

## **Justice and Legality in Imperial and Post-Imperial Spaces**

**Organized by:** Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Max Weber Stiftung, Ilia State University

**Location:** Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia

**Date:** May 1–3, 2025

**Format:** In-person

**Reported by:** Zurab Bezhanishvili

The international conference “*Justice and Legality in Imperial and Post-Imperial Spaces*”, held from 1 to 3 May 2025 at Ilia State University in Tbilisi, explored the role of law, legality, and justice as instruments of power, ideology, and resistance throughout the imperial and post-imperial histories of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and neighboring regions. Organized by the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, the Max Weber Stiftung, and Ilia State University, the conference brought together scholars from across Eurasia for three days of intense discussion on legal pluralism, local agency, the manipulation of justice, and the legacy of colonial and Soviet legal cultures.

The conference opened with welcoming remarks from Nino Mataradze (Dean of Faculty, Ilia State University), Moritz Florin (Max Weber Stiftung), and Stefan B. Kirmse (ZMO), who emphasized the intellectual necessity of approaching justice as both a concept and a political tool. The conveners set the stage for a series of panels that dissected how law functioned not merely as a set of rules, but as a hegemonic language, manipulated to control subject populations, construct loyalist social hierarchies, and normalize authoritarian and imperial authority.

The first day began with Panel I, titled *Institutional and Legal Struggles in the Russian Empire*, chaired by Lucien Turczan-Lipets. Giorgi Tchkadua offered a detailed account of the Russian Empire’s legal colonization of Georgia in the 19th century, highlighting the instrumental use of law to subordinate local institutions under the guise of civilizational transformation. His analysis illuminated how justice was restructured to legitimize imperial authority while disempowering traditional governance. Stefan Kirmse followed with a study of the Surami and Kutaisi trials, focusing on the use of antisemitic “blood libel” accusations as a legal and cultural mechanism for controlling minority populations. His presentation illustrated how these trials mirrored wider judicial shifts, where the rhetoric of reform was subverted by myth and prejudice. Masha Cerovic concluded the panel with a discussion on land conflicts in the Russian-Ottoman borderlands, particularly around Kars. She showed how legal frameworks were weaponized to re-engineer local demographics and impose new ethnic hierarchies.

Panel II, *Understanding Legality and Justice*, chaired by Gevorg Avetikyan, explored conceptual histories and administrative manipulations. Oliver Reisner examined the development of legal-political thought among Georgian intellectuals around 1900, drawing on print culture to reveal how justice was debated as both an ethical ideal and a tool of national self-determination. Anton Ikhsanov focused on the colonial misuse of translation in the Transcaucasian region, demonstrating how imperial agents intentionally distorted local legal meanings to facilitate domination. Leo Hedrich investigated the parliamentary activity of Muslim deputies in the State Duma, showing

how their engagement with legality served as both participation and protest within the confines of imperial rule.

The second day opened with Panel III, *Legal Debates and Diversity among Muslims*, chaired by Oliver Reisner. Evgeniya Prusskaya analyzed the complex interactions between Adat, Shari‘a, and imperial legal systems in the 19th-century Muslim Caucasus. She emphasized how the imposition of customary law (Adat) over Islamic jurisprudence by colonial administrators redefined the authority of Muslim communities and neutralized potential sources of resistance. Magomed Gizbulaev discussed the transformation of Shari‘a in Dagestan under Russian rule, pointing to the ways Islamic legal culture was reshaped, yet not erased, by state policies. Zilola Khalilova presented on madrasa reforms and legal politics in Turkestan, where Islamic educational institutions became sites of negotiation between tradition and Soviet modernization.

Panel IV, chaired by Ketevan Sartania, addressed *Customary Law and Legal Pluralism from Empire to the Present*. Anatolii Tokmantcev examined the legal evolution affecting Jehovah’s Witnesses in post-Soviet Armenia, highlighting the tensions between official legislation and community-specific practices. Natalia Alenkina focused on Kyrgyzstan’s Aksakal courts, tracing their transition from informal authority to state-coordinated legal forums that continue to influence rural justice. Rasul Abdulkhalikov explored the 2018 territorial conflict between Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Moscow, placing it within a broader context of overlapping legal regimes and state efforts to assert control through selective enforcement of plural law.

