

**The internationalization of Georgian literature:
Georgia as the guest of honour at the 2018 Frankfurt Book Fair**
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Abstract

This paper offers an account of Georgia's guest-of-honour experience at the 2018 Frankfurt Book Fair, aiming to observe how Georgian literature was represented and what branding strategies the Georgian delegation deployed to showcase Georgian culture before the international literary field. To this end, this paper considers what features Georgia's literary and political actors spotlighted in the process of branding Georgian literature and which authors were granted more visibility during the fair. This case study approaches literature and translation from a sociological perspective.

Keywords: Georgian literature, Frankfurt Book Fair, literary circulation, translation, peripheral literatures, cultural branding

Introduction

Historically, Georgian literature has scarcely been translated outside the former communist space. However, the guest-of-honour status at the 2018 Frankfurt Book Fair boosted the translation of said literature, and Georgian contemporary novels started peppering bookshops across Europe. But what made Georgian contemporary titles reach formerly uncharted languages?

This paper analyses the internationalization of Georgian literature via the Frankfurt Book Fair¹ and examines how the Georgian delegation at the fair presented Georgian culture and literature, considering that promotion and cultural branding (Woolard 2016, McMartin 2021) constitute state mechanisms for the regulation of translation flows (Heilbron and Sapiro 2018). Specifically, this paper examines the programme “Georgia Made by Characters” as a main source,² alongside agents of the Georgian literary and political fields’ speeches at Frankfurt. My fieldwork at the mentioned fair (involving participant observation and interviews)³ will serve as a complementary source.

According to the classification used in the world-system of translations (Heilbron 1999), Georgia constitutes a “peripheral” literature because it is the source of less than 1 percent of translations worldwide, as per the data in *Index Translationum*. Similarly, the concept of less-translated languages applies to “all those languages that are less often the source of translations in the international exchange of linguistic goods, regardless of the number of people using these languages” (Branchadell and West 2005, 1). In this respect, guest of honourship poses an exceptional opportunity to show the world certain literary representations of national cultures, while it contributes to

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² I am grateful to the team at the Frankfurt Book Fair’s guest-of-honour programme for providing me with digital archive-materials regarding Georgia’s guest of honourship.

³ I am grateful to the Georgian publishers, authors, translators, and members of literary institutions who granted me an interview during and after the book fair. Quotes by interviewees have been made anonymous. The fulfilment of ethical requirements was approved by the ethics committee of Universitat Oberta de Catalunya on April 26th, 2019.

strengthening national publishing markets by inserting them within the world context (Sorá 2010, 1).

With this conceptual framework, I will analyse how Georgian literature was showcased at the fair and which Georgian authors were given more visibility (through their participation at literary and social events, translations into German, presence at the Blaue Sofa,⁴ and speeches at the opening ceremony).

1. The Significance of the Frankfurt Book Fair

International book fairs have been depicted as *tournaments of values*, that is, as social rituals “bringing participants together in short-term, face-to-face interaction in a structured environment” that “define and reassert the economic, social, and symbolic values that constitute the overall field of publishing” (Moeran 2010, 138). This social-anthropological understanding of book fairs takes elements from Bourdieu’s field theory (1992) to consider how book fairs “give a visible structure to the publishing field, reinforcing that structure, while making visible the various resources (economic, human, symbolic, and intellectual capitals) commanded by different publishers in the structured space of positions in which they operate” (Moeran 2010, 141; see also Thompson 2010).

There is consensus among scholars and publishers that the Frankfurt Book Fair is the most important and most internationalized trade fair in the publishing industry (Moeran 2010; Dujovne and Sorá 2010; Sorá 2013, 2016; and Dujovne 2016). This book fair can be read as a partial representation of the international literary space, offering a stage for the world republic of letters (Casanova 1999): the spatial organization dynamics within heavily mirror the unequal distribution of visibility that different literatures face (Moeran 2010; Dujovne and Sorá 2010; and Sorá 2013), with the so-called peripheral cultures located at the physical periphery of the fair and enjoying fewer visitors.

