

# Autonomy and Conflict

Ethnoterritoriality and Separatism in the  
South Caucasus – Cases in Georgia

Svante E. Cornell

Uppsala 2002



ای چرخ فلک خرابی از کینه تو است  
بیدادگری شیوه دیرینه تو است  
ای خاک اگر سینه تو بشکافند  
بس گوهر قیمتی که در سینه تو است

Aey Charkhe Falak Kharabi Az Keena-e- Tu Ast

Bedadgari Shiva-e Dereena Tu Ast

Aey Khak Agar Seena-e Tu Bishi-kafand

Bass Gohar-e Qeemati Ka Dar Seena-e Tu Ast

*Circling heaven, this decay is your ill-will*

*Cruelty, your attribute so perennial*

*O earth! If they cleave your chest*

*In your bosom you hide a precious jewel!*

**Ruba'iyat** of Omar Khayyam (ca. 1048-1131)

Translation by Dr. Imtiaz Kazi, 2000

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## ABSTRACT

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Providing minority populations with autonomy is gaining appreciation as a method of solving, managing, and even pre-empting ethnic conflict. However, in spite of the enthusiasm for autonomy solutions among academics and practitioners alike, there is reason to argue that the provision of autonomy for a minority may under certain circumstances increase rather than decrease the likelihood of conflict. In certain political conditions, autonomy strengthens the separate identity of a minority; it thereby increases its incentives to collective action against the state; and most of all its capacity to seek separation from the central state, through the state-like institutions that autonomy entails. The objective of this dissertation is to investigate whether territorial autonomy was a contributing factor to the violent ethnic conflicts that have erupted in the South Caucasus since the late 1980s. It presents a theoretical argument to explain which qualities of autonomy solutions increase the likelihood of conflict; and then seeks to outline possible rival explanations derived from the theoretical literature. The dissertation then examines the explanatory value of autonomy as compared to nine other possible causal factors in a study of nine minorities in the South Caucasus. Finding that autonomy has the highest explanatory value of any of the factors under study, it then moves on to study in depth the five minorities existing on the territory of the republic of Georgia. Three of them, Abkhazia, Ajaria, and South Ossetia, were autonomous, whereas two (the Armenians and Azeris in Southern Georgia) had no autonomous status. The dissertation shows how the institution of autonomy, by promoting an ethnic elite in control of state-like institutions, and by enhancing factors such as leadership, economic viability, and external support, played a crucial together with these factors in the escalation to conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, whereas the absence of autonomy mitigated conflict in Javakheti's Armenian and Kvemo Kartli's Azeri populations.

*Keywords:* Autonomy, Caucasus, Ethnopolitical Conflict, Georgia (Republic), Ethnic Relations, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Javakheti, Ajaria, Kvemo Kartli

Svante E. Cornell, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, Box 514, SE-75120 Uppsala, Sweden

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Uppsala University, Box 514, SE-75120 Uppsala, Sweden

Phone +46 18 471 00 00

Fax. + 46 18 69 51 02

E-mail: [info@pcr.uu.se](mailto:info@pcr.uu.se)

Website: [www.pcr.uu.se](http://www.pcr.uu.se)

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## Ethnoterritoriality and Separatism in the South Caucasus – Cases in Georgia

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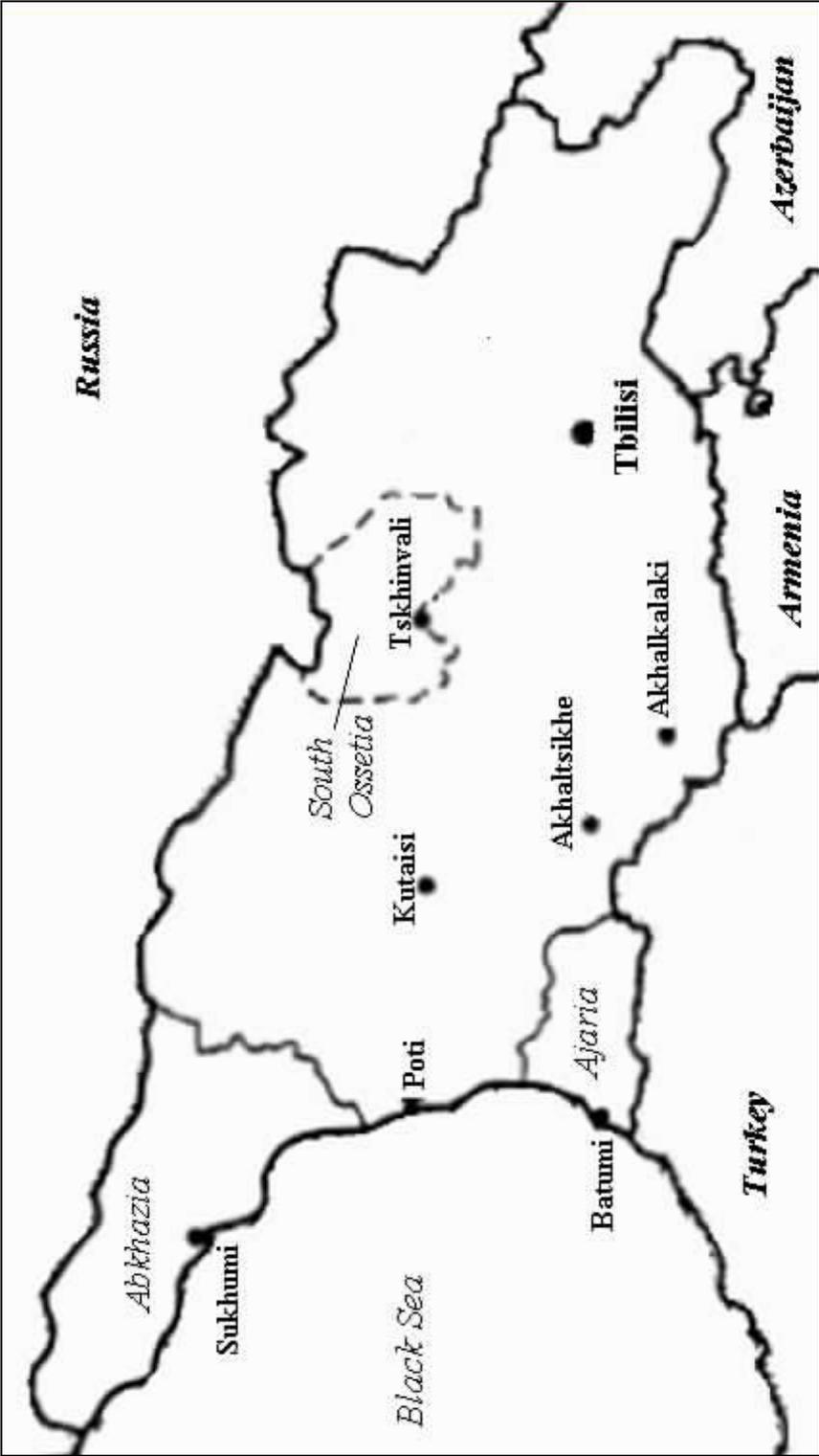
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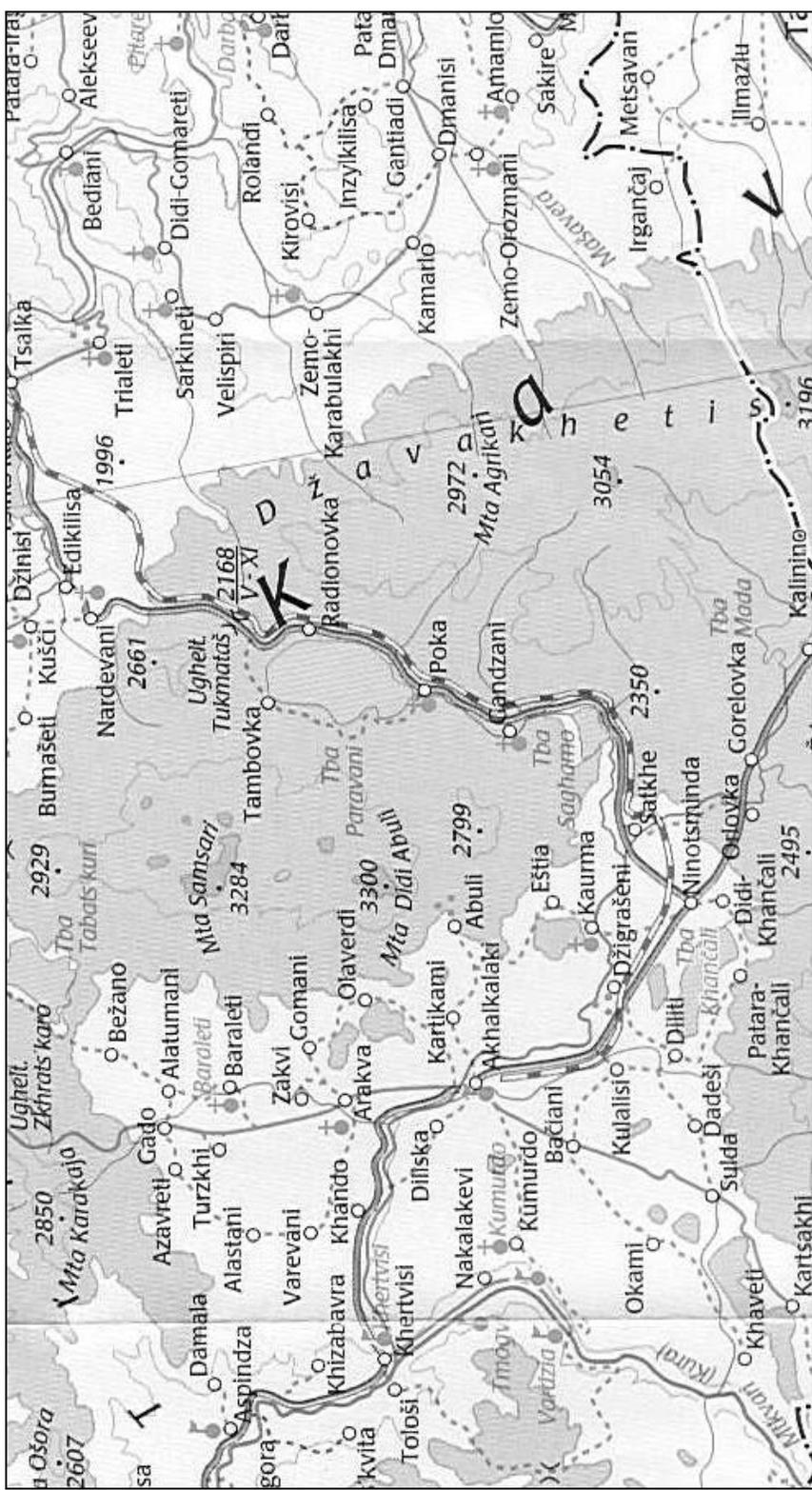
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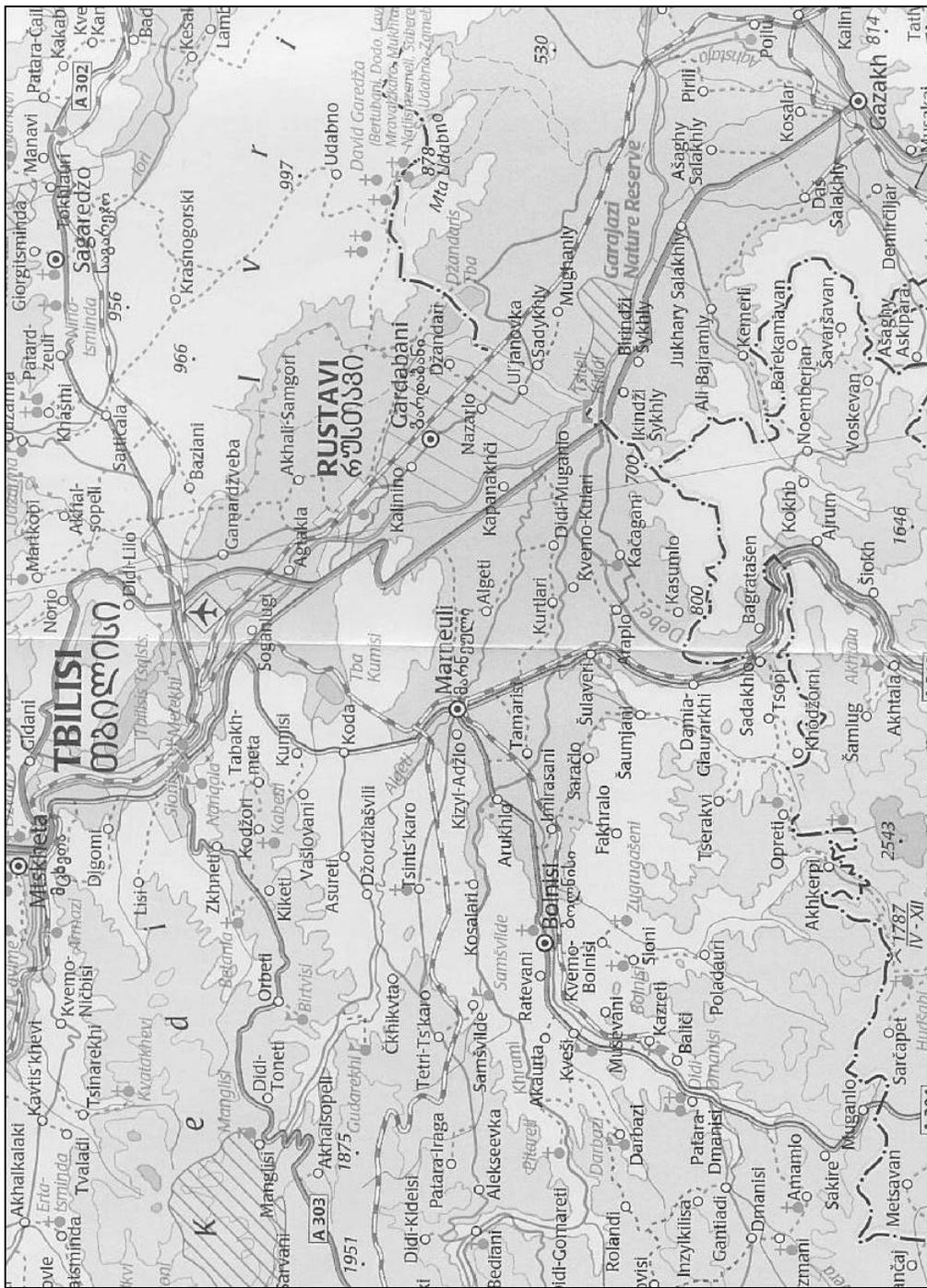




Georgia with Autonomous Units, 1989



The Javakheti Area (Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda) of Samtskhe-Javakheti



The Dmanisi, Bolnisi, Marneuli, and Gardabani Areas of Kvemo Kartli

# 1

## The Role of Autonomy for Violent Conflict

Territorial autonomy is often considered a mechanism of conflict resolution, a compromise between a minority aiming at self-determination and a state protecting its territorial integrity. Territorial autonomy is increasingly advocated as a solution to ethnic conflicts, but the institution of autonomous regions for minorities is also gaining salience as a mechanism to prevent the eruption of violent conflict. While being a solution to many conflicts, there is reason to suspect that autonomy can under certain circumstances act as a catalyst of conflict. This is most clear in the successor states of the former Soviet Union, where ethnic conflicts have typically taken the shape of a conflict between an autonomous region or republic and its central government. In fact, the successor states of the former Soviet Union constitute a unique environment to trace this phenomenon. Despite its ideological aims to unify people of different ethnic origins, the Soviet state was in fact built on a system of hierarchical ethnic federalism. Below the 15 union republics that the union consisted of, there were over thirty autonomous republics and regions with lower degrees of self-rule. However, all minorities were not covered by this system—some, for a variety of reasons, never held autonomous status, mainly if the ethnic group in question was the holder of union or autonomous republic elsewhere. Hence groups such as Russians in Kazakhstan, Tajiks in Uzbekistan, and countless others became so-called ‘non-status’ minorities despite their large numbers. In a situation where certain minorities are endowed with territorial autonomy and others devoid of such status, one could *à priori* expect the non-autonomous minorities, especially in a time of political transition or crisis, to press for the elevation to an autonomous status or independence, or to demand to redraw the new international borders (where applicable) to be included in their ‘mother’ state; on the other hand, minorities already holding autonomous regions would, given that they already enjoy self-rule, have less of a reason to do so. Yet during the transition period that began in the mid-1980s and until the late 1990s, only one case of a non-autonomous minority voicing a credible and sustained struggle for self-determination occurred, that of the Gagauz in Moldova, which was solved by an autonomy arrangement in 1994. On the other hand, a host of secessionist or irredentist struggles<sup>1</sup> took place between autonomous regions and their central governments: some

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<sup>1</sup> Here separatism is defined as the struggle of an ethnic group for an independent state, whereas irredentism is taken to mean an attempt by a portion of an ethnic group in one state to unite with ethnic kin in another.

became violent and led to wars in Mountainous Karabakh (Azerbaijan), South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Georgia) and Chechnya (Russian Federation), whereas secessionism emerged, without leading to large-scale violence, in other cases such as Crimea (Ukraine), Gorno-Badakhshan (Tajikistan), Tatarstan and Bashkortostan (Russian Federation). Other autonomous regions voiced their claims to higher levels of self-rule more or less calmly, without questioning the integrity of their state of belonging, and obtained concessions through negotiations with the center; prominent examples are Ajaria (Georgia), Sakha-Yakutia (Russia). Still other autonomous regions never even voiced any such claims, including Karakalpakistan in Uzbekistan, and Mordovia, Udmurtia, and Karelia in Russia. Yet it remains the case that among the numerous minorities in the South Caucasus, the only ones that ended up in secessionist armed conflicts with their central governments were the autonomous ones.

### **1.1. Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether territorial autonomy was a contributing factor to the violent ethnic conflicts that have erupted in the South Caucasus since the late 1980s. The three states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are particularly well suited to a study of the role of autonomy for violent ethnic conflict since they form a limited geographical area where nine compactly settled minorities were present before the onset of conflict in the late 1980s. Four of these were autonomous: the Armenians of Mountainous Karabakh in Azerbaijan, and the Abkhaz, Ajars, and South Ossetians in Georgia. Meanwhile, five minorities of comparable size lacked autonomy: the Armenians of Javakheti in Georgia, the Azeris in Georgia, the Azeris in Armenia, and the Talysh and Lezgins of Azerbaijan. While the relations between the various minorities and their central governments have ranged from calm to occasionally high levels of tensions in all cases, only in three cases did these tensions deteriorate into armed conflict: in Mountainous Karabakh, South Ossetia, and in Abkhazia, incidentally three of the four areas that held territorial autonomy.

As these three cases were all autonomous regions or republics in the Soviet period, the question that comes to mind is whether autonomy played any role in the escalation to armed conflict. Was autonomy a factor generating conflict, or did conflict emerge in these specific regions for other and different reasons? Already at this point, it is necessary to note that no attempt is made to portray autonomy as the sole responsible factor for these conflicts. Indeed, autonomy can be construed neither as a sufficient nor as a necessary condition for conflict. Of 20 autonomous regions in the Russian Federation, armed conflict had emerged only in one case by early 2002: Chechnya. Likewise, ethnopolitical conflicts have emerged in various regions of the world without the presence of autonomy for the minority in question. Nevertheless, the question is whether autonomy contributed to the emergence of conflict; and if so, in which way, to what extent, and in relation to

which other factors? As will be shown below, there are a number of facets of the institution of territorial autonomy that may be conceived of as contributing to conflict, rather than decreasing the risk of violence. It is nevertheless necessary to account for the role played by other factors which have been listed and discussed at length in the plentiful theoretical literature on ethnic conflict, or arrived to in empirical studies of instances of the same phenomenon.