Panel V, *Invoking Justice in the Anti-Colonial and National Struggle*, chaired by Leo Hedrich, brought the lens to the use of law in resistance movements. Nurzhan Tustikbay analyzed the writings of early 20th-century Kazakh intellectuals, showing how justice was mobilized as a framework for critiquing material and political exploitation under Russian imperialism. Archil Longurashvili investigated the Baku Congress of 1920, where slogans of social justice were appropriated to blend national liberation with socialist internationalism. David Darchiashvili offered a comparative study of Georgian and Polish resistance strategies, demonstrating how both movements navigated the dual pressures of imperial repression and ideological cooptation.

Panel VI, chaired by Said Gaziev, focused on *The Legal Struggle of Double and Non-Titular Minorities*. Aikaterini Lykoudi explored how Crimean, Bessarabian, and Istanbul Karaites used legal self-narratives to construct and protect national identity in the face of competing religious and imperial definitions. Maria Starun discussed sexual crimes involving ethnic minorities in Soviet Leningrad, highlighting how the judicial process revealed entrenched ethnic biases and systemic injustice. Mirkamran Huseynli spoke on the post-Soviet trajectory of ethnic minority strategies in Azerbaijan, emphasizing the continuity of exclusionary practices through legal and cultural institutions.

The third day began with Panel VII, *Enduring and Defying Stalinism*, chaired by Aikaterini Lykoudi. Tamta Tkheldze presented on local initiatives and personal vendettas during the Red Terror in Georgia, showing how centralized violence often intersected with local disputes and retribution. Anna Tchintcharauli examined the forced resettlement of Chechens, Ingush, and Khevsurs through survivor narratives and legal documentation, reflecting on how these traumas shaped intergenerational memory. Said Gaziev offered an account of Soviet bureaucratic

indifference through the metaphor of barefoot children excluded from education, using it as a lens to examine the contradictions between ideological rhetoric and material neglect.

Panel VIII, chaired by Moritz Florin, concluded the conference with the theme *Justice Campaigns and Dissidence, 1960s–1980s*. Ketevan Sartania analyzed the Georgian dissident movement’s legal discourse, showing how appeals to constitutional and international law became tools for articulating national self-determination. Gevorg Avetikyan addressed the case of Armenian nationalism, highlighting how Soviet repression paradoxically reinforced ethnic mobilization through legal contestation. Nazrin Gadimova-Akbulut explored how Soviet cultural policy facilitated Azerbaijani national expression, arguing that the promotion of identity often masked deeper constraints. Lucien Turczan-Lipets examined legal and philosophical discussions among dissidents in 1960s Kyiv, revealing how law functioned as both an object of critique and a platform for reclaiming moral authority.

The conference concluded with open reflection and scholarly discussion. Participants reiterated that the manipulation of legal pluralism, the cooptation of customary and religious law, and the cultural targeting of intellectual elites through russification were not relics of the past but enduring patterns. Whether during tsarist colonization, Stalinist repression, or post-Soviet transformation, justice remained a contested term—both a language of domination and a banner of resistance. The legacy of imperial legality continues to shape the architecture of law, identity, and power across the region.

## Conference overview

Thursday 1 May 2025

### Introduction and Welcome

Nino Mataradze, Dean of the Faculty (Ilia State University)

Moritz Florin (Max Weber Stiftung)

Stefan B. Kirmse (Leibniz Zentrum Moderner Orient)

### Panel I: Institutional and Legal Struggle in the Russian Empire

Moderation: Lucien Turczan-Lipets

Giorgi Tchkadua: Justice, Legality, and Imperial Rule: Russian Coloniality in the Caucasus and Institutional Transformations in early to mid-19-th-century Georgia

Stefan Kirmse: Blood Libel in a Changing Judiciary: The Surami and Kutaisi Trials (1850-1854; 1878-80)

Masha Cerovic: From Legal to Ethnic Conflict: Land Disputes in a Russian-Ottoman Borderland (1878 - 1914)

### Panel II: Understanding Legality and Justice

Moderation: Gevorg Avetikyan

Oliver Reisner: Justice and Legality among Georgian Intellectuals. A conceptual history of print media around 1900.