However, every year since 1988, a different country or national culture takes part in the Frankfurt Book Fair as the guest of honour and enjoys a broader platform to

⁴ The Blaue Sofa is a forum organized by the private, multinational, German conglomerate Bertelsmann; the German public TV channel ZDF; the German cultural radio station Deutschlandfunk Kultur; and the German-language, public TV channel 3sat. The forum has become a part of the Frankfurt and Leipzig book fairs and hosts their most famous writers.

showcase its nation's literature and culture. It is through the guest-of-honour status that we can better trace pursuits of legitimacy among national literatures. Though book fairs are generally more focused on trade than on authors per se (Moeran 2010), the guest-of-honour platform is directly concerned with the image-making of a national culture and relies on selecting certain authors over others for this purpose. The honoured national delegation and the various agents in the given literary field publicize a specific picture of the guest culture, a task that aims at building an appealing image of the country using marketing-like strategies to reach the international public, in a process that we might deem *nation branding* (Anholt 2002, Von Flotow 2007, Woolard 2016, Gutmeyr 2019, and McMartin 2021). Branding, or promoting a product by distinguishing it from others (through a name, logo, catchphrase, system of values, identity, image, or narrative), is now used in all kinds of spheres, beyond commerce, with goals that supersede economic capital. Regarding guests of honour at Frankfurt, "outsourcing branding and design to creative firms" as well as "a trend of professionalization [...] to present a polished product to industry peers" (McMartin 2021) confirm how central branding has become.

If these struggles for visibility are especially evident in every guest of honour's presentations, they are even more so when a "peripheral" or less-translated literature receives this status, since these cultures start with less international literary prestige or accumulated symbolic capital.⁵ Hence, their agents perceive a unique opportunity to be seen (and translated). However, guest-of-honour experiences aren't limited to the literary: politics play an important role, too, with culture wielded through soft-power strategies. Thus, guest of honourship can be framed as an activity of cultural diplomacy (Von Flotow 2007). Accordingly, there are plenty of reasons for states to finance the guest of honourship at Frankfurt (Vogel 2019) since it not only fulfils the purpose of improving the international status of a language or literature but also the "reputation of the nations that claim them" (McMartin 2020).

⁵ Symbolic and literary capital is measured by sociologists of literature, for instance, by the number of Nobel prizes that the given literature has received (Bourdieu 1999; Casanova 1999). We can also consider how often they are the source of translations, as per Heilbron (1999).

2. Methodology

To explore the guest-of-honour experience of Georgia, a so-called peripheral literature, in more detail, I built a corpus of 1) Georgian authors who attended the book fair, 2) guest-of-honour events and 3) Georgian books translated into German in the lead-up to Frankfurt Book Fair, as listed on the website “Georgia Made by Characters.” In order to determine what types of authors the Georgian delegation chose to showcase Georgian culture, I have assessed author visibility according to 1) how often authors participated in Georgia’s guest-of-honour events at Frankfurt, considering the author’s role in each event (as an author or as a participant, speaker, or moderator); 2) whether or not authors were invited to the Blaue Sofa; 3) how often authors were translated into German and 4) who spoke at the opening ceremony. I also look at agents of the Georgian literary and political fields’ speeches at Frankfurt to find through what attributes did they brand Georgian literature and culture. Data has been gathered from the guest-of-honour programme,⁶ presentation texts, and speeches that can be found in the programme and in the press kit, as well as from the digital archive-materials that the Frankfurt Book Fair’s guest-of-honour team provided to me (documents of facts and figures that gather quantitative data and short videos about Georgia’s guest of honourship, as well as the promotional video “Georgia Made by Characters”). Participant observation and seven semi-structured interviews conducted at the fair (mainly with publishers but also with one author) from October 9th to October 14th, 2018, serve as complementary sources.

2. Branding Georgian Literature as Time-Honoured and Unique

Several particularities of the Georgian guest of honourship make it a singular and intriguing case study that can cast new light on the role that book fairs play as spaces of legitimation and internationalization for so-called peripheral cultures. First, if considered within the framework of the world-system of translations, the unique alphabet of the Georgian language places it in an even more peripheral position.

⁶ Available online at www.georgia-characters.com

Georgian is a Kartvelian language, an independent (non-Indo-European) linguistic family that also includes Mingrelian, Svan, and Laz. Indeed, the Georgian script is only used for these languages.