An important question is the specific character of the Soviet autonomous structure, which is explained in detail in chapter three. A number of analysts dismiss the relevance of Soviet autonomies, with the argument that they were simply not autonomous. For example, Dörge denied that Soviet 'entities' enjoyed genuine autonomy;<sup>2</sup> Lapidoth, in the same vein, dismisses them by arguing that 'Soviet autonomy has always been of a merely administrative and cultural nature', and that by the 1930s, the 'limited administrative autonomy that had existed became an almost-empty shell'.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, it is correct that the Soviet Union was a strong authoritarian state, where the Communist party leadership was responsible for all important decisions. However, as the discussion in chapter three will show, the Soviet autonomies did over time develop indigenous elites, indigenous institutions, and actually in certain times such as the 1920s and since the 1970s, did carry with them a significant self-rule by local elites, shielding them from the center's policies. The issue also relates more broadly to the relationship between autonomy and democracy. Can a meaningful autonomy exist in a non-democratic state? Many writers would argue that the devolution of power is not possible in an authoritarian state, and that as a result, real autonomy would not be possible. Yet even in authoritarian societies, autonomy may exist in the sense of creating territories whose existence is legitimized through ethnicity, with governmental institutions manned by native elites, defined borders, and significant power in cultural, educational, and sometimes even economic and political matters that help shape the consciousness of the inhabitants of these autonomous regions. Soviet autonomies are examples thereof, and this issue is treated at further length below.

The argument presented in this study has not been systematically treated in the theoretical literature on ethnopolitical conflict. Various researchers have alluded to the role of autonomous institutions in conjunction with ethnic conflict, but this author is unaware of any systematic inquiry into the role of autonomy as a factor in the emergence of ethnopolitical conflict. The lack of existing theory rules out a purely deductive approach as such an approach is normally used either to test an existing theory, a part of

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<sup>2</sup> Heinrich Dörge, *Der Autonome Verband im Geltenden Staats-und Völkerrecht*, Vienna: Brämüller, 1931, p. 18, quoted in Ruth Lapidoth, *Autonomy: Flexible Solutions to Ethnic Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: USIP Press, 1996), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Lapidoth, *Autonomy*, p. 91.

an existing theory, or a novel deductive theoretical construct. As one researcher notes, 'it is commonly held that that deductive approaches should be chosen whenever possible, but that recommendation offers limited guidance if there is no identifiable theory to test'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, there is a need to build theory in this field, hence a theory-building approach will be adopted. Relevant academic literature drawn from various fields will be used in chapter two to set up a number of working proposition on factors plausibly leading to conflict between a government and a minority population, whether autonomous or not. Relevant literature includes, as will be discussed below, literature on conflict between nations as well as literature on nationalism and ethnic conflict.

To determine if autonomy indeed played a role in the emergence of ethnopolitical conflict in the South Caucasus, it must be contrasted with the role played by a host of other factors. This chapter will present the logical case for the argument that territorial autonomy is conducive not to peace and cooperation, but to ethnic mobilization and, indeed, to conflict. In chapter two, a theoretical discussion on the roots of ethnopolitical conflict is undertaken, with the aim of providing the alternative or contributing explanations that may help in accounting for the emergence of conflict in the region. Several working propositions are extracted from this chapter. Having formed the theoretical setting of the discussion, a historical overview of Soviet nationality policy is necessary before moving to the actual investigation of the conflicts of the late 1980s and 1990s. Chapter three will set the scene of the study by examining in further detail the Soviet Union's policies toward nationality and ethnicity, based on Marxism-Leninism – policies that were of great importance to this study as it was Soviet nationality policy that drew the borders of the South Caucasus and determined the minorities that were granted autonomy. The map of the South Caucasus, and the societies that existed in the region in the late 1980s, cannot be dissociated from the Soviet Union's singular approach toward minority issues. Being equipped with a theoretical framework and a historical background to ethnic relations and ethnic policies in the former Soviet Union, chapter four will outline the methodology to be used to investigate the empirical reality and contrast it with the theoretical elements outlined in chapters one and two. After having provided a brief empirical background to the region and specifically to the nine minorities that form the universe of cases in this study, chapter five will carry out a factor-based study of the nine cases, drawing on the working propositions emanating from chapters one and two. This chapter will provide an indication of the role of different factors in explaining the emergence of ethnopolitical conflict. While providing an indication of causal effect, that

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Ohlson, *Power Politics and Peace Policies. Intra-State Conflict Resolution in Southern Africa*, Report No. 50, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, 1998.

is, establishing a link between an explanatory factor and the outcome of conflict, it does not provide an increased understanding of the causal mechanism – i.e., how and through which human mechanism that particular explanatory factor is related to ethno-political conflict. In order to achieve such an understanding, a smaller number of cases will be singled out for further examination. Five cases in the Republic of Georgia, exhibiting the full variation in outcome among the cases under study while sharing a similar political context, are then examined in further detail. Chapter six will provide a comprehensive background to the political development of Georgia with specific attention to minority issues. Against this background, chapter seven will examine each of the five selected cases, with a view to explain which factors, in which way, and in what relation to one another, contributed to the emergence of conflict or the lack thereof. Finally, after a brief comparative discussion of the cases, chapter eight will conclude the study.

## 1.2. Autonomy: General Perceptions

Since the 1950s, ethno-political conflict has grown as a source of concern in the international arena. It culminated after the cold war with the eruption of conflict in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. A number of conflicts also broke out between ethnically defined social groups in Africa and south Asia, in the post-communist states of Eastern Europe and Eurasia, as well as in Western Europe.<sup>5</sup> The reigning assumption that ethnic conflict was a vestige of the primitive past was revised and eventually abandoned, particularly in view of the spread of ethnic conflict to less developed regions. This led to increased media coverage and public awareness of ethnic issues; more importantly, academic research on ethnic conflict and its resolution mushroomed.<sup>6</sup>

Ethnic mobilization among minority populations in multiethnic states has often led to demands for self-rule (territorial autonomy) or to demands for outright secession.<sup>7</sup> Especially in defined geographical areas where minorities are compactly settled, the creation of a separate state is a feasible goal and territorial control becomes a chief issue of conflict. In situations in which ethnic groups live in overlapping settlement patterns, such demands are less feasible and are made more infrequently, making control over or

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<sup>5</sup> Ted Robert Gurr, "Ethnic Warfare on the Wane," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 79, May–June 2000, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Significant works on nationalism and ethnic conflict include Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2d ed., London: Verso, 1991; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1988; Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986; Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985; Ted R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970; Gurr, *Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethno-political Conflict*, Washington, DC: USIP Press, 1993; Gurr, *Peoples versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century*, Washington, D.C.: USIP Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> In other instances, however, ethnic demands are not for 'exit'—autonomy or secession—but for greater participation in the government of the central state, particularly when settlement patterns overlap.

influence in the central government the most contentious issue.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Fearon and Laitin find “regional concentration of minority group (a) powerful and robust factor. . . far more likely to see large-scale ethnic violence than urban or widely dispersed minorities.”<sup>9</sup>

Many theorists have found that solutions involving regional autonomy are effective in dealing with ethnic conflict. Ted Gurr, for example, has argued that “negotiated regional autonomy has proved to be an effective antidote for ethnopolitical wars of secession in Western and Third World States.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Kjell-Åke Nordquist has observed that creating an autonomy—“a self-governing intra-state region—as a conflict-solving mechanism in an internal armed conflict is both a theoretical and, very often, a practical option for the parties in such conflicts.”<sup>11</sup> Regional autonomy implies the introduction of ethnoterritoriality—territorial control linked to ethnicity. It occurs either when a region is explicitly created as a homeland for an ethnic group or when a minority group constitutes a large majority of the population of an autonomous state structure and perceives it as its own.

Central governments are nevertheless almost universally reluctant to accede to demands for autonomy for several reasons. First and foremost, they fear that granting territorial autonomy to a minority group would be merely the first step toward the eventual secession of the region. Second, granting autonomy to one region may be perceived as

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<sup>8</sup> It must be noted, however, that ethnic conflict in such situations is possible, and when it does occur, it is likely to be significantly more severe than in cases of less intermingled settlement patterns. Conflict in intermingled states would tend not to be over a part of the state’s territory and its affiliation but over the control of the state apparatus, that is, the entire territory of the state. The emergence of violent conflict in such situations would be significantly more likely to lead to large-scale ethnic cleansing and/or genocide: a geographic partition line being much more difficult to draw, the conflict is likely to take place not on a warfront between two organized military formations but in civilian-inhabited areas over a much larger tract of territory. Moreover, the knowledge that a clean territorial break is impossible or very difficult encourages the urge to displace or eliminate members of the other group and even the perception that it is necessary. A political solution would also imply that one would continue to live intermingled with members of the other group. This is in turn interpreted as a security threat to the own group and again increases the urge to expel or eliminate the other group, actions that are even conceptualized as defensive and indispensable for the own group’s well-being. This situation is referred to as the security dilemma. See, for example, Barry Posen, “The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,” *Survival* 35, no. 1 (1993). Also Erik Melander, *Anarchy Within: The Security Dilemma between Ethnic Groups in Emerging Anarchy*, Uppsala: Department of Peace and Conflict Research, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Weak States, Rough Terrain, and Large-Scale Ethnic Violence since 1945” (Paper presented at the 1999 annual meetings of the American Political Science Association, Atlanta, September 2–5, 1999), 16, emphasis in original.

<sup>10</sup> Ted Robert Gurr, “Peoples against States: Ethnopolitical Conflict and the Changing World System,” *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 38, Fall 1994, p. 366.

<sup>11</sup> Kjell-Åke Nordquist, “Autonomy as a Conflict-Solving Mechanism: An Overview,” in Markku Suksi, ed., *Autonomy: Applications and Implications*, The Hague: Kluwer, 1998, p. 59.

discrimination against other inhabitants or groups.<sup>12</sup> Third, autonomy increases the risk of intervention by a foreign state affiliated with the specific minority population.<sup>13</sup> In spite of such reservations, however, an increasing number of ethnopolitical conflicts over territory have been settled by compromises involving regional autonomy, such as the provision of autonomy to the Nagas in India in 1972, the Miskitos of Nicaragua in 1987, or the Gagauz of Moldova in 1994. The popularity of autonomy as a solution undoubtedly stems from its being one of the few conceivable compromise solutions in conflicts over the administrative control of a specific territory. Indeed, as will be discussed further, autonomy represents a compromise on the issue of state sovereignty itself.

Advocates of autonomy solutions or of ethnofederalism in general<sup>14</sup> argue that autonomy solutions are effective conflict-resolving mechanisms and that further federalization of multiethnic states along ethnic lines will help prevent ethnic conflict. In some of the literature, ethnofederalism has been characterized as what David Meyer terms a “cure-all prescription” for ethnic tensions.<sup>15</sup> There is, however, considerable reason to argue that the institution of territorial autonomy may be conducive not to interethnic peace and cooperation but rather may foster ethnic mobilization, increased secessionism, and even armed conflict. Whereas the merits of federalism were widely lauded in the literature from the 1960s to 1990, developments since then have generated doubt that ethnofederal solutions can effectively prevent ethnic conflict. Several researchers have noted—usually in passing—how federal structures may be counterproductive under certain circumstances.<sup>16</sup> Yet no systematic inquiry has been made into how and why federal structures, designed to mitigate centrifugal forces, instead may end up strengthening them.

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, in certain instances the central government, in particular in states trying to build a civic national identity, argues that granting autonomy to a minority population would be tantamount to defining that population as second-class citizens. The Turkish government, for example, sticks to its refusal for special rights to citizens of Kurdish origin, on the grounds that they are already enjoying all existing rights as first-class citizens of the Turkish republic; any special rights would imply their segregation from the rest of the population and by extension their diminishment to second-class status.

<sup>13</sup> See Lapidoth, *Autonomy*, p. 203. By the same token it can be argued that the refusal to grant autonomy could be an even stronger incentive for a state affiliated with the minority to intervene.

<sup>14</sup> Ethnofederalism is taken to mean the devolution of power within states to ethnically defined and territorially defined areas, either symmetrically or asymmetrically.

<sup>15</sup> David J. Meyer, “A Place of Our Own: Does the Ethnicization of Territorial Control Create Incentives for Elites to Conduct Ethno-Political Mobilization? Cases from the Caucasus in Comparative Perspective”, Paper presented at the Fifth Annual Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, New York, April 2000. See, for example, Daniel J. Elazar, *Federalism and the Way to Peace*, Kingston: Queens University, 1994; also Lapidoth, *Autonomy*.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Henry Hale, “Ethnofederalism and Theories of Secession: Getting More from the Soviet Cases” (Paper Presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, New York, April 1999); Robert Dorff, “Federalism in Eastern Europe: Part of the Solution or Part of the Problem?” *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 24 (Spring 1994).

### 1.3. Theoretical Aspects on Autonomy

The term ‘autonomy’ is derived from the Greek words *auto* (self) and *nomos* (law), meaning the right to make one’s own laws. The term is used with differing meanings in philosophy, the natural sciences, and in international law and international relations. Autonomy is a term that applies in a variety of social and legal contexts. As Lapidoth notes, it is used ‘fairly loosely to describe the quality of having the right to decide or act at one’s own discretion in certain matters’.<sup>17</sup> As used in international relations, the term was originally derived from sociology, but in a political and legal sense it ‘is part of the self-government of certain public corporations and institutions. It includes the power to ... regulate their own affairs by enacting legal rules’. In international law, autonomy is taken to mean ‘that parts of the state’s territory are authorized to govern themselves in certain matters by enacting laws and statutes, but without constituting a state of their own’.<sup>18</sup> This definition obviously refers to territorial autonomy, which is nevertheless not the only possible political understanding of the term. In particular, another type is cultural autonomy—whereby specific rights and duties are conferred on individuals belonging to a specific group, whether ethnically or religiously based. Autonomy in this study will, unless otherwise specified, refer to territorial autonomy. Crawford defined it as follows: ‘autonomous areas are regions of a State, usually possessing some ethnic or cultural distinctiveness, which have been granted separate powers of internal administration, to whatever degree, without being detached from the State of which they are part’.<sup>19</sup> Lapidoth argues that ‘a territorial political autonomy is an arrangement aimed at granting to a group that differs from the majority of the population in the state, but that constitutes the majority in a specific region, a means by which it can express its distinct identity’.<sup>20</sup> The latter part of this definition would certainly apply to the Soviet autonomies, although as viewed below, Lapidoth is dismissive of them. Whatever limitations there were on the exercise of political authority, the Soviet autonomies certainly helped promote the distinct identity of the groups that were granted autonomy, as will be viewed in greater detail in chapter three. However, there is not necessarily a requirement that the ethnic group granted autonomy form a majority of the population in a given region. Autonomy may be granted on a demographic basis, but also on the basis of an acknowledgment of the ethnic group’s indigenous nature on a specific territory irrespective of population figures, i.e. an acknowledgment of a certain group’s right to exercise authority over a certain territory. Hence in this study, the term autonomy will, unless otherwise specified, be understood as ‘a defined territory that has been legally

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<sup>17</sup> Ruth Lapidoth, *Autonomy: Flexible Solutions to Ethnic Conflicts*, Washington: USIP Press, 1996, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> Hans-Joachim Heintze, ‘On the Legal Understanding of Autonomy’, in Suksi, ed., *Autonomy: Applications and Implications*, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> James Crawford, *The Creation of States in International Law*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, p. 211.

<sup>20</sup> Lapidoth, *Autonomy*, p. 33.

granted a special status and rights and institutions of self-government by a state, by virtue of a titular ethnic group's ascribed differences from the majority population of that state, without being detached from the state'.

### **1.3.1. Autonomy: Definitions and Relation to Human Rights**

The concept of autonomy can according to Steiner be divided into three schemes. The first is a power-sharing regime (or a form of consociational democracy), which 'assures one or several ethnic groups of a particular form of participation in governance or economic opportunities', such as ethnic quotas in parliament and government or veto rights.<sup>21</sup> The second type is a regime of cultural autonomy, whereby members of particular ethnic communities are endowed with specific rights and duties in relation to the government, occasionally being bound by different laws.<sup>22</sup> This is often the case for religious groups, as is the case in Israel for Muslims and Christians, or in India for Hindus and Muslims. Members of particular groups may also be given special rights to preserve their culture and language, through the institution of native language schools for minorities for example. Most important with cultural autonomy is that it is not territorially based; it may still, nevertheless, be either individually or group based and either voluntary or compulsory. The third type in Steiner's analysis is that which gives an ethnic group self-rule, that is political authority over a certain territory, in order to govern its internal affairs to a determined extent. These regimes must naturally be based in the legal system of the particular country, and as such form a part of that state's system of government.<sup>23</sup> It must nevertheless be questioned whether the first regime or consociational democracy can qualify within anything but a very broad concept of autonomy; the concept of power-sharing is in essence different from that of autonomy, being based on participation in power rather than devolution of power.

The principle of autonomy can be defined as 'the granting of internal self-government to a region or group of persons, thus recognizing a partial independence from the influence of the national or central government', which can be determined 'by the degree of actual as well as formal independence enjoyed by the autonomous entity in its political decision-making process'.<sup>24</sup> This definition would include the concept of cultural autonomy, where a 'group of persons' is given 'a partial independence from the influence of the government'; such schemes are useful for minorities scattered on the territory of a state, where no autonomous region covering that population can for practical reasons be

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<sup>21</sup> Henry J. Steiner, 'Ideals and Counter-Ideals in the Struggle over Autonomy Regimes for Minorities', in *The Notre Dame Law Review*, vol. 66, 1991, pp. 1539-1560, here at p. 1542.

<sup>22</sup> John Coakley, 'Approaches to the Resolution of Ethnic Conflict: The Strategy of Non-Territorial Autonomy', *International Political Science Review*, vol. 15 no. 3, 1994, pp. 297-314.

<sup>23</sup> Steiner, 'Ideals and Counter-Ideals in the Struggle over Autonomy Regimes for Minorities', p. 1542.

<sup>24</sup> Heintze, 'On the Legal Understanding of Autonomy', in Suksi, ed., *Autonomy: Applications and Implications*, p. 7.

created. The bulk of this definition is nevertheless intended for territorial autonomy, usually considered synonymous with that of ‘self-government’. It is established that the ‘right to self-determination’ included in the UN charter referred not to sovereignty or independence but to ‘self-government’; it was repeatedly noted that the principle of self-determination conformed to the principles of the charter only insofar as it implied the right of self-government of peoples, not the right to secession.<sup>25</sup>

In the framework of international law, the discussion on autonomy regimes comes within reach of the discussion on human rights and group rights. According to Heintze, ‘the subject of autonomy is always a group ... the prerequisites of autonomy are recognition as a minority or group on the one hand and the acceptance of collective rights [that is, group rights] on the other’.<sup>26</sup> Group rights and their relation to human rights are subject to debate. They can be construed as either collective or corporate rights. Without going too deep into the details of the theoretical discussion on individual human rights and group rights, a short overview of the topic is necessary to place the concept of autonomy in clearer context.