Anton Ikhsanov: The (Mis)use of Translation by the Colonial Administration in the Transcaspiian Region

Leo Hedrich: Legality in the “parliamentary work” of Muslim Deputies in the State Duma (Russian Empire).

Friday, 2 May 2025

Panel III: Legal Debates and Diversity among Muslims.

Moderation: Oliver Reisner

Evgeniya Prusskaya: Navigating Adat, Shariat and Imperial Legal Pluralism in the Muslim Caucasus of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Magomed Gizbulaev: The Transformation of Shari`a in Dagestan (Dagestanskaya oblast under Imperial Russian Rule).

Zilola Khalilova: Muslim Communities, Madrasa Reform, and the Politics of Law in Late Imperial and Soviet Turkestan.

Panel IV: Customary Law and Legal Pluralism from Empire to the Present.

Moderation: Ketevan Sartania

Anatolii Tokmantsev: Jehovah`s Witnesses and Armenian State: The Transformation of the Legal Framework During the Post-Soviet Period.

Natalia Alenkina: Aksakal Courts of Kyrgyzstan: The Evolution of Justice and Legality on the Periphery of the State

Rasul Abdulkhalikov: The 2018 Conflict between Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Moscow in the Context of Legal Pluralism.

Panel V: Invoking Justice in the Anti-Colonial and National Struggle

Moderation: Leo Hedrich

Nurzhan Tustikbay: Invoking Justice from Below: Kazakh Intellectual Responses to Colonial Material Oppression in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Archil Longurashvili: In the Name of Social Justice? The Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East (1920)

David Darchiashvili: Hybridity of National Struggle in Russian Empire and in Soviet Times: Georgian and Polish Cases in Comparison.

Panel VI: The Legal Struggle of Double and Non-Titular Minorities

Moderation: Said Gaziev

Aikaterini Lykoudi: Legal Narratives and National Identity: The role of Crimean, Bessarabian and Istanbul Karaites in the Haskalah and the Karaite National Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Maria Starun: Negotiating Justice: Sexual Crimes, Ethnic Minorities, and the Soviet Legal System in Leningrad Province, 1920s- 1930s.

Mirkamran Huseynli: The Post-Soviet Epoch of Ethnic Minority Identities and Strategies in the Case of Azerbaijan.

Saturday, 3 May 2025

Panel VII: Enduring and Defying Stalinism

Moderation: Aikaterini Lykoudi

Tamta Tkheldze: Bottom-Up: Local Initiative and Personal Vendetta, Red Terror in Georgia.

Anna Tchintcharauli: Soviet Forceful Resettlement Practices in the Eyes of the Chechens, the Ingush, and the Khevsurs.

Said Gaziev: No Shoes, No School: Soviet Bureaucracy and Barefoot Children.

Panel VIII: Justice Campaigns and Dissidence, 1960s-1980s

Moderation: Moritz Florin.

Ketevan Sartania: The Georgian Dissident Movement in the post-Stalin Era: Exploring Justice and National Self-Determination through Legal Frameworks.

Gevorg Avetikyan: Soviet Policies of Repression and the Accommodation of Armenian Nationalism (1950s-1980s).

Nazrin Gadimova-Akbulut: State-led Protection and National Rights: Extending Azerbaijani Cultural Expression within the Soviet System in the 1950s-1960s

Lucien Turczan-Lipset: Forums of Dissidence in 1960s Kyiv: Thinking History, Thinking Law, Thinking Justice.