Only spoken by about 3.5 million people as a native language, fewer than 1 million people speak Georgian as a second language, and a lack of translators from and into Georgian is often denounced by publishers and institutions. Accessing Georgian literature often demands that a foreign reader overcome not only the language barrier but also unfamiliarity with the Georgian script. Although linguistic traits are not the only reason why a literature does or does not get translated, they may imply a higher degree of dependence on institutional efforts or personal motivations.

Second, Georgia's status as a post-Soviet, non-quite-European nation (Tlostanova 2012), or as the "balcony of Europe" (Steiner 2019, 64), makes it a unique case of its kind at Frankfurt. For Georgia, a country seeking integration into the European Union, nation branding serves as a key tool to redefine its image and reimagine its geopolitical place. Indeed, for post-socialist countries, nation branding is an especially attractive mechanism to reposition themselves within the new global configuration (Kaneva 2012, Graan 2013, Latypova 2017, and Gutmeyr 2019). Moreover, for a country aspiring to European Union membership like Georgia, an experience at Frankfurt might also pose an opportunity to be politically seen and to seek alignment with Europe (Gutmeyr 2019). As such, this case study lays bare the strong presence of politics at the Frankfurt Book Fair, reflecting both nation-building and nation-branding processes. I will show that both literary and political domains had a significant impact on Georgia's guest of honourship and in fact intermingled.

a) "Georgia Made by Characters": Balancing Uniqueness with Openness

In a competitive world, brands seek to distinguish their products, focusing on a "unique selling point" (von Flotow, 2007). For Georgia's guest of honourship, language was deemed the main distinctive feature and stood at the centre of the nation's branding strategy, under the slogan "Georgia Made by Characters," with the characters referring to the Georgian script. The fair was seen as an opportunity to show the *world* (through Germany as a window) Georgia's rich and time-honoured culture, with the

alphabet representing its historic uniqueness. Thus, the Georgian delegation deemed language an overall asset. They filled the Guest of Honour pavilion, the main stage for the guest of honour, with hollow wooden letters from the Georgian alphabet, which contained texts on folklore, art, literature, etc., along their inner walls. The slogan reads as a play on words: firstly, “character” could be defined as a person’s (or a culture’s) individual set of qualities, with strong ties to the construct of national identity (Thiesse 1999), which signals, as any brand does, an “inherent desire to create instantly discernible uniqueness” (Gutmeyr 2019); likewise, a “character” might also be defined as a person in a book or a movie; and, lastly, the word refers to the characters of the alphabet—in this case, the Georgian script. What underlies the various meanings of this slogan is the idea of the Georgian culture’s uniqueness: that *characters* define our *character*; thus, what makes Georgia distinct is its alphabet.

But it is worth noting that the uniqueness of the alphabet also suggests impenetrability, so it wields a paradoxical role, simultaneously making this culture appealing for the regional (European) and global community, while reinforcing its traditional character as a less-translated language. This may imply a potential handicap. The Georgian delegation was well aware of this. On the one hand, Gvantsa Jobava (2018) stated that the alphabet “comes at a price, and if Georgian literature is to achieve widespread popularity in the international arena, it is essential to support translation work with meaningful investment and promotion.” As such, the challenges that globalisation poses to “small cultures” (Gutmeyr 2019, 6) are meant to be overcome through translation support policies. These policies, usually in the form of subsidies for literary exports, are a widespread strategy to fight against non-translation and an important tool for cultural diplomacy and for the construction of countries’ international images (Vimr 2019). At the fair, uniqueness was discursively balanced with openness (especially towards Europe), as Jobava recognized: “what we find in Georgian literature today” is “an original and unique synthesis of largely European values and national traditions” (2018). This calls to mind the similar guest-of-honourship experiences of other so-called peripheral literatures, like Mexico’s and Catalonia’s (Anastasio 2019 and González 2019), whose cultures were presented as simultaneously singular yet universal, a branding strategy portraying cultures as distinct while aiming at regional and global dialogue and recognition. In section 2, I will show how Georgia’s selection of

authors also mirrored this scheme. For now, let us turn to the political implications of focusing on the alphabet as the central element.

Language and the representation of a literature may often intertwine with political ideas and aims. Although the *characters* are presented as cultural elements, the uniqueness of the Georgian language has strong ties to politics, and more precisely to the construct of Georgia's national identity and nation-building process (Anderson 1983 and Thiesse 1999). Though nation-states are a modern entity, language (alongside religion and folklore) (De Waal 2010, Amirejibi-Mullen 2019) has been key to the Georgian identity since the Middle Ages (Amirejibi-Mullen 2011)—a trait usually considered to have provided continuity to its people's sense of identity under the multiple invasions they faced.