Some authors argue that human rights are by nature individual rights borne by each person—i.e., universal human rights. Hence there is a difference between human rights and group rights: rights held by a group are by nature dissimilar to those held by individuals. Others insist that human rights can take collective as well as individual forms. Accordingly, much of what is important to Humans relates to things people experience collectively rather than individually.<sup>27</sup> The relationship between group rights and human rights, can hence be seen either as antagonistic or complimentary. Some argue that group rights are complements to human rights; the reasons why we ascribe rights to individuals are also reasons why rights should be recognized for groups; the same underlying values and concerns apply. Additionally, group rights in this perspective are seen as actually strengthening or guaranteeing individual human rights. Another view is that group rights are potentially a threat to individual rights: the rights of groups are often claimed over or against individuals. Moreover, a major purpose of human rights doctrine has been to protect individuals from the power of groups. As such, it is argued that including group rights into human rights defeats the very purpose of human rights. It is interesting to note

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<sup>25</sup> *Documents of the UN Conference on International Organization*, vol. 6, New York: UN Information Organization, 1945, p. 296, cited by Heintze, ‘On the Legal Understanding of Autonomy’, in Suksi, ed., *Autonomy: Applications and Implications*, p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Heintze, ‘On the Legal Understanding of Autonomy’, in Suksi, ed., *Autonomy: Applications and Implications*, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> J. Herman Burgers, ‘The Function of Human Rights as Individual and Collective Rights’, in Jan Berting et al. (eds.) *Human Rights in a Pluralist World: Individuals and Collectivities*, London: Meckler, 1990, p. 63; Yoram Dinstein, ‘Collective Human Rights of Peoples and Minorities’, *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* vol. 25, 1976, p. 102. See Peter Jones, ‘Human Rights, Group Rights, and Peoples’ Rights’, in *Human Rights Quarterly* vol. 21 no. 1, 1999, pp. 80-107.

that there is a trend toward the acceptance and widespread use of the concept of group rights (or collective human rights) in international law. The decisive issue at stake, as shown below, is whether one ascribes to a collective or corporate conception of group rights. The question is whether group rights are vested in the ethnic group or in the individual.<sup>28</sup>

The 'collective' conception, as typified by Joseph Raz, subscribes to an interest theory of rights.<sup>29</sup> X has a right if and only if X is entitled to have rights, and if an aspect of X's well-being is a sufficient reason for holding other person(s) to be under a duty to respect that right. An interest becomes a right only if it is an interest of sufficient moment to justify imposing a duty on another. Hence a right is also conceptually tied to a duty. Group rights arise when the joint interest of a number of people provides sufficient justification for imposing duties upon others (such as positive discrimination/assertive action from the state), whereas the single interest of only one individual would not provide the necessary justification. In this sense, a group right is held jointly by those who make up the group; the group has no existence or interest other than that of its members. This conception can be applied to groups that have strong ascribed identities. For a cultural minority, its culture may be central to the lives of its members. In that case, the minority has a right, as a group, that the majority society shall take steps to accommodate and protect the minority's culture. The costs and inconveniences of actively safeguarding a minority culture is justified by the interests of the combined interests of all of the members of the minority, not the interests of any single member of the minority.

Whereas the collective conception ascribes moral standing to the individuals that jointly make up the group, the corporate conception ascribes a moral standing to the group as such. The question is if groups can be said to have the same irreducible moral standing entitling them with rights as individuals? If so, what criteria would a group have to meet in order to hold rights? In any case, the number of groups holding rights by the corporate conception will be smaller in number than that by the collective conception, since the group needs to have a certain moral standing and not only interests. A group must possess a morally significant identity such that it qualifies for a moral standing separately from its individual members. Generally groups such as 'nations' or 'peoples' are attributed such standing and are seen as having rights that may be conceived of in corporate terms.

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<sup>28</sup> See discussion in Jones, 'Human Rights, Group Rights, and Peoples' Rights'. For background, see eg. Jack Donnelly, 'Human Rights, Individual Rights and Collective Rights', in Berting et al. (eds.) *Human Rights in a Pluralist World: Individuals and Collectivities*, p. 39; James A. Graff, 'Human Rights, Peoples, and the Right to Self-Determination', in Judith Baker (ed.) *Group Rights*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994, p. 186.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, especially pp. 207-209.

Some scholars claim that group rights conceived of as corporate rights can not be considered human rights, because they are held by corporate entities and not human beings. They are grounded in whatever gives these corporate entities their special moral status, unlike human rights that are based on humanity and personhood.<sup>30</sup> A corporate right can be a universal right: For example the right to national self-determination can be asserted in a way making it universal to all nations. Also it is held by the nation and not the persons making up the nation, and the moral standing allowing the nation to hold the right is not humanity but nationhood. However, if this right is seen as a collective right, then it is held not by the nation as such but jointly by the people making up the nation, but based on the interest that those individuals share in living in a self-determined fashion.

The collective rights of a group of individuals will fail if the duties imposed on other individuals to accord them that right are unduly harsh. Hence the collective rights of a group are seen in relation to the individual rights and duties of others. But this is not the case for corporate rights. Corporate rights accord groups a right that is ultimate and not derived from individual rights. Hence if moral standing is given to the group, a potential for rivalry between the group rights and individual rights exists, and may be seen as fundamental and inherent to the concept. For example, ascribing a moral standing to the group will be problematic in the case of people within the group trying to break free (i.e. live in a different way than dictated by tradition.) If rights are ascribed to the group's members individually, then they are free to do as they wish. But if the right is ascribed to the group as such, then this may not be the case, and group and individual rights may conflict. Questions of territory will also be salient. If a nation asserts its corporate right to a territory, it may justify a policy of ethnic cleansing to purge elements whom it deems not to be part of itself and which are therefore not deemed to have a right to live on that territory, again to the detriment of the individual rights of others. To solve such conceptual problems, it is argued that individual human rights must always have a priority over corporate rights. This would prevent the possibility of a corporate right challenging the rights of individuals.

Autonomy regimes are often advocated as a consequence of the right to self-determination of peoples and as such within the conception of corporate group rights. In fact, there are movements to make autonomy a principle of international law. In the draft declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples, it is stated that 'indigenous peoples have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs'. As the declaration has not been ratified, such formulations do not yet have any

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<sup>30</sup> Jones, 'Human Rights, Group Rights, and Peoples' Rights', pp. 88-92.

legal status; in fact the declaration would be the first legal text in which a group is expressly considered as the holder of a right to autonomy.<sup>31</sup>

### **1.3.2. Advantages and Disadvantages of Autonomy Regimes in the Literature**

The advantages of autonomy regimes are relatively well known. Given the multitude of ethnic groups in the world, advocates of autonomy argue that group rights need to be realized below the state level, so as to avoid the transformation of the international system into one containing hundreds of states. The traditional structure of the international system is already threatened by the relative reduction of the role of states in international affairs by the increasing importance of sub-state entities such as 'groups', be they ethnic, national or religious, and supra-state entities such as regional and international organizations. Autonomy is basically the only possible compromise between the interests of the group and those of the state; moreover the flexibility that is inherent in the concept of autonomy, tailored as it may be to each particular situation, increases its usefulness in the context of ever-increasing ethnic tensions. Autonomy may hence work both to prevent and to resolve ethnic conflict.

Autonomy regimes, by protecting diversity, by necessity rest in the assumption that differences enrich more than endanger the world. According to Steiner, 'autonomy regimes of ethnic minorities defend cultural survival rights in counteracting [the trend toward homogenization that has accompanied Western development]'.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the present international system seems to be moving toward a system of international norms that protects difference by pressuring states to create autonomy regimes for minorities, and such norms raise obvious and serious issues: 'the ideal in the human rights movement of preserving difference cannot so readily be bent to support the creation of autonomy regimes'. Whereas such regimes are based on the norm of equal protection, autonomy and power-sharing imply forms of institutionalized separateness which according to Steiner violate the very norm of equal protection: they 'explicitly discriminate among groups on grounds of religion, language, race, or national origin ... [and thereby] drive home the lesson that socioeconomic life and career turn on ethnic bonds.' Moreover, autonomy regimes not only preserve but lock into place historical differences among groups. According to Steiner, 'a state composed of segregated autonomy regimes would resemble more a museum of social and cultural antiquities than any human rights ideal'.<sup>33</sup>

In practice, other authors have argued that autonomy, implying the differential treatment of a certain group may result in protests by other groups, and thus lead to

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<sup>31</sup> Heintze, 'On the Legal Understanding of Autonomy', in Suksi, ed., *Autonomy: Applications and Implications*, p. 14.

<sup>32</sup> Steiner, 'Ideals and Counter-Ideals...', p. 1550.

<sup>33</sup> Steiner, 'Ideals and Counter-Ideals...', p. 1552.

rather than prevent conflict.<sup>34</sup> By contrast, a unitary state—through integration and the denial of collective group rights (though not therefore limiting individual rights)—provides equal opportunities and rules for all citizens of the state, irrespective of color, ethnicity or religion, and thereby prevents the polarization around such issues that would characterize solutions such as autonomy or federalism. Autonomy may in fact isolate the minority and prevent its members from political or economic participation in the larger sphere of the state. Accordingly, it makes dialogue between groups within the society difficult, alienate its component groups from each other, and lead to segregation.<sup>35</sup> Lyck has taken the example of the Faroe islands' autonomy to prove the negative effects of autonomy, arguing that autonomy led the state to feel less responsible for the development of the region.<sup>36</sup>

The general thrust of the current debate is nevertheless that the advantages of autonomy supersede the possible drawbacks. However, this is the case if and only if the autonomy is designed, created, and maintained in a proper way, with the necessary safeguards providing mechanisms for the regulation of possible future conflicts and perhaps also for eventual alterations of the autonomy's status. Autonomy is not in and by itself automatically a recipe for success; quite to the contrary, it is a solution with a number of dangers and risks, which yields its intended positive results only if properly designed.

### **1.3.3. Autonomy and Sovereignty**

The very nature of autonomous regions from the outset entails the existence of certain assets which are conducive to secessionism. The relationship between the central government of a state and an autonomous region within that same state resembles neither the horizontal relation between sovereign states nor the vertical relationship between a state and its citizens, whether or not they be organized politically along ethnic, religious, or ideological lines. With the institution of an autonomous status for a given region, the central government of a state acknowledges the devolution of a certain portion of its sovereignty to the representatives of the population of that region. In fact, the central government concedes that it does not have unlimited jurisdiction over the territory in question—herein lies the essence of autonomy. But at the same time, the central government insists on emphasizing the subordination of the autonomous region to itself and that the existence of the latter in no way contradicts its territorial integrity. Hence the

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<sup>34</sup> See Douglas Sanders, 'Collective Rights' in *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 13 no. 3, 1991, pp. 368-386.

<sup>35</sup> See M. Brems, *Die Politische Integration Etnischer Minderheiten*, Frankfurt Am Main: Lang, 1995, p. 142, cited in Heintze, 'On the Legal Understanding of Autonomy', in Suksi, ed., *Autonomy: Applications and Implications*, p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> L. Lyck, 'Lessons to be Learned on Autonomy from the Faeroese Situation Since 1992', in *Nordic Journal of International Law*, vol. 64 no. 3, 1995, pp. 481-487.

relations between the two units can be described as diagonal; in fact an autonomous region can be conceived of as a state within a state, whether or not this circumstance be officially recognized by either party. Autonomous regions typically share some or most of attributes of states, given that they possess executive, legislative and judiciary bodies; they often have state-like symbols like flags, coats of arms, etc., and often have other state-like institutions like parliaments, ministries, and even presidencies. In fact, autonomies may share most attributes of a state but never, by definition, the main one—that of being completely sovereign, not having any judicial authority above itself. An autonomous region may claim elements of sovereignty, but it is by definition a part of a sovereign state. The sovereignty of the autonomy can never be more than partial or delimited to certain determined spheres such as culture, economy, etc. But by the same token, the institution of an autonomous region implies that the state itself is no longer completely sovereign: it has agreed to share its sovereignty with the autonomy, albeit on an unequal basis, the devolution of sovereignty concerning only a part of the country and being limited to certain spheres. An extreme example, the Republic of Bashkortostan is defined as ‘a sovereign state within the Russian Federation’ — a definition which may seem a contradiction in terms, but which does add fuel to the debate on various regimes of statehood and sovereignty.<sup>37</sup>

There is no accepted pattern for the conduct of relations between an autonomous region and its central government—a fact which corresponds very well to the usefulness of autonomy as a mechanism of conflict resolution or prevention: its very flexibility and ability to be adapted to the specific grievances of a specific minority. Within the ‘society’ of independent and sovereign states, relations between all members are based on certain generally accepted principles, such as the equality of states, non-interference, inviolability of borders etc. Likewise but in a less generally accepted manner, there are principles that govern the relationship between a state and its citizens. The relationship between a central government and its autonomous region(s) does not, however, fit into either of these, sharing elements of both.

#### **1.4. Autonomy and Secessionism**

There are two ways in which the institution of autonomous regions could be conceived of as conducive to secessionism: first of all by institutionalizing and promoting the separate identity of its titular group, thereby increasing group cohesion and the incentives of the

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<sup>37</sup> Ildus G. Iishev, ‘Russian Federalism: Political, Legal and Ethnolinguistic Aspects — A View from the Republic of Bashkortostan’, in *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 26 no. 4, 1998, pp. 724-759. Reproduced as an appendix to the article is the Treaty on the Mutual Derogation of Powers between the State Organs of the Russian Federation and the State Organs of the Republic of Bashkortostan, in *Stanovlenie Dogovornykh Otnosheniy Respubliki Bashkortostan i Rossiyskoy Federatsii (1990-1996 gg., Sbornik Dokumentov)*, Ufa, 1997.

group to act; and secondly by its political institutions that increase the capacity of the group to act.

#### 1.4.1. Borders

One integral characteristic of autonomous regions is established, recognized, and clearly delimited borders—which in the Soviet case appeared on most maps of the union. The importance of borders has been emphasized among other by Benedict Anderson in his classic work *Imagined Communities*. As Anderson quotes a Thai author referring to southeast Asia and in particular Siam, ‘a map anticipated spatial reality, not vice versa. In other words, a map was a model for, rather than a model of, what it purported to represent ... it had become a real instrument to concretize projections on the earth’s surface. A map was now necessary for the new administration to back up their claims...’.<sup>38</sup> Anderson points to the special importance of what he terms the ‘map-as-logo’, whereby in the depiction of a territory, lines of longitude and latitude, place names, rivers, mountains and neighbors all disappear and only the contours—that is, the borders—of the territory in question remain. The map is hence ‘pure sign, no longer compass to the world’. As Anderson shows, the map in this format can then be used for ‘transfer to posters, official seals, letterheads, magazine and textbook covers ... instantly recognizable, everywhere visible, the logo-map penetrated deep into the popular imagination, forming a powerful emblem for the anticolonial nationalisms being born’.<sup>39</sup> The same process can be said to have been at work in the former Soviet Union with respect to its component entities. The maps, that is the borders and shapes of the union republics, autonomous republics and autonomous regions were well in existence by the 1980s and had been so for as long as most inhabitants could remember. Much as in the example cited by Anderson, these maps and borders *antedated* spatial realities in the sense that internal borders of the Soviet Union carried little historical and practical importance.<sup>40</sup> However, to autonomous minorities, the symbol of the republic or region’s shape, map, or borders was present, for most of the population, from birth. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, this symbol became an important rallying cry and an important tool in the hands of ‘political entrepreneurs’. Practically, the task of delimiting the borders of the imagined new state was already completed, an obvious advantage compared to non-autonomous minorities.

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<sup>38</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of Siam*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994.

<sup>39</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1991, p. 175.

<sup>40</sup> Lezgins, for example, have for centuries lived on both banks of the *Samur* river. When this river became the border between the Dagestan ASSR and the Azerbaijan SSR in the 1920s, this did not affect the Lezgins much; they were still able to carry on with their lives, with kinship ties across the administrative border. When in 1992 the Samur became the border between two independent states, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan, the division suddenly became a bitter reality to the Lezgins.

### 1.4.2. Group identity

Several researchers have noted the importance of autonomous entities for sustaining, promoting and enhancing group identity and cohesion. Gurr, for example, notes that ‘the capacity for collective action is relatively high [in the case of] groups that control an autonomous regional government’.<sup>41</sup> The primary instrument for the promotion of ethnic identity is the education system. Arguing for the usefulness of an institutionalist explanation to explain the salience of nationalism in Russia’s republics, Gorenburg notes that:

Instilling a strong sense of ethnic community in individuals requires them to be exposed early and frequently to information about their ethnic identity. In the context of Soviet nationalities policy, this exposure came primarily through the education system. By establishing separate systems of native language education for most of the minority ethnic groups that had their own ethno-territorial administrative units, the Soviet government in effect created an institution dedicated to instilling a common and separate identity among the students ... the identity was further reinforced in the classroom, where titular students were taught the culture and history of their ancestors, who were portrayed as having a direct genetic link with the members of the modern ethnic group.<sup>42</sup>

Hence it is reasonable to argue that the institution of autonomous regions inherently increase the group identity and cohesion of the region’s titular group, not only through the existence of borders but also due to the separate educational system autonomy often entails.

### 1.4.3. State Institutions

Another aspect of autonomous regions is the fact that they typically possess state-like institutions that can have a crucial effect in a process of ethnic mobilization, and that can be used by nationalist leaders to pursue a challenge to the central state’s integrity. Unlike the case of non-autonomous minorities, autonomous regions in many parts of the world have governments and parliaments that act as legitimate representatives of their ethnic constituencies and constitute recognized decision-making bodies. Parliaments can be used to pass language laws, to refuse to accept legislation from the central government, to issue declarations of sovereignty and independence, etc. A minority equipped with an autonomous status hence has institutions through which to challenge state authorities in general and the specific policies and actions of the central government in particular. The crucial factor is that autonomy creates institutions with some legitimacy to take this kind of actions. By contrast, a minority without such institutions would find it more complicated to challenge the state. Popular movements, petitions, demonstrations etc. may in certain contexts be effective methods to influence state policy; however even the

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<sup>41</sup> See Gurr, *Peoples Versus States*.

<sup>42</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg, “Nationalism for the Masses: Popular Support for Nationalism in Russia’s Ethnic Republics,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 53 no. 1, January 2001, p. 74.

organization of such shows of dismay are considerably easier given the existence of autonomous structures. Beyond increasing the sense of legitimacy of the actions taken by the minority, it effectively creates decision-making structures that are crucial in any attempt to bring ethnopolitical demands from the level of quiet dissatisfaction to that of direct action. As Meyer notes, autonomy ‘institutes a stratification of authority, subordinating administrative personnel into a defined hierarchy’; moreover, autonomy ‘establishes standard operating procedures and positive sanctions for the execution of its bureaucratic roles, and negative sanctions for poor performance, however that is defined by the AS [Autonomous Structure] leadership’.<sup>43</sup> In other words, given the existence of a nationalist leadership in the autonomous structure, the entirety of the bureaucracy is enticed to follow suit and adopt a more nationalist profile.

#### **1.4.4. Leadership**

The very fact that autonomous regions have governments moreover means that they have leaders—a crucial factor in any process of mobilization. The position of the leadership of an autonomous region is institutionalized in a manner that the leadership of a regular popular national movement can never be, meaning that leaders of autonomous structures have a relatively solid base to stand on. As Meyer notes, autonomy gives ‘a stamp of legitimacy to its executives and to the rule of the titular ethnic group’, and ‘facilitates improved cohesion of various ethno-politically mobilizing nationalists by providing a single institution around which they can unite’.<sup>44</sup> Beyond lending legitimacy to the leadership, its institutionalization also entails that routines for succession exist. The ‘national struggle’ could continue even through a change in leadership. The existence of an autonomous structure, especially where the titular ethnic group is in demographic majority position, also increases the risk of politicians resorting to ethnic mobilization for career purposes. The institution of autonomy being the source of power for leading élites, the leadership has a vested interest in increasing the level of self-government of the region in question. Elite power is simply positively correlated to the level of autonomy. Consequently, the élite has a vested interest in keeping nationalist sentiment among the population at a high level, which will ensure a pressure from below to sustain or enhance the level of autonomy.

#### **1.4.5. Financial Resources**

Autonomous structures also often carry with them access to financial resources that can be used to fund nationalist movements, and lessen the leadership’s dependence on the

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<sup>43</sup> David J. Meyer, *A Place of Our Own: Does the Ethnicization of Territorial Control Create Incentives for Elites to Conduct Ethno-Political Mobilization? Cases from the Caucasus in Comparative Perspective*, Paper presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the ASN, New York, NY, April 2000, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Meyer, *A Place of Our Own*, p. 2.

central government for finances. Some autonomy schemes include delegation of taxation to the levels of the autonomy, giving the autonomous government direct access to funds, as is the case in Tatarstan or Bashkortostan. Access to funds provides a basis for a movement to emerge without having to find funds from abroad or through donations from supporters, hence greatly increasing the financial independence of the secessionist movement. Moreover, funds can be used to distribute patronage, but also to buy weapons and other equipment.

#### **1.4.6. Mass Media**

Autonomous regions also often enjoy the privilege of having mass media under the control of its governmental authorities, including television, radio stations, as well as newspapers. In other words, beyond the ability to influence the attitudes of the population in the long term through the education system, autonomous regions possess every available means to directly influence the population through news coverage and depiction of events in media—or in clear terms, propaganda—and speed up the process of ethnic mobilization.

#### **1.4.6. External Support**

Yet another factor is external support. Very much due to its institutions, but also to the above-mentioned fact that their very institution of autonomy entails the recognition by the state of the devolution of its sovereignty, the international political (and perhaps also legal) standing of an autonomous region is not comparable to that of a non-autonomous minority. Practically, this entails that external support for an autonomous region is more likely to be forthcoming than for non-autonomous minorities.

### **1.5. Conclusions**

The conclusion of the discussion above is that *ceteris paribus*, secessionism is likely to be significantly higher for minorities equipped with an autonomous region, compared to non-autonomous minorities. In the Soviet context, the fact that autonomous regions were sometimes tightly controlled by the center during the Soviet era was no impediment to their use for political purposes during the transition period. First of all, the identity-shaping characteristics were present all throughout the Soviet era; secondly, the autonomous structures could be filled with increased content and more actual political significance in the late 1980s. Whereas the ASSR or AO Supreme Soviets had often been rubber-stamp institutions during the Soviet era (though this was not always the case, as Abkhazia and Tatarstan among others repeatedly sought a change in status against the wishes of Soviet authorities), the political liberalization of the late 1980s meant that the powers given to these parliaments by the (on paper) highly liberal Brezhnevian

constitution could actually be used. This chapter generates one working proposition for the study:

*Proposition: In combination with other factors, the existence of territorial autonomy increases the risk of conflict.*

# 2

## The Roots of Ethnopolitical Conflict

Chapter one set forth the thesis that autonomy has certain facets that may contribute to ethnic mobilization and hence to conflict. However, an ever-growing body of literature has identified a large number of different factors at the root of ethnopolitical conflict. In order to investigate the relationship between autonomy and conflict, it is hence necessary to contrast the salience of autonomy with the salience of other factors. It shall be recalled that chapter one noted that autonomy is regarded neither as a sufficient nor as a necessary condition for ethnopolitical conflict. In other words, certain autonomous territories do not come in a situation of conflict with their central government; moreover, ethnopolitical conflict takes place in the absence of autonomous structures. Hence the challenge is to investigate whether autonomy has indeed been a factor contributing to the emergence of conflict in the South Caucasus. Chapter four will deal with the methodology of the study in further detail; nevertheless, it should be clear already at this stage that autonomy will need to be contrasted with other factors that have been at work in the process leading to conflict in the South Caucasus. This chapter envisages to examine the discussion on ethnopolitical conflict in the literature, extract the central arguments produced by scholarship to explain the emergence of this type of conflict, and finally to construct working propositions based on this literature, that would have an explanatory value for the occurrence of conflict.

For this purpose, a discussion surveying general research on the subject is undertaken in order to arrive at a categorization of factors deemed responsible for the phenomenon of ethnopolitical conflict. The discussion takes its base in the traditional dichotomy between primordial and instrumental views of ethnic conflict, and then emphasizes three central categories of factors: incentives or willingness to rebel, capacity to act, and political opportunity to act. Moreover, the dichotomy between background factors and catalyzing factors behind ethnic conflict is emphasized and the factors to be elaborated are discussed under these sub-headings. Two issues are paid special attention to in the selection whenever applicable: the specific case of autonomous regions, and the geographic territory of the former Soviet Union. Hence, factors that may be important for ethnopolitical conflict generally but superfluous in the context of the former Soviet Union, where all nine cases to be discussed are confined, are not dwelled on. For example, the proposition that transition from authoritarianism to democracy increases the risks of conflict is important for the general body of theory on ethnopolitical conflict; however all

cases in this study would fall under the same conditions of political transition, and therefore this explanatory factor would have no ability to explain a variance in the occurrence of conflict.

## 2.1. General Research on Ethnopolitical Conflict

The literature on the phenomena of ethnicity and nationalism is relatively plentiful. A number of classic works on the development of nationalism exist, such as Anderson's *Imagined Communities* or Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism*. Meanwhile, there is an entire body of literature that has tried to map the reasons or causes of inter-state conflict. However, as noted by Gurr and Harff, 'there is no comprehensive and widely accepted theory of the causes and consequences of ethnopolitical conflict'.<sup>1</sup> Likewise van Evera states that 'scholars have written widely on the causes of nationalism but said little about its effects ... most strikingly, the impact on nationalism on the risk of war has barely been explored'.<sup>2</sup> One would agree with Charles Tilly that 'if the Nobel Academy [sic] awarded a prize in political science, surely it would give high priority to anyone who would provide a convincing answer to a simple question: under what conditions do ethnically identified populations make sustained, effective claims to control their own separate state?'<sup>3</sup> In the same mood, Horowitz notes that there are 'formidable obstacles' to the construction of a theory of ethnic conflict.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the element of autonomy is largely ignored. In fact, in much of the literature on ethnic relations the assumption is of relations between an ethnic group, which may be politically organized in a variety of more or less cohesive ways, and a government that often is seen as representing a particular ethnic group. The case of politically autonomous ethnic groups (usually treated at par with non-autonomous groups in the literature) differs from this standard pattern of ethnic relations in one important respect: both ethnic groups in question, at the center *and* at the periphery, possess sovereignty, albeit at different degrees. Both are organized into a territorial entity with political institutions that represent their populations. Of course, one of these entities is within and hierarchically subordinated to the other; but the minority group is nonetheless in a qualitatively different position compared to ethnic groups not vested with an autonomous status.

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<sup>1</sup> Ted R. Gurr and Barbara Harff, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994, pp. 77-78.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen van Evera, 'Hypotheses on Nationalism and War', originally published in *International Security*, vol. 18 no. 4, 1994, pp. 5-39; page numbers here refer to the article republished in Michael E. Brown (ed.), *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict: An International Security Reader*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997

<sup>3</sup> Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985, p. 95.

Although few consistent theories of ethnic conflict as such exist, most attempts to treat the issue find their roots in theories of ethnicity and nationalism. There is a traditional dichotomy on the issue of the roots of ethnic tensions. One is the primordialist view which, very simplified, argues that ethnic identities are given, and beyond that that the process of modernization was perceived as a threat to minority cultures and ways of life, hence prompting rebellion on the part of minorities. Deutsch, for example, argued that social mobilization was related to ethnic conflict, and this argument has been developed by other authors.<sup>4</sup> According to this view, ethnic competition is likely to occur in the 'modern' sphere of life as it is people newly having severed ties with their familiar, traditional environment to move to a 'modern' living environment, (typically leaving agriculture on the countryside for industrial or service work in an urban environment) that are most subjected to insecurity and seek the shelter of their tribal or communal identity. As such, ethnic conflict is seen not (as had been the case earlier) as a primitive relic of the past, but related to the very process of transition from the 'primitive' past to modernity. Another view, defended by among other Charles Tilly, argues that ethnic identities are social constructs, and that the main aim of groups is material and political gains; hence political entrepreneurs make use of economic differences and promote ethnic solidarity as a means to achieve economic and political aims.<sup>5</sup> Tilly argues that leaders and members of ethnically defined populations make strong claims for control over autonomous states or subdivisions of states under two conditions: when competitors begin to make claims for statehood that would exclude or subordinate the ethnic group in question; and when the agents of a state to which the population is already subordinated begins to threaten a) the group's ethnic identity or b) its shared access to advantageous niches.<sup>6</sup> According to this line of thought, political entrepreneurs seek to raise the level of group consciousness and group cohesion among their target population. Where one school of thought emphasizes the defense of ethnic identity, the other stresses the pursuit of group interests.

What can be inferred from these two lines of thought is on the one hand an emphasis on grievances and defense of ethnic identity: that is, the perception of an ethnic group (typically a minority population) that it is discriminated against by another group (normally the majority population of a state). Such perceived disadvantages create a *willingness* or *incentive* on the part of members of the ethnic group to mobilize politically. The other line of thought would then argue that the main driving force is the pursuit of

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<sup>4</sup> Karl W. Deutsch, 'Social Mobilization and Political Development', in *American Political Science Review*, vol. 55, 1961, pp. 493-514; Robert Melson and Howard Wolpe, 'Modernization and the Politics of Communalism: A Theoretical Perspective', in *American Political Science Review*, vol. 64, 1970, pp. 1112-30.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Tilly, 'Ethnic Conflict in the Soviet Union', in *Theory and Society*, vol. 20 no. 5, October 1991, p. 575.

group interests, that is political *capacity* and *opportunity* — that leaders see a chance of achieving certain political or economic goals by ethnic mobilization.

Naturally, these two lines of thought are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, a number of studies have argued that the amalgamation of these two views would be the best basis for the construction of a theory of ethnic conflict. Ted Gurr has noted that ‘ethnopolitical activism is motivated by peoples’ deep-seated grievances about their collective status in combination with the situationally determined pursuit of political interests, as articulated by group leaders and political entrepreneurs’.<sup>7</sup> It seems reasonable to argue, as do Gurr and Harff, that ethnic conflict is most likely to occur when both conditions are fulfilled: that is, when there is a strong sense among a minority of imposed group disadvantages, *and* where the ethnic group is characterized by a strong group cohesion and represented by leaders with a political agenda.<sup>8</sup> Naturally, these factors are linked; in particular the notions of perceived discrimination and political leadership are linked by group cohesion. A commonly felt notion of discrimination or suppression among members of a group under certain circumstances – such as the group inhabiting a defined territory and not living dispersed throughout the territory of the state, for example – increases the feeling of common belonging to the group, and hence strengthens group cohesion.<sup>9</sup> Group cohesion is also a *sine qua non* for the emergence of credible political leaders. Without group cohesion, there would be no strongly knit community on which the leaders could base their position; any political movements would be abortive or unsuccessful even in the absence of – or perhaps, especially in the case of – state suppression of such movement. Moreover, absence of group cohesion would significantly lower the likelihood of political movements forming at all, since the formation of mass-grounded movements depends on a reasonably strong basis that only a cohesive and self-aware group can provide. Group cohesion carries with it the emergence of grass-root cultural or other informal or formal associations and groupings from which a political movement can emerge.

The key word in knitting together these concepts seems to be *capacity*. Both willingness to act and political opportunity in the shape of political leaders are important because they increase the capacity of the group to act. Indeed, in a recent study, Gurr views ‘group capacity for collective action’ as a function of the salience of group identity and cohesion, shared incentives (that is, willingness), and the existence of legitimate leaders (in Gurr’s

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<sup>7</sup> Ted R. Gurr, *Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflict*, Washington, DC: USIP Press, 1993, p. 123.

<sup>8</sup> Ted R. Gurr and Barabara Harff, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994.

<sup>9</sup> Naturally, a group can possess a strong level of group cohesion even in the absence of discrimination; especially if there are significant cultural, linguistic, or religious differences between a group and its neighbors, group cohesion can survive and even strengthen for centuries even in a non-hostile environment.

model defined as ‘coalitions among diverse segments and contending leaders’ and ‘authenticity of leadership’).<sup>10</sup>

Basically, the crucial notions just noted of perceived discrimination, group cohesion, and political leadership can be approximated into the three more abstract notions of incentives, capacity, and opportunity. Perceived discrimination, or in the words of Gurr and Harff ‘imposed group disadvantages’, is instrumental in increasing frustration and resentment among members of a group against authorities and/or other groups, thereby creating an incentive or willingness to change the disadvantageous situation by taking action. Strong levels of group identity—which translates into higher group cohesion—fueled by incentives to act lead to a greater willingness for collective action. Both these factors increase the likelihood of the emergence of a political leadership, an element that implies an increased capacity for action on the part of the group. Capacity to act is also strongly affected by opportunity structures, often elements external to the group – whether domestic to the state (such as regime transitions, economic crises) or related to the international environment (such as outside intervention and regional crises). It is reasonable to conclude that the presence of incentives, capacity and opportunity for political action all significantly increase the likelihood of conflict, at least insofar as the demands of a group are resisted by authorities and/or other groups – a conflict can not take place unless the minority group’s challenge leads to a negative reaction from the part of the state, or other groups. However, states very seldom allow minority challenges on sovereignty to proceed unchecked. All in all, conflict is likely only when the three elements are all present, where a willingness and capacity to act as well as political opportunity exists.

## **2.2. The Categories of Factors: Underlying Factors versus Catalyzers**

An increasing number of authors have emphasized the existence of various qualitative categories of factors leading to conflict. Van Evera argues that ‘causes of war or peace can be classified as proximate (causes that directly affect the odds of war) or remote (causes of these proximate causes, or background conditions necessary for their activation).’<sup>11</sup> In a similar manner, Harff denotes enduring (background) conditions, as well as ‘triggers’ and ‘accelerators’, the latter being the essential and necessary factors that ‘move conflicts to the next stage of escalation or, for that matter, that trigger de-escalation’;<sup>12</sup> likewise, Brown divides factors leading to internal conflict into ‘underlying factors or permissive

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<sup>10</sup> Ted R. Gurr, *Peoples Versus States: Ethnopolitical Conflict and Accommodation at the End of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Washington: USIP Press, 2000, chapter 3.

<sup>11</sup> Van Evera, ‘Hypotheses on Nationalism and War’, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Harff, ‘Early Warning of Humanitarian Crises: Sequential Models and the Role of Accelerators’, in John L. Davies and Ted Robert Gurr, eds., *Preventive Measures: Building Risk Assessment and Crisis Early Warning Systems*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers inc., 1998, p. 72.

conditions', and 'catalytic factors or proximate causes'.<sup>13</sup> Brown, Van Evera, Gurr and Harff all strive to build hypotheses on the emergence of ethnic conflict, and all at the outset divide the factors or variables they present into a 'background' set of factors and a set of 'triggers' or proximate causes. The case for making this distinction is the following: there are factors that are required for a conflict to occur, but that in themselves do not *trigger* the eruption of conflict, or in other words 'activate' it. For example, historic conflict or the 'age-old animosities' between peoples, often mentioned in media, is a factor in most ethnic conflicts in the sense that such conflicts seldom break out without the existence of animosities between the peoples or ethnic groups involved. However, this is not a triggering factor of conflict, for several reasons. One major point is that the presence of this factor does not explain why conflict erupts at a specific point in time; background factors are often time-resistant – they are present over a long period of time, without conflict necessarily occurring. Moreover, empirical evidence shows that such factors are typically present in numerous situations, but that even in case of the presence of a combination of background factors in a multitude of cases, only a limited number of potential conflicts actually turn into large-scale violence. In this sense, the background factors are 'permissive conditions', as Brown puts it: they are 'necessary' for the occurrence of conflict but do not in and by themselves trigger conflict. Naturally, the presence of a multitude of background factors certainly makes the eruption of conflict more likely. However, there is necessarily something that triggers the conflict, a certain change that takes place, which escalates the conflict from potential to actual. Indeed, there are numerous instances of ethnic groups living with strong mutual animosities for extended periods of time without clashing violently on a large scale. Whether they are persons or ethnic groups, neighbors may despise each other but there is a need for a specific contentious issue or a triggering event or development for actual confrontation to take place. Background factors are then factors that are either constant or develop during an extended period of time, and that are hence less resistant to sudden change. In the categorization of factors above, background factors, as will be seen below, typically fall under the headings 'incentives' and 'capacity', but seldom under 'opportunity'. Those factors that spur a willingness to act among ethnic groups are typically time-resistant as they are mainly to do with group identities or perceptions of group relations and of history that do not change rapidly. Factors related with capacity are more diverse, some, mainly political factors, being malleable to change but others, such as demographic and geographic factors, being more resistant to time.

Secondly, there is a set of 'catalyzing' factors that directly trigger conflict. The scholarly research on nationalism and conflict, as Brown puts it, 'does a commendable job of surveying the underlying factors or permissive conditions that make some situations

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<sup>13</sup> Michael E. Brown, 'The Causes of Internal Conflict', in Brown (ed.), *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict: An International Security Reader*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997, pp. 3-25, here at p. 4.

particularly prone to violence, but it is weak when it comes to identifying the catalytic factors—the triggers or proximate causes—of internal conflicts'.<sup>14</sup> These factors are events or circumstances that directly increase the risk of conflict, or escalate it, in a given context. The catalyzing factors are by nature situational and fluctuating, and more difficult to assess and predict than the background factors. An example of a typical proximate cause is a coup d'état bringing a nationalist leader to power; given the presence of several background factors, such an event would have the potential to radicalize an already wary minority, leading it to decide to secede, hence triggering a violent conflict if the state reacts to the secession. Catalyzing factors are often related to developments that provide a political opportunity; events that significantly and rapidly increase either the capacity or the willingness of a group to act.

Obviously, one corollary of the dichotomy between background and catalyzing factors is that background factors are considerably more easy to identify and analyze—more time-resistant and accessible as they are—than catalyzers, which range from geopolitical changes to internal events that may be difficult to predict or in which a substantial element of chance and timing may play an important role. However the dichotomy is important in several ways: with relevance to the present work, it helps in understanding the eruption of conflict at a specific point in time: with an analysis based on background variables only, one may do a great deal to identify the areas where a potential for conflict exists, but not much to predict when and how—that is under which circumstances—this could happen. Although outside the scope of this study, it is important to note that the importance is even more conspicuous for conflict prevention: background factors, as just mentioned, identify potential conflict situations. Their understanding is necessary as preventive measures must include efforts to offset these factors. However, understanding what actually triggers a conflict is equally or more important in the short term as preventive measures must focus on preventing the catalyzing factors or circumstances from emerging.

### **2.3. Background Factors or Permissive Conditions of Ethnic Conflict**

The underlying factors behind ethnic conflict can be divided into several sub-categories of factors. Hence, factors may be related either to group cohesion and willingness, to capacity for action, or to opportunity. As noted above, background factors can by nature not be related to opportunity, whereas catalyzing factors typically fall under this heading. Background factors are then classified under two headings: group cohesion and incentives, and capacity for action.

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<sup>14</sup> Brown, 'The Causes of Internal Conflict', p. 13.

### 2.3.1. Group Cohesion and Incentives

#### 2.3.1.1. *Group Identity and Group Cohesion*

Ethnic mobilization, a *sine qua non* of ethnic conflict, is dependent upon individual members of the group actually identifying the ethnic group as their primary allegiance and primary identity. In fact, ethnic identity is but one of several allegiances individuals may have. Other, competing, allegiances may be related to class, tribe, region, religion, or a civic national identity of a state. That ethnic conflict did not break out in any significant scale in the Soviet Union before its dissolution is often explained by the monocausal explanation of effective state repression. Another significant factor seldom acknowledged is that a great part of the citizens of the Soviet Union did identify themselves, at least in part, exactly as such. The civic identity (and to a lower degree a 'proletariat' class identity) of being a Soviet citizen, coupled with official rhetoric of the brotherhood of nations, was in fact at least partially adopted by a significant number of people—while the structure of the union, as discussed in chapter three, simultaneously entrenched the separate ethnic identity of the minority populations. With the dissolution of the union, not only did central repression fade, but the Soviet, all-encompassing identity was no more, and individuals were forced to reorient their identities—in practice leading to an increased identification with the ethnic group.<sup>15</sup> This process took place in former Yugoslavia as well. This serves to highlight the fact that ethnic identities are not given, instead being highly situational and carrying different importance under different circumstances. For example, in a society that is deeply characterized by social (class) cleavages, ethnic identity may fall in the background and cease to be a major determinant. Ethnic identity may also be diluted by a civic conception of a nation that assimilates or integrates individuals into itself. The case of Turkey is a case in point, where the 'Turkish' identity, a creation of the twentieth century, has succeeded in gaining the status of primary identity for a large majority of the population, despite its ethnically highly mixed character. Even a substantial number of Kurds, the largest and most cohesive minority in Turkey, identify themselves at least partially as 'Turk'—a predominantly civic identity.<sup>16</sup> The comparison between the Turkish and Soviet approaches to the issue of ethnicity is particularly interesting. The Soviet approach was to acknowledge and entertain ethnic identities while trying to build a common, new identity *over* the ethnic identities. The Turkish approach (modeled on France) was also to create a new civic conception of the nation, however here the approach was integrative: previous ethnic identities were discouraged, often harshly, and full focus was given on promoting the common civic

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<sup>15</sup> See Svante E. Cornell, 'Conflicting Identities in the Caucasus', in *Peace Review—a Transnational Quarterly*, vol. 9 no. 4, December 1997.

<sup>16</sup> See chapter 7 in Hugh Pope, *Top Hat, Grey Wolf and Crescent: Turkish Nationalism and the Turkish Republic*, London: Hurst, 1997. Also Svante E. Cornell, 'The Kurdish Question and Turkish Politics', in *Orbis*, vol. 45 no. 1, 2001.

identity. In retrospect, both approaches have encountered severe problems. Of course, other factors and circumstances have influenced the outcome of the respective ‘experiments’; whereas this debate deserves to be the subject of a study in its own right, suffice it to say that the utter collapse of the Soviet system and the plethora of ethnic tensions in the former Soviet Union does put the consociational approach into question.

The issue of group identity is crucial to the study of ethnic conflict. Gurr and Harff express the issue with the following hypothesis: ‘the more strongly a person identifies with an ethnic group that is subject to discrimination, the more likely he or she is to be motivated into action’. Gurr has argued that several external conditions contribute to the salience of group identity: the extent of cultural differences between the group and other groups with which it interacts; the severity of the group’s disadvantages in relation to other groups; and the intensity of conflict with other groups and the state.<sup>17</sup> Cultural differences and discrimination are discussed in detail below. However, the issue of conflict presents the danger of a circular argument: conflict increases group identity, which in turn increases willingness to act, which increase the risk of conflict, etc. If the present aim is to explain what leads to conflict, it is hard to argue that conflict itself is a reason for it. With regard to group identity in the former Soviet Union, it should be noted that all titular nationalities of autonomous regions and republics had institutions to promote their separate culture and identity. The degrees of cultural rights varied between autonomous republics and autonomous oblasts; nevertheless, the pattern was roughly similar although the emphasis given to promotion of cultural rights differed over time. Most notably, from the 1960s to the 1980s, titular language instruction decreased steadily. Yet, this differed little among groups. State policy in the cultural field is susceptible to have a very limited explanatory value for group cohesion and willingness to act on the part of ethnic groups.

#### 2.3.1.2. *Cultural Differences*

The rather commonsensical argument that cultural differences are necessary for ethnic conflict is a starting point for this argument. Without significant cultural differences, conflicts may arise but they would then not be ethnopolitical conflicts as the background of the conflict does not have any relation with communal identity. The *extent* of these differences is nevertheless likely to have an influence on the potential for violence. In the *Minorities at Risk* project, Gurr denotes six ‘cultural traits’ to measure differentials: ethnicity/nationality, language, religion, social customs, historical origin, and urban/rural residence. Whereas this categorization is very neat, the first variable, ethnicity, is somewhat confusing as it seems to be comparable with the category, cultural differences, and therefore measurable with the five remaining variables. In any case, ethnicity as such is a term subject to an amount of discussion and debate so great that it can hardly be

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<sup>17</sup> Gurr, *Minorities at Risk*, p. 126.

easily measured or coded without severe theoretical problems. What is to have different ethnicity? To look different, to be seen differently by other groups or simply to have a different national identity than other groups? In principle, cultural differences can take the shape of differences in language, religion, physical appearance, customs and traditions. It can be argued that the risks of conflict increase with the number of factors separating two groups. If groups speak different languages, the chances of information failure, and therefore misunderstanding and subsequent conflict, increase; if they share different religions, one important conflict-preventing factor in the spiritual realm is absent—in many religions there are strong prohibitions against violence toward members of the same religion; moreover difference in religion increases the ‘otherness’ of the other group, thereby deepening alienation and prejudice. Differences in physical appearance (be it physiognomy or dress) contributes to visually isolating the other group from one’s own, thereby giving rise to added prejudice and stereotyping, as well as easy identification of members of a group. The difference is readily observable without interaction, which is not the case with religion or language. Less pronounced factors such as different traditions, customs or habits related to food, drinking, or social behaviors are additional factors. The levels of cultural differences between minorities and the titular nationalities of the central state vary greatly. For instance, cultural differences between Russians and Ukrainians are relatively low; by contrast, those between Chechens and Russians are highly significant in all categories discussed above. Likewise, Talysh and Azeris have lesser cultural differences than Armenians and Azeris. *À priori* it could be assumed that the likelihood of conflict would increase with the level of cultural differences. However, researchers have pointed out that distinct but very closely related ethnic groups may not automatically have harmonious relations. The smaller among the two groups may feel threatened of absorption by the larger group, and lead to a perceived need for self-assertion. Examples are Bashkirs and Tatars, Ukrainians and Russians, or Norwegians and Swedes. In general, though, greater cultural differences carry greater risks of friction, tensions, and conflict. Moreover, the previously examined issue of group cohesion can be incorporated: cultural differences will matter immensely more if group identity is strong and the groups, or at least one of them, are cohesive. In particular, the cohesion of the minority is important. If the state’s titular nationality is cohesive, this is conducive to conflict only if it is revisionist and seeks conflict with the minority, as happened in Georgia in the late 1980s. But normally, being the holder of a sovereign state, the majority population is more likely to be satisfied with its status and therefore may not seek to challenge the autonomy. On the other hand, cohesion among the minority group is likely to contribute to the likelihood of conflict in case it is dissatisfied (which it at the outset has a higher incentive to be, not being the holder of a sovereign state), if it perceives relative group disadvantages. In particular, the level to which the minority has been assimilated into the culture of the titular nationality of the state is important. Many minorities in the Russian Federation, for example, are strongly culturally and linguistically Russified, and their group cohesion is relatively low. Extreme nationalists are however likely to be especially active if they

perceive a danger of total assimilation; their possibility to gain popular support will in all likelihood be low. The discussion can be summarized in the following proposition:

*Proposition 1: The deeper the cultural differences between two groups, and the stronger group identities and cohesion, the higher the risk of conflict.*

### 2.3.1.3. *Political Discrimination*

The perhaps most well-known and obvious political factor increasing the likelihood of ethnic conflict is discrimination. As discussed above, perceived ‘group disadvantages’ imposed by another group in control of the central government is a factor almost certain to lead to an increasing frustration among members of an ethnic group, and as a result, an increasing willingness for political action that may in turn translate into demands for secession. Discrimination can be political or economic in character, and the two are often interlinked. Political discrimination, in Gurr’s definition, implies that ‘group members are or have been systematically limited in their enjoyment of political rights or access to political position by comparison with other groups in their society’.<sup>18</sup> In general, it is clear that political discrimination is a potent factor increasing the likelihood of conflict. Van Evera hypothesizes that ‘the more severely nationalities oppress minorities now living in their states, the greater the risk of war’.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Brown argues that authoritarian systems are likely to generate resentment over time, especially if ‘the interests of some ethnic groups are served while others are trampled’, and that ‘conflict is especially likely where ‘oppression and violence are commonly employed by the state’.<sup>20</sup>

In the case of the former Soviet Union, however, the relevance of political discrimination as a factor in explaining why conflict erupted in certain areas and not others is not evident. This is the case because it is highly difficult, if not impossible, to measure the levels of discrimination in each autonomous unit. Moreover, if discrimination was taking place, who would be to blame—the Republican leadership or the central Soviet State? Nationalism or Communism? In fact, laying the blame squarely on the republican government would be somewhat illogical since the Soviet Union was a totalitarian state where the republican governments were not autonomous in reality although being so on paper. To take a concrete example, the Abkhaz accuse the Georgian republican leadership of having tried to obliterate the national identity of the Abkhaz through a process of linguistic and cultural ‘Georgianization’. The Georgians retaliate that compared to the North Caucasian nationalities (ethnically related to the Abkhaz) that had autonomous entities within the Russian Federation, the cultural identity of the Abkhaz were considerably more protected; accordingly, whereas North Caucasian nationalities were

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<sup>18</sup> Gurr, *Minorities at Risk*, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> Van Evera, ‘Hypotheses on Nationalism and War’, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, ‘The Causes of Internal Conflict’, p.8.

subjected to linguistic and cultural Russification, Abkhazia's belonging to Georgia protected it from such policies and enabled the Abkhaz, despite their demographic weakness, to survive as a distinct nation. In such a situation, discrimination is largely a matter of perception. In the end, it is irrelevant in judging the likelihood of conflict whether or not discrimination has actually taken place; what is important is if a group *feels* discriminated, whether there is a perception of discrimination. (Perceptual factors are discussed below.)

Political discrimination against minorities is often said to have been the rule, not the exception in the Soviet Union: non-Russians were allegedly systematically disfavored while seeking career opportunities at the union level, most blatantly in the military.<sup>21</sup> A counter-claim is that autonomous minorities were subjected to a similar level of discrimination as were citizens in general, irrespective of origin—ethnic Russians fared as bad as did others. Moreover, autonomous regions were areas where the titular nationality was *positively* discriminated. For example, despite being less than a fifth of the population of their ASSR, the Abkhaz controlled almost half of the seats of the local parliament and were highly over-represented in the governing of the ASSR. Given this unclear picture of discrimination, it is arguably meaningless to seek to explain the variance in conflict through variance in political discrimination. Keeping this problem in mind, it is possible to argue that among minorities subjected to a higher degree of discrimination or harassment compared to other groups, the likelihood of conflict is higher.

With reference to the discussion above regarding the 'even distribution' of discrimination in the former Soviet Union, two specific cases of noticeably higher levels of discrimination can be noted. The first is the case of national groups that were subjected to deportation during the second world war. The deported nationalities (including the Chechens, Ingush, Karachai and Balkar) were even after their 'rehabilitation' from deportation in the 1950s treated as second class citizens and their possibilities of political participation were highly restricted. For example, Jokhar Dudayev, the leader of the Chechen struggle for independence between 1990 and his death in 1996, was able to enter the military academy by posing as an individual of Ossetian nationality. The deported nationalities were clearly discriminated in terms of education and training as well as in their careers. Hence it is certain that the deported nationalities (that are all part of the Russian Federation) have a higher level of frustration and resentment toward the central government in Moscow than do other autonomous minorities. National groups that have been the subject of systematic harassment such as deportation or attempted genocide are

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<sup>21</sup> However, especially in the military, a clear bias toward certain nationalities could be seen. In particular, Muslim citizens composed the bulk of the supply and logistics forces, but seldom the actual fighting forces and never the elite forces. Muslims were at clear disadvantage while seeking to become officers, something that can be said about Baltic peoples as well; by contrast, more trusted nations such as the Armenians were comparatively favored.

more likely to have a willingness to secede from the political entity that they associate with the injustices committed against them.

Secondly, non-Christian peoples were subjected to higher levels of discrimination for their religious beliefs and simply for their origin than Christian peoples. This regards especially Muslim peoples, given that the Soviet Union was especially hostile to Islam, seeing Islamic Fundamentalism as a potential security threat, but also to Buddhist minorities. Hence it can be expected that the frustration against the central government be higher among Muslims and Buddhists. Islamic peoples in particular were subjected to a higher level of discrimination in many spheres of Soviet life than other citizens. The restrictions on expressions of religion were harsher concerning Islam than other religions, in particular Orthodox Christianity. Muslims were systematically disfavored in the military service, were normally confined to non-fighting and therefore less prestigious positions in the military. At several occasions during the period of Soviet rule, Soviet Atheism assaulted Islam in the Union. Muslims were distrusted, and few Muslims made officer rank, whereas other minority nationalities, such as Armenians or Georgians, fared considerably better.<sup>22</sup> Again, the problem of identifying the 'culprit' arises. In the non-Russian republics especially, discrimination could be identified either with the titular nationality of the republic or with the central authorities. Interestingly, there were few autonomous regions in non-Russian republics granted to Muslim populations: Ajaria is the only case. Karakalpakistan, Nakhchivan and Gorno-Badakhshan were all Muslim autonomies within Muslim republics. With respect to the Russian Federation, then, a plausible argument could be made that Muslim autonomies would have a greater incentive to seek separate statehood, due to a likely higher perception of imposed group disadvantages than other groups, an argument true also for Buddhists, in all likelihood at a lower intensity.

However, it must be noted that this very much approximates the variable on cultural differences: claiming that Muslims and Buddhists have a higher willingness to act is in practice the same as saying that peoples with high cultural differences have a higher willingness to act. Besides these exceptions, political discrimination is not a variable that is either possible to measure or which would be likely to have a bearing on the likelihood of conflict, given the relatively even level of suppression, assault on civil society and lack of democracy that was characteristic of communism in its Soviet shape.

#### 2.3.1.4. *Type of National Conception: Civic or Ethnic?*

Nationalism is often treated as a coherent concept needing no further definition. But in connection with the discussion above regarding identities, it was noted that civic

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<sup>22</sup> See Yaacov Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union*, London: Hurst, 1999; Hélène Carrère D'Encausse, *Islam and the Russian Empire: Reform and Revolution in Central Asia*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1987; Amir Taheri, *Crescent in a Red Sky: The Future of Islam in the Soviet Union*, New York, 1989.

conceptions of nationhood exist, such as the French, Turkish or formerly Soviet and Yugoslav kinds. In fact, this conception is predominant in many states where political and communal borders are least compatible. Conceptions such as ‘Ghanaian’ or ‘Nigerian’ have little or no ethnic connotation but designate the citizenship of a political entity, the nation-state or occasionally the state-nation. Despite being a more abstract conception, civic nationalism can be a very strong identity as exemplified by the Turkish or French case. And the difference between the two conceptions of nationalism is significant enough to deserve further treatment. As Anthony Smith has noted, ‘nationalism-in-general is merely a lazy historian’s escape from the arduous task of explaining the influence of this or that particular nationalist idea, argument or sentiment in its highly specific context’.<sup>23</sup>

Smith points to the difference between a civic-territorial and an ethnic-genealogic model of the nation. According to Smith, the civic model of the nation is a predominantly *spatial* or *territorial* conception, with the nation and the land it inhabits belonging to each other; secondly there is ‘a community of laws and institutions with a single political will’, implying common regulating institutions, whether the state be organized as a unitary state such as France or Turkey or unions of separate territorial entities such as the United States. There is a deep sense of a legal and political community whose members are equal before the law of that community; and moreover, a measure of ‘common culture and a civic ideology’ that bind the population together. Opposed to this stands the ‘ethnic-genealogic’ conception of the nation, whose emphasis lies on a community of birth and native culture. An ethnic nation is before anything a community of common descent. Whereas in the civic model an individual can choose which nation to belong to or become integrated into the nation of his choice, there is no such possibility in an ethnic model of a nation. There is what Smith terms ‘a fictive super-family’, with myths of common ancestry tying together the members of a nation—therefore the use of the term ‘genealogic’.<sup>24</sup> Naturally, few nationalisms are purely civic or ethnic, and most share elements of both. But, as Smith puts it, the conceptual distinction has important consequences:

Civic and territorial models of the nation tend to produce certain kinds of nationalist movement: ‘anti-colonial’ movements before independence and ‘integration’ movements after independence. Ethnic and genealogical models of the nation, on the other hand, tend to give rise to secessionist or diaspora movements before independence and irredentist or ‘pan’ movements thereafter.<sup>25</sup>

Hence territorial, civic nationalism typically concentrates on bringing together and integrating the population residing within its boundaries, giving them equal standing before the law and often abandoning plans to ‘rescue’ ethnic kin in neighboring states. Ethnic nationalist movements, on the other hand, are intent on making the political and

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<sup>23</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, London: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 79.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, *National Identity*, pp. 8-15.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *National Identity*, p. 82.

ethnic boundaries coterminous with each other; this implies that ethnic nationalism is more likely to be aggressive towards other ethnic groups on the territory of 'their' state and towards neighboring states containing ethnic kin to the group.<sup>26</sup>

Conceptions of nation based on civic nationalism are then inherently more peaceful and non-aggressive than ethnic ones. As Brown notes, 'conflict is more likely when ethnic conceptions of nationalism predominate'.<sup>27</sup> However, it should be noted that models of nations based on civic nationalism vary greatly with regard to their treatment of divergent identities on their territory, and that the dominance of civic nationalism does not preclude conflict, as displayed both by Indonesia and Turkey. Whereas in especially immigrant nations like the US, for example, all 'previous' identities are accepted and tolerated but expected to be secondary to the American identity, other states such as France or Turkey see competing identities as threats to the entire national project and therefore deny or suppress them. For example, Atatürk's dictum was generous in that it allowed everyone who desired so to become a Turkish citizen; but it didn't provide a solution for those who were not prepared to abandon their previous identities in order to embrace the new national idea. This, in a nutshell, was the problem of a significant portion of the Kurdish population who differed from the rest of the population not only by language but also by its clan-based feudal social structure, the dissolution of which the regime never succeeded in inspiring.

Minorities, in order to be minorities, are nevertheless generally ethnically defined. Should they be predominantly civic, that would contradict the concept of minority, which implies a distinction of some sort from the rest of the population. However, this is not necessarily true for autonomous regions. In the example of Tatarstan in the Russian Federation, the leadership speaks of a *Tatarstani* nation composed of the citizens of Tatarstan, as opposed to the *Tatar* ethnic group. But only minorities endowed with a strong autonomy can reason in terms of citizenship, which is almost always a prerogative of the state. As concerns the subject of this study, the very existence of autonomous regions within a state is likely to affect the national conception. In rigid integrationist civic systems, autonomy as such would be seen as a consociational model of handling minority issues that would go against the very conception of the state. But in the Soviet Union, autonomies were inherited and few governments (Georgia being a partial exception) were intent on abolishing them. The character of the national identities of the autonomous

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<sup>26</sup> Smith, *National Identity*, pp. 82-83. The Turkish republic is an example of a civic state: Atatürk's dictum defining the Turkish nation (*Ne Mutlu Türküm Diyene*) determines as a citizen everyone who calls him or herself a Turk as opposed to whoever *is* a Turk. Every person living within the borders of the republic and accepting its basic principles was welcome to be its citizen irrespective of ethnic origin. Hence, people of Caucasian or Slavic origin having migrated to Anatolia, or indigenous populations of Kurdish or Arabic origin became Turks in their own right, whereas Turkish minorities elsewhere, in the Middle East or in the Balkans, did *not* enjoy substantial privileges for obtaining citizenship in the republic, and were mostly ignored unless they sought refuge in Turkey.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, 'The Causes of Internal Conflict', p.8.

titular nationality and that of the state titular nationality are nevertheless crucial to the relations between center and autonomy. If the state's titular nationality is dominated by an ethnic conception of the nation, the chances that the autonomous minority will desire to dissociate itself by secession are higher; similarly, if the autonomous nationality defines itself predominantly ethnically, its own desire for separate statehood is likely to be more pronounced, and the likelihood of conflict increases. On the other hand, civic conceptions of nation in both autonomy and central state will have a dampening effect on conflict. It is then possible to formulate the following proposition:

*Proposition 2: The more the national conception of either the minority or the state's titular nation approximate an ethnic conception of the nation, the higher the likelihood of conflict.*

#### 2.3.1.5. *Loss of Political Autonomy*

Gurr notes a 'history of lost political autonomy' as a major 'risk factor' in his model of ethnopolitical rebellion. According to Gurr, it is 'an historical fact around which myths and grievances are formed. Appeals to those myths and grievances are a potent source of mobilization for future political action'.<sup>28</sup> In this assessment, Gurr touches on a point related with the discussion regarding autonomy made in chapter 2. Indeed, the loss of autonomy, with the symbolism it carries, is a potent factor in increasing resentment and thereby willingness to take political action. The most obvious examples are Kosovo, which lost its real autonomy in 1989 and where the cycle of violence in Yugoslavia subsequently started; and South Ossetia in Georgia, where the threat of losing autonomy was a precipitating factor to the conflict. But as these two examples show, the loss of political autonomy may be both a background factor and a catalyzer of conflict. If political autonomy has been lost but a somewhat stable situation has been created in spite of this, as in Kosovo, the loss of autonomy serves as an additional factor increasing incentives on the part of the minority to act. But if a situation is already tense, as will be discussed below, the removal of political autonomy can serve as a direct catalyzing factor precipitating violent conflict. This factor can explain the reasons for conflict only in cases of autonomous minorities. Among the cases in this study, only Ajaria was faced with a distinct political threat from the Georgian national movement to lift Ajaria's autonomy, whereas Zviad Gamsakhurdia, even before coming to power, pledged to safeguard Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's autonomy. South Ossetia's autonomy was eventually lifted, but only after South Ossetia took a decision to secede from Georgia. In no case in this study can the actual loss of political autonomy be seen as a cause for conflict. The fear of losing autonomy may have been a factor, and as such will be discussed in the case studies.

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<sup>28</sup> Ted R. Gurr, 'A Risk Assessment Model of Ethnopolitical Rebellion', in Davies and Gurr, (eds.), *Preventive Measures*, p. 18.

#### 2.3.1.6. *The Security Dilemma*

The processes whereby groups feel the need to provide for their own security and ponder whether other groups are a threat to them lead to specific situation that has recently been given much attention by conflict theory: that of the Security Dilemma. The essence of the security dilemma concept is that ‘vulnerable and fearful actors through efforts to enhance their own security undermine the security of others’.<sup>29</sup> By acting to defend themselves, groups unintentionally threaten the security of other groups; the emergence of a self-defense militia movement in one ethnic group may easily be seen as a potential or real threat by a neighboring group which will then move to take similar action, in the worst case leading to mutual escalating counter-measures and eventually the unleashing of offensive military action for defensive purpose – a kind of deterrence failure.<sup>30</sup> The increased understanding of such mechanisms has done a great deal to improve the understanding of how and why ethnic civil wars break out in transition periods after the fall of authoritarian rule, what rational choice theorists call ‘emerging anarchy’. The security dilemma nevertheless presupposes that emerging anarchy is a cause of ethnic tensions. This view is problematic as in many cases it is the very ethnic tensions that *lead to* the emerging anarchy. For example, there were few signs of emerging anarchy when the Mountainous Karabakh conflict emerged in 1988, or when the riots in Abkhazia took place in 1989. These conflicts contributed significantly to *creating* the anarchy that emerged in the Soviet Union and led to its dissolution. In other words, the security dilemma may have the causal chain backwards in some cases.<sup>31</sup> A security dilemma certainly existed in between Armenia and Azerbaijan by 1991 – but how did it emerge? Moreover, the conditions of ‘emerging anarchy’ or state weakness were similar throughout the Caucasus region in the period under study. Why did conflict emerge among certain groups rather than others? Clearly, even if a security dilemma developed between some of the groups, such as the Georgians and Abkhaz or the Armenians and Azeris, there must have been some reason why this dynamic occurred among those groups and not between Armenians and Georgians or Azeris and Georgians.

#### 2.3.1.7. *Past Conflict and Myths*

A number of authors have argued that the perception held by members of groups against other groups is a major cause of conflict. Brown argues that ‘groups tend to whitewash and glorify their own histories, and often demonize their neighbors, rivals and

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<sup>29</sup> See Erik Melander, *Anarchy Within: The Security Dilemma between Ethnic Groups in Emerging Anarchy*, Uppsala: Department of Peace and Conflict Research, 1999, p. i.

<sup>30</sup> See eg. Barry Posen, ‘The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict’, in Michael E. Brown, ed., *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. 103-124.

<sup>31</sup> See Stuart Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001, pp. 20-21.

adversaries', and that history often becomes distorted and exaggerated. The creation of 'ethnic mythologies', in his view, increase the risk of conflict, especially if two groups have mutually exclusive and mirroring perceptions of each other.<sup>32</sup> By the same token, Van Evera argues that nations can co-exist most easily when their self-images and images of their neighbors converge, but that relations 'are worst if images diverge in self-justifying directions'.<sup>33</sup> As both authors show, mythmaking is especially dangerous if related to past conflicts and crimes that have transpired in the relations between two groups.

A particular factor affecting group relations is the collective memory, which strongly influences the perception of other groups. A key factor affecting such perceptions is the history of relations between ethnic groups. As Van Evera has argued, 'the degree of harmony or conflict between intermingled nationalities depends partly on the size of the crimes committed by each against the other in the past; the greater these crimes, the greater the current conflict'.<sup>34</sup> More importantly, the *memory* of past crimes will determine the relations between the groups. A strong level of remembrance will strengthen the perception that it is impossible to continue living with the other group, and that members of the own group living in the midst of the other group need to be rescued. Hence, remembrance of past crimes is conducive to what Van Evera terms a diaspora-annexing as opposed to a diaspora-accepting attitude. Of course, past conflict need not lead to renewed conflict, as the current European integration project and especially Franco-German relations exemplify. In fact, the salience of past conflict and past crimes is related to several factors: first, the degree to which they are remembered and nurtured, or transformed into national myths; second, the degree to which the perpetrator of the crimes is still present and can be held responsible, and whether individuals or an entire group is held responsible. This factor is in turn dependent upon how the perceived perpetrator interprets the past, if the crimes are admitted and repented, or if the two groups' interpretation of the past are compatible. Kaufman has pointed to the importance of symbolic politics. Symbolic politics theory holds that 'people make political choices based on emotion and in response to symbols', giving great importance to the psychological environment in which conflicts emerge.<sup>35</sup> By suggesting that people often make decisions on the basis of emotions and symbols rather than rational, cost- or benefit-calculations, symbolic politics helps explaining how the ethnic bond can be mobilized upon. As Kaufman notes,

On the individual level, appeals to emotionally laden ethnic symbols are what motivate people to participate in ethnic movements, and appeals to myths blaming other groups are

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<sup>32</sup> Brown, 'The Causes of Internal Conflict', p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Van Evera, 'Hypotheses on Nationalism and War', p. 47.

<sup>34</sup> Van Evera, 'Hypotheses on Nationalism and War', p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 29.

what make people feel aggressive and motivate them to fight in ethnic wars. Those emotional appeals short-circuit the complicated problem of making tradeoff decisions because they encourage people to put ethnic issues ahead of other concerns.<sup>36</sup>

It is uncontroversial to argue that the existence of past conflict between two groups, especially if this conflict is well-remembered and/or has been mythified, increases the likelihood of mutual suspicion, tensions, and conflict.

*Proposition 3: The greater the intensity of past conflict and the myths surrounding it, the greater the risk of conflict.*

### **2.3.2. Capacity for Action**

#### *2.3.2.1. Rough Terrain*

The connection between ‘rough terrain’ and conflict has been noted by military experts, most notably by students of guerrilla warfare.<sup>37</sup> It is commonly accepted that a ‘rough’ physical geography—mountains or heavy forests—is conducive to guerrilla warfare. In such terrain, defenders with local knowledge have the upper hand against traditional military forces and counterinsurgency strategies. The examples of Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Chechnya speak for themselves: motivated guerrilla fighters aided by rough terrain are able to deny numerically far larger armies control of territory indefinitely. Technologically superior enemy forces are unable to utilize their numerical, organizational and technological advantages against the defenders, hence making the cost of war for the occupying forces prohibitively high. Of course, rough terrain is by itself not a factor leading to conflict. Most importantly, defending forces need the support of the civilian population for their war effort to be successful. Supplies of food, treatment of wounded fighters, etc. all depend on the relationship between the civilian population and the fighters. This said, studying 37 ‘rural base minorities’ in Eastern Europe, Fearon and Laitin find that ‘mountain groups were six times more likely to see large-scale fighting with the state following the Soviet collapse’. As they note, rough terrain is a useful tool to explain how minorities with small numbers can ‘sustain significant guerrilla conflicts with the state’.<sup>38</sup> However, there may be reason for caution. In the context of the study of secessionist conflict in the former Soviet Union, almost all ethnic conflict has taken place in the Caucasus. The ‘rough terrain’ variable would seem to be highly applicable here. But

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>37</sup> See Walter Laqueur, *Guerrilla Warfare*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1997.

<sup>38</sup> James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, ‘Weak States, Rough Terrain, and Large-Scale Ethnic Violence since 1945’, Paper presented at the 1999 Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, 2-5 September 1999, Atlanta, GA, pp. 18-20.

a region such as the Caucasus may share other particularities than rough terrain, whether cultural, demographic, historic, or geopolitical. Hence the 'rough terrain' variable may be difficult to isolate. On a different note, certain authors have tried to connect topography with psychology, arguing that 'mountain peoples' typically are more warlike, for example, than peoples inhabiting lowlands. The historian of civilizations, Fernand Braudel, for instance, famously stated that 'In the mountains, then, civilization is never very stable.' Furthermore, he argued that:

The mountains are as a rule a world apart from civilizations, which are an urban and lowland achievement. Their history is to have none, to remain always on the fringes of the great waves of civilization, even the longest and most persistent, which may spread over great distances in the horizontal plane but are powerless to move vertically when faced with an obstacle of several hundred meters.<sup>39</sup>

This discussion, as epitomized by Braudel, has tendencies to make sweeping generalizations on entire peoples because of the topography of their habitat. However, it should be noted that mountains, especially, have a function of providing a certain degree of isolation for their inhabitants, and progress and development generally reaches mountain areas in a very delayed and incomplete manner.<sup>40</sup> The very ethnic geography of the Caucasus, especially the north Caucasus, illustrates this. In the mountains of Dagestan, a plethora of ethnolinguistic groups exist, some with fewer than a thousand members, which have been able to safeguard their distinctive identity throughout centuries of war, conquest, and collectivization. As such, it is no exaggeration to argue that terrain does have an impact, in the longer term, on the identity of the people. This is primarily true for mountains, but the dense jungles of the Amazon have provided similar, perhaps even stronger shelter for indigenous peoples there. In a sense, then, rough terrain can be said to have an influence both on the strength of ethnic identity and on the capacity for rebellion. However, its effects on identity can be internalized in the factors dealing with identity without necessarily invoking terrain; for practical purposes it matters little what caused cultural differences, whether historical or topographic factors. For the purposes of this study, rough terrain will be dealt with in the manner in which it may directly influence political decisions, that is through its effect on a minority's expected capacity to act and to sustain itself.

*Proposition 4: Rough terrain, in particular mountains or heavy forests, increases the risk of conflict.*

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<sup>39</sup> François Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, New York, 1972, Vol. 1, p. 33.

<sup>40</sup> S. Frederick Starr, 'Altitude Sickness', *The National Interest*, Spring 2001.

### 2.3.2.2. *Ethnic Geography and Demography*

Another important factor that has been stressed in the literature is ethnic geography. The settlement patterns of ethnic groups in a state are likely to have an impact on conflict potential: first of all, if ethnic groups live dispersed on the territory of a state and not physically tied to one particular geographic region, secessionist demands are less likely to emerge, since the creation of a separate state or the delimitation of its boundaries would be difficult or impossible. In such cases, minorities are likely to press for cultural rights and a commensurate share in the government and political life of the state they inhabit. However, it must be noted that the ethnic conflict in such situations is possible; moreover it is likely to be significantly more severe than in cases of less intermingled settlement patterns. Conflict in intermingled states would tend not to be over a part of the state's territory and its affiliation but over the control of the state apparatus, that is, the entire territory of the state. The emergence of violent conflict in such situations would be significantly more likely to lead to large-scale ethnic cleansing and/or genocide, for several reasons. Firstly, a geographic partition line is much more difficult to draw, and the conflict is likely to take place not on a warfront between two organized armies but to a larger extent in civilian-inhabited areas over a much larger tract of territory. Secondly, the knowledge that a clean territorial break is impossible or very difficult—and costly for the own group in terms of having to carry out population exchanges, as has been done in certain cases—entails that the urge to forcibly displace or physically eliminate members of the other group become more pronounced, and even perceived as necessary. Third, the security dilemma would apply to a larger extent in such cases: a future compromise would imply that one would continue to live intermingled with members of the other group. This is in turn interpreted as a security threat to the own group, and again increases the urge to expel or eliminate the other group, actions that are even conceptualized as defensive and indispensable for the own group's survival and well being.

If, by contrast, ethnic groups are settled in clearly defined territorial areas, the risk of a secessionist conflict is significantly larger; the separation from the 'mother' state then becomes attainable and imaginable for the group in question. The link between people and territory is typically greater, implying a sense of group ownership of the land. While the likelihood of the rise of secessionist demands is higher in states where groups are settled along regional lines, conflict if it erupts is unlikely to lead to large-scale systematic killings or genocide. Warfare is, as Brown puts it, likely to be 'more conventional in character'.<sup>41</sup> The discrepancy in outcome between the wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Mountainous Karabakh illustrates this phenomenon. Bosnia-Herzegovina presents a clear case of the first kind of situation, whereas Mountainous Karabakh is a relatively good case of a conflict over a slice of land, and mass killings and genocide took place in the former

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<sup>41</sup> Brown, 'The Causes of Internal Conflict', p. 7.

case but not in the latter unless one uses a highly diluted definition of the term.<sup>42</sup> The possibility for the state to accept the secession of a region is furthermore significantly higher if that region is well-defined, homogeneously populated by the minority group in question, geographically advantageously located (that is, either at the border areas of the state or at the seaside but not located like an ‘island’ within the state), and of minor strategic importance.

In the case of autonomous regions, the issue above does not arise, since there is by definition a well-defined geographic area allocated to a specific ethnic group. Even then, both geography and demography may nevertheless still matter, and matter a lot. As concerns geography, the *location* of the region, either autonomous or non-autonomous—is crucial. Although minority populations—and thereby autonomous regions—are usually located at the periphery of states, this is not always the case, as the cases of Tatarstan or Bashkortostan in Russia illustrate. Moreover, the neighborhood in which the minority is located carries great importance. If it is isolated from the rest of the world, the likelihood of secessionism and especially conflict is low; economically, the new state would not be able to conduct relations, and politically it would be significantly more dependent on the former state it belonged to, with which it is unlikely to have a friendly relationship after secession. Isolation can take three forms: Firstly, a region is isolated if it does not share a border with any other state or has an outlet to the sea, that is if it is encircled by the state it belongs to. Second, a region may be isolated even if it does have an outlet to the outside world but this outlet is not conducive to be used since it has a hostile relationship with the neighboring state in question, or if it is physically inaccessible, like the Sakha republic’s arctic coast. Thirdly, the region is isolated if the outlet—neighbor or waterway—is in a state of turmoil. Basically, then, a proposition can be formulated as follows: The greater the geographic proximity and access to the outside world, the higher the likelihood of secessionism and conflict. In the context of the present study, all minority-populated regions are contiguous to the outside world. The only exception, technically, is Mountainous Karabakh, separated from Armenia by a corridor which, at its thinnest, is ca. 12 km wide. For practical purposes, this did not mean Mountainous Karabakh could not be connected to Armenia; given the short distance between the borders of the enclave and of Armenia, it was practically contiguous to the outside world. Given that all cases fall into the ‘yes’ category, this proposition will not be used in the study.

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<sup>42</sup> Both Armenians and Azerbaijanis accuse each other of genocide. Armenians mention the massacre of Armenians in Sumgait (February 1988) as an instance of genocide. According to official figures, 26 people died; the real figure is undoubtedly higher, but nevertheless does not qualify for the term genocide neither regarding the numbers involved nor the imperative of premeditation. The Azeris accuse Armenians of the killing of over a thousand civilians during the Armenian capture of the Azeri village of Khojaly in February 1992, while the killing of over 700 civilians has been proven. Whereas this action represents the largest event of its kind in the war’s history, it does not either qualify for the term genocide.

Concerning demography, the demographic strength of the group in question is particularly important. Two points deserve to be made. First, for a credible secessionist struggle to emerge, it is reasonable to think that the secessionist group needs a certain demographic weight compared to the population of the rest of the country. A group that composes only a fraction of a state's population will have several incentives *not* to secede. One incentive is that the imagined new state would not be economically or politically viable. Another, more powerful, that a struggle for independence against the vastly more numerous majority population would be unlikely to succeed. Importantly, as will be discussed below, this factor can be offset by external support either of ethnic kin or politically motivated third states. Also, in case of a political transition in the 'mother' state with its political scene looking inward, there may be a window of opportunity for even a small minority to secede. A proposition is hence that 'the larger the demographic strength of the minority in relation to the population of the state, the greater the risk of conflict.' However, all minorities in the South Caucasus compose less than 5% of their respective states' population and would hence score low on this variable.<sup>43</sup> This proposition is hence discarded for the purposes of this study.

The second point is the internal demographic structure of the region inhabited by the minority. It can be assumed that the titular nationality needs to have a strong relative demographic position in the autonomous region in order to wage a credible struggle for independence. Demographic plurality make it easier for a group to control the local administration of a minority area, something which would be difficult if not impossible if other groups are demographically larger. Moreover, in the absence of demographic plurality of one titular group, a mass-level political movement is unlikely to emerge. In any case, the political ambitions of different groups and especially their leaders are normally hard to reconcile. In a case of two or more minority groups coexisting in a region, the prospect of secession has the potential to evolve into a security dilemma between the groups. This is the case, as the new environment resulting from secession would increase

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<sup>43</sup> A state is generally termed homogeneous if minorities amount to less than 5% of the population. The same figure, although arbitrary, will be applied here. One would assume that a group numbering less than 5% of the population of the state—that is twenty times smaller—would have a low capacity to act. Using this figure, no group in this study can be termed 'large enough', if defined as the population inhabiting a plausibly secessionist region. Armenians form close to 9% of Georgia's population, but reside in three different locations clearly separated from one another geographically and socio-economically. Secessionist moves would hence require a significant population in each of the three regions; demographic numbers can hence not be measured in lump. Likewise, the secessionist move in Mountainous Karabakh was a phenomenon completely separate from the much larger Armenian community in Baku, estimated at close to half a million people. Technically, this proposition would show a positive correlation in six cases; however, the three cases of conflict would naturally all be in the 'wrong' square. Moreover, Abkhaz and South Ossetians are by far the *smallest* minorities in the study, numbering less than 100,000 each and far smaller than the Armenians in Javakheti and Azeris in Kvemo Kartli, who number between 150,000 and 300,000 each, depending on estimates. Moreover, in Azerbaijan the Mountainous Karabakh Armenians are smaller in number both to the Lezgins and the Talysh.

the importance of the demographic, economic, and political relations between the groups. Concretely, both groups would wonder how the inter-group relationship would crystallize after secession. Question such as the following will arise: Will the other group attempt to monopolize power? Would it have an interest in eliminating political participation of the other group? What weaponry does it have access to? Does the other group have external support? Do we need to take precautions for our security? The conclusion is that *ceteris paribus*, the likelihood of a secessionist movement decreases the lower the demographic portion of the autonomy belongs to the titular nations.

*Proposition 5: The greater the demographic dominance of the minority in the region it inhabits, the greater the risk of conflict.*

### 2.3.2.3. *Weak State Structures*

One main structural factor noted by Brown is the problem of weak state structures, which can be applied both to the case of newly formed states and to existing states in a time of political and/or economic transition. Many post-colonial states on different continents have suffered from being artificial constructs, with borders drawn at worst arbitrarily and in any case often belying logic, and without political institutions ‘capable of exercising meaningful control over the territory placed under their nominal supervision’.<sup>44</sup> The states emanating from the dissolved socialist multi-ethnic federations (that is, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia) share these problems to varying degrees. In this sense, a large number of states have come into existence in a situation requiring a cumbersome and among tracts of the population unpopular process of nation-building. One major weakness of a state is hence if the political boundaries correspond poorly to communal boundaries. Of course, this is not necessarily a weakening factor. Few states are ethnically homogeneous and strong states can and do exist in multiethnic environments. The United States and France are examples of highly multiethnic states that have been largely successful in building a strong civic national identity. However, there are fewer examples of states born in the twentieth century, particularly in its latter half, that have been equally successful in this endeavor. Turkey managed to create a strong civic ‘Turkish’ identity out of a highly heterogeneous population—only one group, the Kurds, has evaded, and then only partly, integration into the Turkish civic identity.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, in most cases of especially post-colonial states, the disparity between ethnic settlement patterns and state boundaries has been a major problem. The general global revival of ethnicity as a political concept has complicated or in some cases made impossible nation-building processes in many states. Whether ethnicity has been treated in a consociational or integrative manner, results have

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<sup>44</sup> Brown, ‘The Causes of Internal Conflict’, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Hugh Poulton, *Top hat, Grey Wolf and Crescent: Turkish Nationalism and the Turkish Republic*, London: Hurst, 1997; Erik Cornell, *Turkey in the Twenty-First Century: Challenges, Opportunities, Threats*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000.

varied greatly. With reference to intra-state ethnic conflict, it is a triviality, but a significant one, to note that conflict can take place only if more than one ethnic group inhabit the territory of a state. Basically, the academic treatment of the phenomenon of ethnic conflict is restricted to multi-ethnic states, albeit in the broadest definition of the concept. Naturally, inter-state conflicts can also be described as ethnic, though this necessitates a geographical proximity between the two belligerents.

Two of the hypotheses in Van Evera's typology of causes for conflict follow from this point. The first is that 'stateless nationalisms pose a greater risk of war if they have the strength to plausibly reach for freedom, and the central state has the will to resist their attempt'.<sup>46</sup> This entails that nationalism in an ethnic group that is not the holder of a nation-state poses a greater risk to peace than nationalism in a group that already has a state. In other words, nationalism among stateless ethnic groups entails dissatisfaction with present status and a quest to improve this status, ultimately by seeking the creation of a nation-state. Van Evera's argument can be taken one step further and applied to the case of ethnic groups holding a state within a state, that is, a territorial autonomy. Would nationalism among autonomous groups be more or less dangerous than among groups with no political status? The argument here, as advanced in chapter one, is that if the group is revisionist—that is, dissatisfied with its autonomous status or seeking to revise it, then its opportunity of acting on the dissatisfaction is greater. The other hypothesis related to this issue in Van Evera's typology is that 'the greater the defensibility and legitimacy of borders, and the greater the correspondence between these political borders and communal boundaries, the smaller the risk of war.' A sub-hypothesis of this is that 'the more closely the boundaries of emerging nation-states follow ethnic boundaries, the smaller the risk of war.'<sup>47</sup> This issue is less than controversial, mainly stating that ethnic conflict is likely to take place in states where more than one ethnic group lives.

States, even if not 'born weak' are subject to being weakened by other factors, be they external or internal. Reductions in aid or fluctuations in commodity prices (especially for rentier states<sup>48</sup>) have the potential of severely weakening certain states. Nevertheless such events must be considered as catalyzing rather than background factors, given their fluctuating character. 'Root' factors weakening a state are mainly internal; endemic corruption, administrative incompetence, economic mismanagement, and a failure to uphold law and order are typical indicators of the weakness of states. As Brown notes,

When state structures weaken, violent conflict often follows. Power struggles between and among politicians and would-be leaders intensify. Regional leaders become increasingly independent, and should they consolidate control over military assets, become virtual warlords. Ethnic groups which had been oppressed by the center are more able to assert

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<sup>46</sup> Van Evera, 'Hypotheses on Nationalism and War', p. 29.

<sup>47</sup> Van Evera, 'Hypotheses on Nationalism and War', p. 29.

<sup>48</sup> See eg. Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani, eds., *The Rentier State* (vol. 2 of *Nation, State and Integration in the Arab World*), London: Croom Helm, 1987.

themselves politically, perhaps in the form of developing more administrative autonomy or their own states ... criminal organizations become more powerful and pervasive ... borders are controlled less effectively ... when states are weak, individual groups within these states feel compelled to provide for their own defense; they have to worry about whether other groups pose security threats ... the incentives for groups to make independent military preparations grow.<sup>49</sup>

These processes are exacerbated in the face of state collapse, as in the case of Somalia, or in a power vacuum following the dissolution of a multiethnic state held together by authoritarianism, coercion and a failed ideology—as in the cases of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. As discussed in chapter 2, the existence of statehood on various levels in these states poses an additional problem as these quasi-state entities suddenly came into juridical existence, whereas practically they had only existed on paper. The specific issue of political transition is discussed in section 2.4.1. In general, the argument is that the more state power is based on coercion, the higher the likelihood of conflict once state structures weaken, whatever the reason for the weakening. However, all cases in this study were components of one state; they were all affected to comparable degrees by the weakening of state structures at the center, yet conflict erupted in some regions but not in others. Obviously, the explanation is to be found elsewhere.

#### 2.3.2.4. *Regional Constellation of Power*

A last structural factor is in the external realm, and concerns the regional constellation of power surrounding the state in question. This issue has several dimensions. One issue of major importance with regard to ethnic relations is whether minority groups in a given state have ethnic kin in neighboring states, and especially if this ethnic kin constitute a majority population of a nation-state. A second, equally important issue lies in the relative power of the two states: whether the kin state has a power (demographic, economic, political and/or military) comparable to or greater than the state where the minority lives. Van Evera posits that ‘the risks ... are larger if the rescue of diasporas is difficult but possible; smaller if rescue is either impossible or easy’.<sup>50</sup> The argument needs elucidation; it is fairly straightforward that risks of violent conflict are low if ‘rescue’—that is the intervention of ethnic kin on behalf of a group in another state—is impossible either for geographic or power-related reasons, such as the impossibility of Israel coming to the rescue of Soviet Jews. However, the argument of risks being lower when ‘rescue is easy’ is counter-intuitive. According to Van Evera, the threat of intervention by a strong power may be enough to ensure better treatment of the minority in question and is in most cases an important factor in the formulation of policy in a state. Hence it is ‘in-between situations—those where rescue is possible, but only under optimal conditions—that are

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<sup>49</sup> Brown, ‘The Causes of Internal Conflict’, p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> Van Evera, ‘Hypotheses on Nationalism and War’, p. 29.

most dangerous'. Whereas in both 'easy' and 'impossible' conditions the behavior of external powers are predictable and therefore secure, the in-between situation is unpredictable as the potential intervening state may await a window of opportunity, fearing it may not come back.<sup>51</sup> A proposition drawn from this discussion is:

*Proposition 6: If a minority has ethnic kin in another country, the likelihood of conflict increases.*

#### 2.3.2.5. Economic Factors

Economic factors are complicated in the typology used here since they are, dependent on their character, possible to categorize both as incentives and capacity. Economic hardships fuel incentives to act; economic strength increases capacity to act. A short overview of the treatment of economic factors in the literature is helpful.

Brown outlines three major factors in the economic and social realm: general economic problems, discriminatory economic systems, and problems related with economic development and 'modernization'.<sup>52</sup> Most analyses of economic factors behind ethnic conflict are based on studies of the third world, or occasionally the developed world. The situation of post-Soviet economies is substantially different. Whereas developing countries or the 'third world' are considered to be on a path toward 'modernization', the former socialist countries of the 'second world' were significantly 'modernized' in several ways. This is characterized by the generally high level of education of the population, (for example, the literacy rate in Tajikistan is 98,9% whereas it is 31% in neighboring Afghanistan); the relatively well-built infrastructure, the high level of urbanization, the comparably good position of women in society, the secularization of society, etc. Hence the significant economic disorders and poverty in 'second world' countries are dissimilar to those in the third world as it is the case of a radical *worsening* of economic conditions for people that have experienced better times. The radical social changes brought forward by modernization were hence already long present in these states, making them qualitatively different from the third world. Naturally, this was true to different extents in different regions of the union: in particular, the 'southern' regions of the Caucasus and especially Central Asia were primarily considered as raw material-producers in the Soviet command economy and less permeated by the processes of industrialization and urbanization. Likewise, southern Central Asia (Uzbekistan, southern Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) in particular was less secularized than the rest of the union; in general, the social structure there survived the onslaught on traditional society better than other parts of the union. Yet, these nations were arguably more similar economically and socially to other northern and western, more developed, communist-ruled nations than to the non-Soviet societies

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<sup>51</sup> Van Evera; also Barry Posen, 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict', pp. 32-38.

<sup>52</sup> Brown, 'The Causes of Internal Conflict', p. 10.

to their south such as Afghanistan or Iran, with the possible exception of the most rural and far-away areas.

Under the reigning conditions, one could expect people in the post-communist countries affected by poverty to react *stronger* to their economic situation than people in countries that have not experienced better times. This has not been the case, however, mostly due to the widespread social apathy that is another characteristic of post-Soviet societies. Generally, of course, it is possible to assume that general economic problems increase the risk of conflict. As Van Evera notes, economic problems increase the tendency to seek for scapegoats. Moreover, economic difficulties may spur leaders to play the ethnic card to cement their position in power, which may otherwise be threatened by their economic record. Generally speaking, the incentives to act are higher in situations of economic hardship. In the context of the former Soviet Union, however, the decade after 1985 was characterized by a general economic collapse. In the second half of the 1990s, the economic situation in post-Soviet states have developed rather differently, but until 1995 the economic difficulties were arguably equally disastrous in all successor states. The economic difficulties can hence not significantly explain the variance in the dependent variable in this study.

The relationship between economy and ethnic conflict is a complicated matter. Horowitz makes two basic distinctions, that between backward and advanced regions, and that between backward and advanced groups.<sup>53</sup> Regions are characterized as advanced or backward according to their relative economic position in the state, measured (whenever possible given the difficulty of acquiring data) by regional income. Groups are characterized as advanced if they have benefited from opportunities in education and nonagricultural employment; represented over the mean in number of secondary school and university graduates, in bureaucratic and professional employment; and in per capita income. Backward groups are 'less favorably situated on the average in terms of educational attainment, high-salaried employment, and per capita income'; moreover, backward groups are often stereotyped as 'indolent, ignorant, and not disposed to achievement'. Horowitz then finds four categories: advanced groups in advanced regions, advanced groups in backward regions, backward groups in advanced regions; and backward groups in backward regions. All, according to Horowitz' model, have different propensities for secessionism. Horowitz observes that 'the vast majority of secessionist regions is economically backward. Advanced regions are far less inclined to separatism'. When advanced groups in advanced regions move toward secessionism, the rationale is a feeling of subsidizing poorer regions which in turn leads to frustration, and a belief that secession would be economically beneficial. However, secession would carry with it important economic drawbacks, such as the loss of a larger inner market and possible

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<sup>53</sup> Donald L. Horowitz, 'Patterns to Ethnic Separatism', in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 23 no. 2, 1981; also Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*.

destruction through warfare of the economic potential. Hence, advanced groups in advanced regions are likely to settle for a compromise through negotiation. According to Horowitz, advanced groups, either in advanced or backward regions, in general choose to secede only if economic costs are low.<sup>54</sup> Backward groups in backward regions are according to Horowitz by far the most frequent secessionists; moreover, they are early secessionists. Horowitz' argues that despite the economic weakness of the region, backward groups in backward regions often choose the path of secession despite the economic costs it would entail:

The frequency, enthusiasm, and violence of separatist movements among backward groups in backward regions can scarcely be put down to selfish elite motives alone. It is true that, whereas secession enables leaders to eliminate the interethnic competition they previously faced, many other people may be adversely affected by the end of revenue subsidies and the severance of the backward economy from the state. Yet the formal divergence of interest is just that; by the time the movement gets underway, calculations of sacrifice and opportunity are invariably overwhelmed by an avalanche of ethnic sentiment that the undivided state is intolerable.<sup>55</sup>

With respect to the Soviet Union, it is instructive to note that the regions that according to Horowitz' model would be most prone to ethnic conflict would be Central Asia and not more 'advanced' regions such as the Baltic republics. In any case, according to Horowitz' model, Baltic republics would be late seceders, whereas Central Asian republics would be early seceders. Hence following this model, the regions of the USSR most likely to secede in the time of transition that eventually led to the dissolution of the union were the Central Asian ones. Indeed, Horowitz made this point in 1991:

The situation of the Central Asian ethnic groups strikes me as quite different [compared to the Baltic] and potentially of far greater consequence for ethnic relations in the long term ... Russians and Kazakhs confront each other as ethnic strangers ... and a juxtaposition of 'backward' but indigenous Kazakhs with 'advanced' but immigrant Russians is surely present. Where such juxtapositions emerge, so-called backward-indigenous groups typically make strong claims to priority in the territory and to homogenization as the ultimate objective. Such claims are often reinforced by intergroup violence, and secessionist movements are common. ... Backward groups in backward regions (such as Central Asia) typically have fewer inhibitions on separatism and more incentives to secede than do advanced groups in advanced regions.<sup>56</sup>

In all fairness, Horowitz issued a disclaimer, and noted that 'the eruption of conflict is not inevitable. By accident or by design, regimes may take measures that mitigate severe ethnic conflict'. However, with the benefit and comfort of hindsight, it is safe to say that

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<sup>54</sup> Horowitz, 'Patterns to Ethnic Separatism', p. 193.

<sup>55</sup> Horowitz, 'Patterns to Ethnic Separatism', p. 174.

<sup>56</sup> Donald Horowitz, 'How to Begin Thinking Comparatively about Soviet Ethnic Problems', in Alexander J. Motyl, (ed.), *Thinking Theoretically about Soviet Nationalities*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1992, pp. 16-17.

Horowitz' model is relatively unhelpful for understanding and explaining the break-up of the Soviet Union. Indeed, Central Asia was a 'dog that didn't bark' during the turbulent years between 1988 and 1991. In fact, Kazakhstan in particular was the most reluctant republic to proclaim its independence, doing so in fact *after* the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union and later than *any* other republic.<sup>57</sup> Kazakhstan has been the most integrationist country of the CIS besides Russia, pushing ardently for a creation of some form of Eurasian Union. Generally speaking, Central Asia was spared ethnic unrest, save certain riots and events prior to the dissolution of the union. Between 1986 and 1990, most republics in Central Asia experienced a flare-up in low-intensity ethnic tensions, not typically directed at Russians but at other immigrant nationalities, including Armenians, Lezgins, or Meskhetian Turks. The only large-scale ethnic hostilities in Central Asia since 1986 took place between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan in 1990.<sup>58</sup>

The most important point made by Horowitz is nevertheless his pointing out that secessionism exists in different guises, and that the type of secessionism at work has a great impact on the likelihood of conflict and compromise, respectively. Indeed, using Horowitz' typology, advanced groups in advanced regions are perhaps as likely as other groups, especially if well organized and provided with a leadership as autonomous group almost automatically are, to press for secession with peaceful means. The threat of secessionism could be an important tool for such groups in bargaining with the central state; such groups would, in the absence of large-scale repression, be driven more by pragmatic rather than emotional rationales. As such, if confronted with a harsh response from the state and a threat of military intervention, advanced groups in advanced regions would see the costs of secession rising sharply and overshadowing the benefits. They would hence be likely to settle for a compromise whereby they would gain certain levels of self-determination in especially the economic realm but remain politically within the state. On the other hand, backward groups in backward regions would be less likely to press for secession unless a large set of other background factors were present. But once they do, they would arguably be less likely to settle for a compromise and more likely to take up arms. Connecting to the typology used in this study, advanced groups in advanced regions have a higher capacity to act, given that their territory has a certain economic viability. Their willingness to secede may differ according to other factors, but it can be assumed that their willingness to fight is lower, given that they have more to lose than other groups. By contrast, backward groups in backward regions have a distinctively lower capacity to act, having little economic viability; however, their incentives to act may be

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<sup>57</sup> In the words of one analyst, 'the collapse of the USSR left the republic with little choice but to take formal independence'. Martha Brill Olcott, 'Kazakhstan: Pushing for Eurasia', in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (eds.), *New States, New Politics—Building the Post-Soviet States*, Cambridge University press, 1997, p. 547.

<sup>58</sup> Yalman Onaran, 'Economics and nationalism: the case of Muslim Central Asia', in *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 13 no. 4, 1994.

higher since they identify their status as imposed disadvantages and have little to lose economically.

Taking into account the above discussion, it can be assumed that ethnic leaders' strategies are likely to be significantly influenced by the economic condition of their region. This is true in particular for autonomous regions; their leaders are practically concerned with the financial and economic duties of government in the region, unlike nationalist leaders in non-autonomous regions that are often primarily concerned with political and cultural issues rather than with the macro-economic realities of their region. In the political calculation that inevitably transpires among the leadership regarding the desirability of a secessionist struggle, it is likely that the economic viability of the region, should it succeed to become independent, would affect these calculations. If leaders have reason to anticipate that after independence the prospective state will be worse off economically than the existing situation, this is likely to have a curbing effect on secessionist aspirations. Practically, there is reason to think that *ceteris paribus*, leaders of an impoverished region with little industry and few natural resources would be less inclined to embark on a struggle for independent statehood than leaders of a region endowed either with abundant natural resources or a strong industry.

However, as Horowitz points out, a strong economy may also be an impediment to secessionism. Secession may carry with it economic disadvantages insofar as the region would no longer have unimpeded access to the larger market of the state it belongs to; this is an impediment only if the region does not have the possibility to market its goods elsewhere. Here, the geographic location of the region (as viewed earlier) is crucial. Moreover, it can be argued that economic wealth impedes secessionism simply as the population would be less likely to be dissatisfied with their economic condition and therefore less likely to support a secessionist struggle that would carry the risk of armed conflict and thereby also endanger the very economic wealth of the people. To quote Armenian President Robert Kocharian, the rich man is unlikely to be more willing to fight than the poor man.<sup>59</sup> If the population is economically deprived, however, it would have significantly less to lose by a secessionist struggle. If, on the other hand, an economic *potential* for welfare exists—typically through natural resources but possibly also through industry—but which has not benefited the local people (for example if income from the region has gone directly to the central state budget and not returned in other forms to the region of origin) the risk of conflict would increase, since the locals are likely to be frustrated over what would be perceived as the 'theft' of 'their' resources. Summing up the discussion, the following proposition can be deduced:

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<sup>59</sup> When asked by a journalist if Azerbaijan's oil resources would not give Azerbaijan the possibility of acquiring weapons through its new wealth and conquer Mountainous Karabakh with military means, Kocharian asked the reporter 'Are you sure the rich man fights better?'. See RFE/RL *Caucasus Report*, vol. 1 no. 29, 15 September 1998; *The New York Times*, 14 September 1998.

*Proposition 7: Economic viability increases the likelihood of conflict—especially where the indigenous people have not hitherto benefited from it.*

## **2.4. Catalyzing Factors or ‘Triggers’ of Ethnic Conflict**

Catalyzing factors of ethnic conflict are generally factors related to political opportunity. This means relatively rapid political or economic changes or events that create a new situation, where typically the capacity of a group to act is boosted. The willingness of a group to act is less likely to change in a short period of time than its capacity to act. Naturally, it is possible to conceive of events that would radically change a group’s willingness to act: a sudden change of leadership in the central government in a radical direction is an example that comes to mind. Mostly, however, capacities are changed by political opportunity. Indeed, the most widely noted catalyzing factor of ethnic conflict is regime transition and suddenly weakening state structures—whether internally or externally conditioned—which increases the security concerns of groups while simultaneously providing opportunities for political action. Indeed, in explaining any of the conflicts that erupted in the former Soviet Union or Yugoslavia, this factor is of paramount importance. However, as mentioned above, this factor is less helpful in explaining why certain areas in these collapsed states were the scene of conflict and others not. Clearly, since conflict did not erupt everywhere at the same time, other factors must have been at work. Moreover, even in cases where a great number of background factors were present, such as Chechnya, or in the case of Kosovo, armed conflict did erupt but significantly later—in 1994 and 1998, respectively, despite the fact that these areas were known as high-risk situations long before that. Some catalyzing factor must hence have been at work. In this discussion, attention will be given to three main catalyzing factors. The role of leadership; external support; and the availability of arms.

### **2.4.1. Political Transition**

It is generally accepted that conflict is more likely to emerge in times of political transition, especially in authoritarian political systems.<sup>60</sup> This is the case for several reasons: first of all, political transition, especially in the shape of processes of democratization, is likely to carry with it the decline of state repression as well as increased opportunities for political action on the part of social groups, including ethnic groups. Hence, suppressed desires for secession are likely to be rejuvenated and to come to the open in times of political transition. Moreover, such times of flux provide opportunities for new political leaders to emerge and seek power; and a very powerful base for a political leader to appeal to is the ethnic group, especially if popular resentment against the state and/or other groups is strong. Gurr lists this among ‘group opportunities for

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<sup>60</sup> Brown, ‘The Causes of Internal Conflict’, p. 8.

collective action', terming it 'recency of major change in structure of the political regime'. Whereas Gurr's contention that 'major, abrupt regime changes provide a window of opportunity for ethnic contenders to press their claims' is fundamentally correct, Gurr's interpretation does not account for the fact that this political opportunity may exist *prior* to regime change. In fact, regime change itself, even if abrupt and major, is not always unanticipated. Rather, certain factors such as changes in the external environment, attempts to political reform, or changes in practices of state suppression are instrumental in creating the atmosphere of flux which is understood as the time of transition. Basically, it is not necessarily the case that regime change *precedes* or causes ethnic tension; often, the same factors that eventually lead to regime change are also conducive to ethnic violence. Sometimes, as in the case of the Soviet Union, ethnic tensions precede and *contribute* to abrupt regime change. In this sense, it seems more correct to argue that periods of political transition (the time preceding and succeeding actual regime change), albeit difficult to define with exactitude, are particularly conducive to ethnic conflict. In general, one could hypothesize that times of political flux and transition increase the likelihood of ethnic conflict. For the purpose of this study, all ethnic conflicts on the territory of the former Soviet Union took place in the time of transition that began in 1987 and in some ways still continues. Indeed, the most direct origin of almost all conflicts were concentrated to the years immediately preceding or following the break-up of the union. This factor is however a constant in this study, given that the political transition was present in *all* the cases covered. Since all cases were part of the Soviet Union and more or less equally affected by the changes at the center, a variance in this variable is not to be expected. In fact, all nine cases went through similar political flux.

#### 2.4.2. Availability of Arms

It is a superfluity to claim that armed conflict is impossible without arms. But the *availability* of arms is an important factor in the risk of armed conflict in given area. This factor is naturally related to other factors such as geography and external support, which make the appropriation of arms more or less difficult—or weakening state structures that enable nationalist groups to acquire weapons from within the country. However, this factor needs to be handled with caution, given that increasing tensions between an autonomous region and its central government may *breed* an arms race. In other words, it may be difficult to determine whether the conflict attracted arms to the region or whether the existence of arms were a factor in leading to conflict. The case of the Soviet Union includes certain peculiarities that are likely to have had, and continue to have, an impact in this field. First of all, the Soviet Union was a military superpower, implying that it had large arsenals of all types of weaponry. As a result, weapons were present *within* the country, and prospective leaders of armed violence needed not import them from outside in case they could obtain them from local military installations. It is a fact that basically all armed violence on the former Soviet Union's territory has been perpetrated with weapons

emanating from the Soviet army's depots. The use of military materiel by non-state actors has in turn been made possible by the remarkable level of corruption among union military and later the successor states' military forces, itself a product of the financial debacle and political dissolution of the union. The financial debacle increased incentives for corruption as the wage arrears of the officer corps grew, making it increasingly hard for officers and their families to make a decent living. Meanwhile, the political dissolution of the union also carried with it a destruction of discipline in the ranks—the chance of getting away was significantly higher than just a few years earlier. Given the appalling condition of the Soviet military, and the ease with which military arsenals were 'burglarized', 'broken into', or simply reported 'stolen', it is plausible that the risk of conflict be higher in areas with a high concentration of military installations. Such areas are reasonably easy to determine: the periphery of the union. Areas such as Tatarstan or Yakutia, geographically located inside the union and far from its outer borders, had few or no military installations. These installations were located on the rim of the union, especially on the borders with Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey, but also to a lesser extent on the borders with Eastern Europe (lesser, because Soviet military installations existed in Warsaw pact states, and the western republics were hence not front-line areas). In other words, southern Central Asia and the Caucasus, and to a lesser degree the westernmost parts of the union such as Moldova, western Ukraine and Belarus were areas with especially high concentrations of arms. Naturally, Tatar or Yakut extremists could presumably acquire weapons from other parts of the union. However, the access to these weapons would be significantly more difficult and risky for groups far from military installations. In areas such as Tajikistan or the Caucasus, for example, the opportunity of acquiring weapons was significantly higher. A general proposition would be that areas with high concentrations of military installations have a significantly higher risk of conflict. However, given the saturation of the Caucasus with arms, and the comparatively short distances in the region, the availability of weapons was high for all minorities under study. As such, the proposition is not used in the study.

### **2.4.3. The Issue of Leadership: Power Grab or Ethnic Mobilization?**

The issue of leadership and its effects on ethnic relations is central to the debate on the causes of ethnic conflict, and the core of the instrumentalist argument. In the context of the former Soviet Union, a number of authors have dismissed the ethnic factor behind separatism in especially the Russian Federation, arguing instead that the demands for independence or higher levels of self-rule on the part of 'the republics' has been conditioned basically by their leaders' attempts to stay in power and to strengthen their position *vis-à-vis* the center. Philip Roeder, for instance, argues that the sovereignty drive among autonomous republics in the Russian Federation was orchestrated primarily to preserve the communist-era élite's control over their regions and to increase their relative

power *vis-à-vis* the central authorities.<sup>61</sup> Likewise, Daniel Treisman argues that ‘rather than primordial cultural aspirations, [separatist threats] may constitute weapons in a competitive struggle to extract a larger share of centrally bestowed benefits’.<sup>62</sup> Hence these authors have argued that ethnic leaders in the Russian Federation have concentrated on economic issues, while using ethnicity as a smokescreen for their activities.

And indeed, it is difficult to refute the argument that leaders have a vested interest in preserving and expanding the autonomy of their region solely for political purposes, even solely for career purposes. However, this assumption may not hold up to closer scrutiny. First of all, even if it would be logical to assume that leaders would promote secessionism only for political purposes, it would be illogical to argue that they would go as far as causing ethnic conflict for their political purposes. Career-minded political leaders are unlikely to reject a compromise with the central state for the highly dangerous prospect of waging a war for independent statehood. Secondly, leaders cannot create grass-roots secessionism where there is no ethnic tension. Without the presence of several background factors, leaders would have a hard time finding popular support for secessionism. And thirdly, empirical studies show that the argument may be empirically wrong. Gorenburg studied the public statements of leaders in four ethnic republics (Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Khakassia and Chuvashia) and contrasted them with the actual laws and political programs adopted by the same leaders. If the argument of political ambition determining secessionism is true, we would expect to find a verbal insistence on cultural issues but less practical commitment to it. The results are the opposite. Leaders spoke little of ethnic and cultural issues such as the promotion of the titular group’s culture and language, but enacted significant legislation designed to promote the titular group culturally—this despite the fact that the titular nationality constitutes a majority population only in one of the studied republics, Chuvashia. Hence promotion of the titular group at the expense of other groups implied a significant political risk since it carried the danger of alienating non-titulars, especially Russians.

Although these élites wanted to promote ethnic revival in order to ensure the cultural and political survival of their ethnic group, they did not want to alienate Russian inhabitants of their region and the central government in Moscow. For this reason, they argued that their fight for sovereignty was aimed at increasing local self-government and economic well-being, which would benefit all inhabitants of their region, regardless of ethnicity. As a result, in most republics ethnic revival was implemented but was not discussed in the speeches and interviews given by local leaders.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> See Philip Roeder, ‘Post-Soviet Institutions and Ethnopolitics’, Paper presented at the 1994 meeting of the American Political Science Association.

<sup>62</sup> Daniel Treisman, ‘The Politics of Intergovernmental Transfers in Post-Soviet Russia’, in *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 26 no. 2, 1996, p. 327.

<sup>63</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg, ‘Regional Separatism in Russia: Ethnic Mobilisation or Power Grab?’, in *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 51 no. 2, 1999, p. 269.

The results of Gorenburg's investigation enable us to at least moderate the claim made regarding political ambition being the monocausal explanation of secessionism in autonomous republics in the former Soviet Union. Certainly, political ambition plays a role: this is displayed most clearly by the fact that even ethnic republics controlled politically by ethnic Russians have promoted autonomy from the center. However, as noted, the pursuit of ethnically and culturally motivated aims is not to be ignored.

This said, the effects of leadership, and in particular leadership change, on the prospects of conflict, are significant. Most notably, the advent to power, through democratic means or by illegitimate ways, of radical nationalist leaders is likely to be a major factor precipitating conflict. This is true both for the central government and the minority leadership. Radical nationalist leadership in the minority would have a potential to act on the existing frustration, promote ethnic mobilization, and thereby escalate tension with the central government. In the case of autonomous regions, a radical nationalist autonomous leadership would not be unlikely to take the unilateral decision of secession, whereas a less radical government would be unlikely to take that decision unless provoked. By the same token, the advent to power of a radical nationalist regime in the central government of a state would carry the risk of alienating the autonomous region, which would then feel a need to reconsider its further remaining within the state. This is the case for several reasons. First of all, a radical nationalist government would be more likely to be negatively inclined to the very existence of autonomies on its territory; moreover, it would be more likely to pursue policies promoting the titular group of the state, detrimental to minorities, including autonomous ones. Basically, the autonomous minority would be likely to reconsider its wish to coexist within a single (albeit not unitary) state with such a government. As argued in chapter one, it would be in a more advantageous position than non-autonomous minorities to do so, given that it controls a quasi-state structure with an institutionalized decision-making mechanism, state-like institutions and symbols, as well as fixed borders. It deserves to be stressed that the leadership change factor is a *catalyzing* factor, implying that its significance would be depending on the presence of background factors in the concerned areas. For example, a radical nationalist regime emerging in Moscow would not automatically lead to attempts to secession by *all* autonomous regions in the Russian Federation; however, the risk of secessionist activity in areas with high scores on background variables would increase. It should also be noted that stark policy shifts by an incumbent government in either camp could have much the same effect as leadership change.

*Proposition 8: the emergence of a radical leadership in either the minority population or the central government significantly increases the risk of conflict.*

#### **2.4.4. Contagion, Diffusion and Spill-over: The Importance of the International Environment**

The discussion above has concentrated on domestic factors including the structure of the state, inter-group relations, economic issues, and cultural differences. Nevertheless, ethnic relations are strongly influenced also by external factors. Primary among these are external support for a party to a conflict and the regional political environment.

##### *2.4.4.1. External Support*

As Ted Gurr notes, ‘foreign sympathizers can contribute substantially to a cultural group’s cohesion and political mobilization by providing material, political and moral support’.<sup>64</sup> Foreign support can take the shape of either state or non-state actors supporting secessionist aspirations, and can take various shapes. The most outright type of support is military intervention in a conflict, which is powerful but risky on the part of the intervening state or group. More common are economic and financial support, provision of training facilities, diplomatic actions in support of a group and political pressure on the state. Such support may be given for a variety of purposes, most often ethnic or religious solidarity with the insurgent group or political enmity with the central state in question, or a combination of these factors. This factor may serve both as a background factor and as a catalyzer. As noted above, the risk of conflict increases if the titular group of an autonomy has ethnic kin abroad. Foreign support may also be a catalyst, if during an escalation of tensions the autonomy’s leadership secures the active support of a state. This factor could be pivotal in determining the leadership’s decision whether or not to take up arms. Given clear signals that a friendly state will not intervene would significantly lower the likelihood of war since autonomous regions are typically smaller in size and number, and possess less military resources and training than the central state organs—the risk of defeat is normally large. On the other hand, a promise of support would have the opposite effect and tilt the balance toward a decision to move forward with secession, even at the price of war.

In whatever shape, foreign support plays a crucial role in the likelihood of conflict. It is clearly a catalyzing factor since it is amenable to great variance in a short period of time. A foreign government, for instance, may suddenly alter a prior decision of non-involvement, thereby rapidly changing the situation in a stand-off between a minority and a central government. It must however be noted that it is sometimes difficult to determine whether the conflict brought foreign support or if foreign support led to conflict in a given case. However, external support prior to the outbreak of hostilities can without difficulty be seen as a catalyzing factor of conflict.

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<sup>64</sup> Gurr, *Peoples Versus States*.

*Proposition 9: External political, financial and/ or military support for a minority significantly increase the risk of conflict.*

#### 2.4.4.2. *Contagion*

In addition to external support, the occurrence of separatist struggles in nearby minority regions, whether in the same state or neighboring states, is likely to have an impact on the likelihood of conflict. A successful secession in a neighboring state may set a precedent and in fact add to the determination of a group's leadership to follow suit. Moreover, it is likely that the effect of 'contagion' be higher the closer the proximity of the contagious case. This argument is nevertheless complicated in the case of the Caucasus. The emergence of the Mountainous Karabakh conflict in early 1988 is often claimed to have had a catalyzing impact on the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. But likewise, bloodshed in a nearby conflict may also calm tensions, setting an example of horror for the concerned populations and decrease the following of nationalist groups. Separatism in Chechnya, for example, can be claimed to have had a deterring impact on other minorities in the North Caucasus. The war sent a signal that separatism is likely to be followed by death and destruction—not likely a factor leading to contagion. In any case, this argument fails to explain why the Mountainous Karabakh conflict, if it affected the situation in South Ossetia or Abkhazia, did not lead to the radicalization of the situations among any of the other minorities. Especially Javakheti, populated by Armenians just like Mountainous Karabakh, would have been a clear candidate for contagion, or for that matter other minorities in Azerbaijan such as the Talysh or Lezgins.

## 2.5. Conclusions

In the discussion above, an overview of the background and catalyzing factors existing in the theoretical literature on ethno-political conflict has been undertaken and adapted to the present research, that is adapted to the specific conditions of the former Soviet Union as well as the specific conditions of autonomous regions. The propositions summarized in table 2.1 will provide a basis for an empirical investigation of the roots of conflict between autonomous regions and central governments in the former Soviet Union. After a review of nationality policy in the Soviet Union in the next chapter, chapter four will deal with the methodology to be adopted to confront these propositions with the empirical record.

**Table 2.1: A Summary of Working Propositions**

<b><i>Group Cohesion &amp; Willingness</i></b>	<p><b><u>Prop. 1:</u></b> The deeper the cultural differences between two groups, and the stronger group identities and cohesion, particularly in the autonomous minority, the higher the risk of conflict.</p> <p><b><u>Prop. 2:</u></b> The more the national conception of either the minority or the state's titular nation approximate an ethnic conception of the nation, the higher the likelihood of conflict</p> <p><b><u>Prop. 3:</u></b> The greater the intensity of past conflict and the myths surrounding it, the greater the risk of conflict.</p>
<b><i>Capacity for Action</i></b>	<p><b><u>Prop. 4:</u></b> Rough terrain, in particular mountains or heavy forests, increases the risk of conflict.</p> <p><b><u>Prop. 5:</u></b> The greater the demographic dominance of the minority in the region it inhabits, the greater the risk of conflict.</p> <p><b><u>Prop. 6:</u></b> If a minority has ethnic kin in another country, the likelihood of conflict increases.</p> <p><b><u>Prop. 7:</u></b> Economic viability increases the likelihood of conflict— especially where the indigenous people have not hitherto benefited from it.</p>
<b><i>Catalyzing Factors</i></b>	<p><b><u>Prop. 8:</u></b> the emergence of a radical leadership in either minority population or the central state significantly increases the risk of conflict.</p> <p><b><u>Prop. 9:</u></b> External political, financial and/or military support for a minority significantly increase the risk of conflict.</p>
<b><i>Autonomy</i></b>	<p><b><u>Prop. 10:</u></b> The existence of territorial autonomy significantly increases the risk of conflict.</p>



# 3

## Communism and Nationalism: Ethnicity in the Soviet Context

The particularity of governance and of the view of ethnicity in the former Soviet Union is a factor in any study of ethnic relations and policies in the former Soviet space. In fact, the Soviet experience of creating and governing a multi-ethnic state with a disparate population is the tale of a constant conflict between pragmatic interests of the state and ideology, stemming from the philosophical incompatibility of Communism and Nationalism. The two ideologies have in common the focus on the community, not the individual; the individual human being is seen as a member of a collectivity.<sup>1</sup> However, the analogy ends there: where Nationalism sees the nation as the main determinant of individual and collective identity, Communism sees social class as the main determinant. But both ideological and practical considerations, perhaps with an emphasis on the latter, led the architects of the Soviet Union to give notable concessions to nationalism. To re-establish control of a multi-ethnic empire in which many of the minority peoples had been given a taste of independence, the emerging Soviet state, weak after revolution and civil war, was not in a position to recentralize the periphery solely with military force. Having to provide an incentive for the minorities to join the revamped Russian state, the Bolsheviks guaranteed political autonomy to all minorities that joined the Soviet Union. