical influences. This larger geopolitical scale eventually has an effect on the sociocultural group involved in the struggle for recognition and will come forward later in this essay.

On the Periphery.

In the book *Shifting Border*, Ayelet Shachar, jurist and professor at the University of Toronto, explores how borders are no longer confined to fixed geographical lines on a map. Instead, they are dynamic and mobile, extending beyond traditional land borders to regulate access, rights, movement and belonging in an increasingly globalised and interconnected world.⁹ Etienne Balibar, a French philosopher, calls borders "instruments of inclusion and exclusion" and demonstrates how borders shift in response to fluctuating economic, political and cultural forces, creating spaces that are not wholly part of any state or ideology.¹⁰ The concept thus becomes less about transition and more about the inherent instability and fluidity of border regions, where identity and politics remain unfixed. "[...] A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition".¹¹

Examples of regions grappling with liminality are places caught between power regimes (sometimes functioning as buffer zones), peripheral places (interior and exterior from the borderline), colonies and spaces with unique legal or governance frameworks. Rather than a passive transitional phase, this form of liminality is characterised by active processes of self-definition and adaptation to external pressures. More than just economic insecurity, it reflects the systemic marginalisation of those that exist outside dominant frameworks, yet remain profoundly affected by them.¹²

Shields, a Canadian sociologist and cultural theorist, argues that these "places on the margin" are not simply excluded or forgotten but are actively constructed through narratives, practices and ideologies that define them as 'other'.¹³ Marginal spaces are socially constructed, reflecting the hierarchies and exclusions imposed by dominant ideologies. These spaces are not naturally marginal but are made so by systemic exclusions (or semi-inclusion), whether through racial, economic or political means. Understanding marginal spaces as socially constructed emphasises the potential to dismantle these hierarchies, reimagine their societal roles and integrate their voices and contributions into broader narratives. They can become sites of resistance and creativity, where alternative identities and practices challenge the dominant ideologies that created them.

⁹ Ayelet Shachar, *The Shifting Border: Legal Cartographies of Migration and Mobility: Ayelet Shachar in dialogue* (Manchester University Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Étienne Balibar, *We, The People Of Europe?: Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton University Press, 2009).

¹¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 2021.

¹² Anoma Pieris, *Architecture on the Borderline: Boundary Politics and Built Space* (Routledge, 2019).

¹³ Rob Shields, "Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity," *Choice Reviews Online* 28, no. 10 (June 1, 1991): 28–5779, <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.28-5779>.

Trauma and the Built Environment.

Places on the periphery or in between major geopolitical influences often have to deal with trauma caused by historical events. According to Andreas Huyssen, one of the most interesting cultural phenomena of this time is how “memory and temporality have invaded spaces that seemed among the most stable and fixed: cities, monuments, architecture and sculpture”.¹⁴

The German writer W.G. Sebald writes about memory and trauma in relation to historical events that have left marks on landscapes and human lives. In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald explores the English landscape, presenting it as a site where the scars of history are physically embedded in the environment. The book suggests that landscapes, far from being neutral spaces, are repositories of collective memory, shaped by the traumas and conflicts that have occurred within them. The landscape becomes a palimpsest, layered with memories (of suffering) and cultural erasure. In *Austerlitz*, Sebald delves even more explicitly into the trauma of historical events, particularly the Holocaust, through the experiences of his protagonist, Jacques Austerlitz. Austerlitz's quest to reconstruct his lost identity is a reflection of the broader struggles of those who have experienced trauma, in this case, the forced migration of Jews during World War II. Austerlitz's fragmented memories mirror the larger process of societal forgetting and the impossibility of fully reconciling with a past.

Sebald's portrayal of memory and trauma highlights how history is not simply an abstract series of events but is physically and emotionally embedded in spaces, objects and people. Memory becomes a tool for understanding how individuals and societies negotiate their relationship with the past, with the built environment acting as a tangible archive of that trauma. The built environment, as a reflection of geopolitical forces, becomes a powerful medium for reshaping identity and articulating contemporary aspirations. The disappearance of certain architectural styles or typologies is not merely an act of removal but an active process of redefinition.¹⁵ The erasure contributes to societal forgetting and lack of tangible resemblance to the past. In the process of reshaping the future, everything that does not want to be remembered is not talked about, cared for or even erased from the city's street image. An example of this is Soviet structures in Tbilisi that are just lying around like concrete junk, slowly decaying or being demolished and not part of *Tbilisi's Heritage Register*. Soviet heritage is not seen as Georgian heritage.

The neglect of Soviet heritage signifies a deliberate act of cultural and political distancing—a way to forget the past and orientate towards new affiliations and ideals. The buildings are physically present yet ideologically distant from the current socio-political ethos. The residents with whom I got in contact, preferably don't talk about these Soviet places and try to look forward and focus on creating *their* narrative. But is healing from trauma through forgetting or reinterpreting history selectively the right way forward?

Is healing achieved by severing ties with the past, or is it better served by reinterpreting, integrating or even confronting the darker aspects of history? This part of the essay shouldn't be read as an ode to preservation and conservation but rather as a manifest arguing for not erasing nor hiding history—to keep telling the story and learn from the good and the bad. Erasure goes further than losing mere structures; it is about losing ways of living and the architecture that used to serve this, that are part of history. The built environment serves not only as a backdrop for history but as an active participant in shaping and preserving the memories of that history.

Conclusion.

The essay navigates the concept of political-geographical liminality, exploring its anthropological roots and evolution into a lens for understanding marginal spaces shaped by geopolitical forces. Political-geographical liminality underscores the fluidity and instability inherent in border regions and the ways in which external pressures, historical legacies and local agencies converge to shape identity and space. As demonstrated, this liminality is not only a product of geographical placement but also a

¹⁴ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, 2003, 1.

¹⁵ Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Semiotext(e), 1991.

manifestation of ideological oscillation and its profound impact on the built environment. The choices societies* make regarding their architectural and cultural heritage—whether to preserve, reinterpret or erase—are emblematic of their struggles to define identity amidst transition.

I, however, believe that excessive change to the physical history can be dangerous and eventually won't help with reshaping one's own identity. Such actions may lead to a sense of disconnection, where societies lose not just physical structures but also hold the ways of living and thinking, that those structures once supported. Architecture is a vital witness of history, but without spaces of remembrance, one cannot heal or learn from the past. What is lost and deleted from history is difficult, if not impossible, to recover. By addressing trauma through meaningful reinterpretation rather than erasure, societies can craft a more inclusive narrative for the future. In contrast, a society that embraces both continuity and evolution allows for a layered understanding of identity.

** I use the word 'societies' here deliberately since alterations to the existing built environment in Tbilisi don't just come from higher up, this desire is integrated within all layers of the society.*

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