The Russian empire, unlike previous invaders, shared the same religion as Georgia's, Eastern Orthodoxy. But the language that had forged Georgians' common identity persisted as the main element constituting *Georgianness* against the backdrop of Russian domination (from 1801, when the country became a protectorate of the Russian Empire, to 1918). During this period of domination, Russian was imposed as the official language in Georgia, and the Georgian language was gradually excluded from the fields of administration and education. However, the language still played an important role in Georgians' identity. Later, in the second half of the nineteenth century, a new, educated elite revived and secularized the Georgian language, and the country started being conceived as a modern nation (Amirejibi-Mullen 2019). During Soviet times (1921-1991), Georgia kept its language and alphabet, which was "too firmly engrained to be easily replaced" (Nedelka 2019), and Georgians defended their language when it was threatened from a proposal that would grant Russian and Georgian co-official status (see Gutmeyr 2019 regarding the Soviet Constitution proposal in 1977). After 1991, many of the languages of post-Soviet states have tended toward adopting the Latin alphabet, responding to the need to adapt to the globalized world (see Gutmeyr 2019 for further details), but, in Georgia, the language and alphabet have been kept as "fundamental pillars of national identity" (as Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze recalled at the Frankfurt Book Fair's opening ceremony). While scholars have observed a retreat in the ethno-religious component of Georgian nation-building policies in favour of more civic-linguistic nationalism (Amirejibi-Mullen 2011, Berglund 2016, and Gutmeyr 2019), we

should not forget that whenever a single specific language is promoted by a nation state, it is at the cost of other languages. Scholars have recognized that the “one-to-one match between one territory, one nation, one language and one literature” is indeed a myth (Meylaerts, 2006). As per Georgia, the speeches at the book fair made no mention of heterolingualism whatsoever (on the status of minority languages in Georgia, see Amirejibi-Mullen 2011).

The political role of language is deeply rooted, and nation-building elements emerged in the speeches, too, as when Medea Metreveli described Georgia’s slogan as follows:

Our character is the main factor determining our identity, which is Georgia’s most powerful force in becoming established in the independent and free world. The path our country follows every day to retain this independence is very complicated. [...] [I]ts being complicated makes us even more responsible for maintaining our country and its culture and identity, making our character even firmer and principled (Georgia Made by Characters Programme, 3)

Without directly mentioning political notions, the text hints at them by highlighting the difficulties of maintaining independence. The idea of resistance and struggle for liberty are key elements of nation-building (Thiesse 2009, 20). In this case, it might refer to past and present Russian domination and influence on the Georgian territories that declared de facto independence from Georgia. Remarkably, this issue was significant at the 2018 Frankfurt Book Fair, with the Georgian delegation staging a protest in anti-Russian-occupation t-shirts. Similar protests had been performed at earlier Frankfurt Book Fair editions. We also see this in the words of Gvantsa Jobava, then head of the Georgian Publishers and Booksellers Association, who stated that “in this politically charged season [...] becoming Frankfurt’s Guest of Honour is an act of resistance to Russian—and formerly Soviet—hegemony” (Anderson 2018). In their speeches, not only did the agents of the Georgian literary field deplore Russia’s interventions in the seceded territories, but the speakers also broadly positioned or branded Georgian culture in opposition to Russia and to the Soviet past, in an attempt to stop Georgia from being identified as post-Soviet and shift towards Europe (coinciding with Georgia’s priority policies—see Latypova 2017). Paradoxically, by following this strategy, Russia and the Soviet past are often brought up, directly or indirectly, in discourse. In the same vein,

the Georgian prime minister at the time, Mamuka Bakhtadze, mentioned the idea of Europe as a family to which Georgia was finally returning, reinforcing the notion of the historic unity between both civilizations. In a more explicitly political gesture, he mentioned Germany's role in Georgia's integration into Europe. This points toward an awareness of how guest of honourship at Frankfurt could strengthen bilateral relations with Germany, boosting the already long Germany-Georgia relationship,⁷ while also propelling Georgia's relations with the wider world from a specific geopolitical position. However, as the fact that Federica Mogherini (then High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs) spoke at the opening ceremony reminds us, it's not only the so-called peripheral cultures that use the guest-of honour-platform to exert soft power, but central cultures use it, too: Germany and the European Union stood alongside Georgia, consolidating (or reaffirming) their superpower in turn.⁸

b) Embracing the Old and the New

In branding Georgian literature, a second asset played an equally paradoxical role: antiquity. The antiquity of the Georgian culture is often invoked in Georgian society, as was the case at the Frankfurt Book Fair, with authors hearkening back to its time-honoured character. For instance, Aka Morchiladze, the most well-known contemporary Georgian writer, also highlighted this feature. Paradoxically, however, contemporary literature circulates more and far more easily than classical literature. Additionally, if we look at the translations subsidized between 2014 and 2018 (Kvirikashvili 2020), although we may find both time-honoured and contemporary authors, contemporary titles outweigh the former. There is a commercial reason for this, as titles by living authors are easier to promote via book presentations and signings (plus, living authors can be branded as well—see Van den Braber et al. 2021, 12), but it is also often argued that

⁷ Indeed, it is very symbolic that Georgia's guest of honourship coincided with the 100th anniversary of Georgia's first independence (1918-1921), an opportunity to recall that Germany was the first country to recognize Georgia's independence. Interestingly, it also coincided with the 70th declaration of Human Rights which, gave centrality to the EU at the book fair.

⁸ Assertions such as "Wherever Georgia is a guest of honour that is the right place for the European Union to be" and "We continue to be a cultural superpower. Let me say, the cultural superpower in the world", by F. Mogherini, point to this mutual but unequal interest relation. The whole speech can be read in F. Mogherini's blog: <<http://www.federicamogherini.net/text-of-my-speech-at-the-at-the-frankfurt-book-fair-opening-ceremony>>

contemporary global themes are easier to grasp all around the world (see Ganguly 2016, Kirsch 2016, and Ganguly 2020). Nonetheless, the idea of antiquity marked the event's various speeches. However, this idea was often accompanied with allusions to contemporary literature, as if aiming to balance the presence of both types of literature. Indeed, the agents whom I interviewed insisted that the delegation wished to project a diverse image of Georgian literature. It seems that there may have been an agreement to balance out contemporary and classical authors, a strategy that may respond to two different logics, one favouring short-term return in the publishing market and the second seeking long-term prestige (Sapiro 2003). Moreover, this already very "ornamental" ancient alphabet (Nadelka 2019, 210) was freshly presented with a carefully designed, modern font, a decision that also reflected the ancient-modern tandem, while suggesting the importance of branding. At the same time, it can be argued that Georgia promoted a multifaceted representation of its culture to reach as large an audience as possible (Hertwig 2019, 110).

Ultimately, antiquity held more weight in the Georgian delegation's speeches, straying from a strategy that might have responded to contemporary literature's tendency to see more success—perhaps in an attempt to compensate the latter. This emphasis on antiquity can be read as an argument for legitimacy, since in the world republic of letters, antiquity entitles national literatures with literary capital, with national classics becoming universal (Casanova 1999). Thus, so-called peripheral literatures, which do not have their classics among those considered universal, appeal to antiquity to prove their richness in this type of capital.

Interestingly, the fact that the Georgian delegation brought traditional Georgian dancers as well as DJs to perform onstage at the guest-of-honour pavilion during book-fair evenings also illustrates this strategy in parallel spheres of the cultural domain, music and dance. Such a strategy confirms the need for countries that brand themselves to show their historical achievements together with their modern successes (Anholt 2002). Indeed, newer cultural products are often showcased in an attempt to substitute or complement older trends with new attributes such as modernity, innovation, creativity, and diversity (Von Flotow 2007).

3. The Authors Representing Georgia

In this section, I discuss which authors were chosen as the main spokespeople for Georgian literature, following the assessment described in the methodology. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on the two authors that, according to the above criteria, stand out as the most visible figures at the Frankfurt Book Fair, Aka Morchiladze and Nino Haratischwili. Both frequently starred at literary events (including the Blaue Sofa) and spoke at the opening ceremony, hinting at their prominent roles in the Georgian literary field. Performing the role of spokesperson implies a significant degree of recognition and symbolic capital. However, both figures have very different trajectories. The fact that the delegation chose these two authors seems to mirror the uniqueness-openness tandem highlighted above. Morchiladze is the most well-known contemporary novelist in Georgia and stands among the most translated ones, too. He has received the SABA national literary prize the most (five times before 2018 and once thereafter), which would point to the influence of national literary prizes on authors' international sway.

Meanwhile, playwright, novelist, and translator Haratischwili seems to have tread the opposite path, with foreign or international recognition weighing on her role as an author in Georgia. Haratischwili lives in Hamburg (Germany), writes in German, and is often considered a German author there, with her books usually published by the German press Frankfurter Verlagsanstalt. Her figure stands in contrast to the other authors' who took part in the guest-of-honour programme and seemingly contradicts the branding strategy—as she does not wield the “unique” Georgian language. However, this fact makes her stand out among Georgian authors. Furthermore, she had not won any Georgian literary prizes until the Fair (except for the Georgian-German Givi Margvelashvili prize she received in 2016 for contributing to Georgian-German cultural relations), when she was awarded a special, new SABA award for Georgian-German literary relations. This fact shows how global recognition carries local recognition but also casts light on how Georgia has interpreted its diplomatic role and on how the idea of openness was used to counterbalance the Georgian language's uniqueness: Haratischwili's figure appears as a proxy for Georgian-German relations, while simultaneously bolstering the idea of Georgia as a European country.

While Haratischwili boasts the traits of a global novelist (Kirsch 2016), Morchiladze operates in complex tension between the local and the global. Regarding the language, listening to his speech at the opening ceremony, one could sense that it was hard to translate simultaneously—I found that the translation attached to the press kit lost some significant nuance. These complexities were equally present in the content of his speech in the opening ceremony, exposing the contradictions in the global circulation of literature. For instance, he noted that Georgia is “a country of poetry”—which, he noted, made him uncomfortable given that he, a novelist, was chosen as the spokesperson for Georgian literature. This tension emphasizes how the novel tends to be dominantly employed as the genre for internationalization, despite the specificity of cultural traditions. Indeed, his speech highlighted the ways the national canon can be very different from the one built to circulate internationally. Morchiladze spends time in various countries (Georgia, England, Portugal, etc.), providing him with inspiration for his job as a writer and proving his penchant for the cosmopolitan, but unlike writers like Haratischwili and Zaza Burchuladze, he does not permanently reside abroad. Such complexity also penetrates his works, which have been widely translated but are said to be hard to translate.⁹ No single book by Morchiladze was especially highlighted at Frankfurt, as his national recognition and readership allowed him to be presented beyond a single book.¹⁰ Morchiladze has written copious novels, from non-linear texts that play with language and include dialects and jargon, to novels that show the senseless life of youths in the 1990s against the backdrop of the conflicts in the Caucasus, to works set in fictional settings as well as in Tbilisi, spanning from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, with allusions to Georgian personalities as well as to world-renowned writers.

Meanwhile, the book by Haratischwili promoted at Frankfurt, *The Eighth Life (For Brilka)*,¹¹ reflects twentieth-century global history in the stories of six generations of women in Georgia. The lives of her characters “[f]rom Tbilisi to Moscow to London to Berlin [...] are vividly enmeshed with world events, from the rise and fall of the Soviet

⁹ Interview with Aka Morchiladze, December 16th, 2019.

¹⁰ In fact, while he usually publishes more than one novel per year, he did not publish any books in 2016 and 2017 that could be promoted as new titles at Frankfurt.

¹¹ Charlotte Collin and Ruth Martin’s English translation of this book was awarded the 2020 Warwick Prize for Women in Translation.

empire to the siege of Leningrad and the Prague spring” (Jaggi 2019). The author, who had already won several German literary prizes (the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize, Kranichsteiner Literaturpreis, and Literaturpreis des Kulturkreises der deutschen Wirtschaft) and was recently longlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize, can be seen as a global novelist not only because of her books, but also given her hybrid identity, as an author located at the crux of different cultures. This hybridity was reflected in her speech at the opening ceremony, in her name (a Georgian name written the German way), and in the translations of her works circulating in numerous countries. Her speech featured global ideas on circulation, border-crossing, cultural exchange, and multilingualism. She noted that “when I started to write, I was a Georgian author in public perception. Later, I became a German-Georgian and then German. Strangely enough, the latter was due to a book of 1278 pages dealing with Georgia. I became affiliated by telling a story of a seemingly foreign country.” While this story very interestingly defies the idea of the national writer (Shih 2004), narratives about a particular text or writer are also constructs that writers themselves, and other stakeholders, can use as a brand that “pushes the text from field to field” (Van den Braber 2021, 12). Simultaneously, the representation of Georgian literature through Haratischwili’s figure offers an interesting example of the complexities and contradictions of so-called peripheral literatures when embedded in the wider world, including the role of translation. While translators tend to emerge as key mediators (Roig-Sanz and Meylaerts 2018) in the process of literary exporting, Haratischwili’s case shows the ambivalent role that language and translation played in this guest-of-honour project. The centrality of translators was made invisible (Venuti 1995) by the spotlighting of an author who did not need to be translated (to enter the German literary field), one who could be easily translated to other fields, given her use of a dominant language. Haratischwili, the writer, carried her status as a mediator of the Georgian culture independently of translators.

The fact that Haratischwili was the most sought-after author at the 2018 Frankfurt Book Fair (Sánchez 2018) and that her book was translated into so many languages, becoming an international bestseller, says a lot about the world-system of translations and the unequal power distribution among languages. Obviously, translating from German, spoken by about 95 million people as a native language (and by about 25 million as a second language) and translating from Georgian, a language

spoken by far fewer people, as I mentioned above, whose alphabet is not shared with any other language, involves disparate challenges. Yet, the role Haratischwili has played as a female writer offering a little-told account of history that taps into gender-conscious overtones in a lesser-known setting needs to be emphasized. In some languages, like Spanish or Catalan, the only available contemporary title of Georgian literature is her masterpiece *The Eighth Life (for Brilka)*.

3. The Rise and Fall of the Georgian National Book Center (GNBC)

I could not conclude this paper without devoting one last section to briefly addressing an issue that has been central to the Georgian guest of honourship, that is, the role of the Georgian National Book Center (GNBC from now on) and its closure following the 2018 Frankfurt Book Fair.

For context, we should note that the Ministry of Culture began undertaking the task of subsidizing translations from Georgian literature as of 2010, under the direction of Medea Metreveli, but it was only after the guest-of-honour agreement that the GNBC was established as an autonomous institution financed with the State budget. International recognitions such as the guest of honourship at the Frankfurt Book Fair have an impact on national cultural policies and on State roles in promoting literary circulation (Dujovne and Sorá 2010; Szpilbarg 2015). Often, when a country aspires to become guest of honour, it develops translation-support policies (a pre-requisite to gain said status), or increased budgets for translation support (especially into the German), as well as new literary institutions. In the case of Georgia, the guest-of-honour agreement brought the Georgian literary field one step closer to institutionalization and autonomy. However, preparation for guest of honourship may also foster conflict between agents in the literary field, with tensions between its different poles (in the Bourdieusian sense) and with other fields regarding questions such as how to represent the culture, how exclusively literary this representation should be, who makes the decisions, who is invited, etc. For Georgia, these preparations, as well as the fair's aftermath, included several controversies concerning the government and the GNBC,

which disputed decision-making faculties as politics interfered in the literary field.¹² Because of the various controversies, Minister of Culture Mikheil Giorgadze himself ultimately took over as leader of the guest-of-honour programme. Soon after the 2018 Frankfurt Book Fair, the government announced the closing of the GNBC. In July of 2019, the GNBC and the Writer's House ceased operations, and a new institution, the National Foundation for Georgian Literature, opened in exchange. However, the following month, the Writers' House reopened, reinstating its former director and assuming all the GNBC's prior functions. It could be argued that the impact that the Frankfurt Book Fair's guest-of-honour requirements have on national cultural policies are not always sustainable through time.¹³

While significant pieces of this story are missing to clearly understand the nature of such events, the above may signal that politics plays an ambivalent role in nations' cultural promotion abroad and that the autonomy¹⁴ of the national literary institutions in charge of promotion, which very often depend on state budgets (a fact that necessarily precludes autonomy), is indeed very relative and unstable.¹⁵ In the case of Georgia, although the field gained a certain degree of autonomy with the establishment of the GNBC, the government was keen to project a certain national concept, which involved controlling promotion processes and keeping power over decision-making, which, again, hints at the political function of international projection.

¹² For a more detailed description of the events, see an interview with Medea Metreveli (Tarkhnishvili 2019) published in the Georgian press in August 2019, in which Metreveli recounts the various controversies but does not make the details explicit. This interview is my only source on this information, since Medea Metreveli never accepted an interview with me, and while she referred me to the deputy director of the Center, the latter did not mention any of these events when I asked about the preparation process for Frankfurt (interview on May 28th, 2019).

¹³ See the case of Brazil (Boix-García 2019, 226). One may also wonder whether the heavy economic investment made for the guest of honourship at Frankfurt made it impossible to keep financing two separate literary institutions afterwards, pointing to the idea that the book fair's mechanisms privilege Western or Westernized countries whose economies are strong enough to support their literary fields (Bosshard 2019, 186).

¹⁴ Following Bourdieu, the literary field is autonomous (having its own rules and specific resources), but only relatively, since the political field is always more dominant and has the power to impose constraints.

¹⁵ The events of the summer of 2021 in Georgia have once again shown the political interference in the literary field, given that the government appointed a representative of the Ministry of Culture as member of the jury for the state-financed literary prize *Litera*. This edition of the prize was cancelled by the Writer's House, the institution that ran the prize, because the jury, their nominees, and their director disputed said appointment.

Conclusions

This paper contributes to advancing research on the Frankfurt Book Fair in relation to the promotion of so-called peripheral literatures through guest of honourship, a vehicle that undoubtedly boosts international clout. In such a structured and hierarchized environment, in which visibility is a highly valuable resource, what makes the case of the so-called peripheral literatures especially interesting is that the guest-of-honour status is their opportunity to be truly seen.

Georgia's guest of honourship constitutes a singular case given Georgia's very particular traits, namely, its own alphabet, used as the central element in branding its literature, and its status as a country aspiring to European Union membership. Like other so-called peripheral literatures, Georgia followed a strategy of seeking a balance between uniqueness (singularity and distinction) and openness (universality, cosmopolitanism, and recognisability).

The authors chosen as spokespeople for Georgian literature seem to fit within the same scheme, considering the most well-known contemporary Georgian writer, Aka Morchiladze, with his complex use of language, and the Georgian-German writer Nino Haratischwili (the exception to the rule within a language-centred brand), who embodies openness, Georgian-German relations, and Georgian-European relations. At the fair, the role of translation ultimately proved ambivalent, because even though the strategy of highlighting the Georgian script and language as the main distinctive feature emphasized translation and translation subsidies' key role, spotlighting a German-language writer rendered translation invisible. In this regard, the role of translators and publishers as key figures that make the internationalization of guest-of-honour literature possible is a path worth exploring in future research.

Likewise, the delegation also pursued a balance between antiquity, a legitimizing mechanism for national literatures in the world republic of letters, and modernity or contemporaneity, a trait that may facilitate readership in different settings through global themes and which may also find more success in the publishing market. In future research, it would be interesting to look at the books at the fair as objects of circulation to find what combination of uniqueness or specificity, openness or recognisability, and antiquity and modernity makes texts circulate globally or deems authors eligible for

international promotion. The mechanism of balancing between antiquity and modernity, together with literary and political actors' discourses aimed to brand Georgia as European, with clear political aims, shed light on how guest of honour platforms at international book fairs can function politically. The Georgian delegation's emphasis on its political desire to integrate Georgia into Europe in its speeches and general discourse evidences the political relevance of the Frankfurt Book Fair as a platform for multilateral soft power.

Finally, Georgia's guest of honourship also shows that, for recently institutionalized literary fields, the guest-of-honour project can, on the one hand, trigger new cultural policies and specific institutions, and, on the other hand, surface the contradictions of the given literary field. For Georgia, it simultaneously helped advance the institutionalization of literature, with the creation of the GNBC, and cast light on the barriers to autonomy in the literary field, revealing the thorny relationship between literature and politics. In this vein, future research could address the unexpected, not always only positive, effects that the guest of honourship can have for so-called peripheral literatures. Future research should also consider whether Georgia's other cultural-projection practices deploy the same communicative strategies as the Georgian delegation's at Frankfurt in order to glean a more comprehensive notion of how the state shapes cultural transfers.

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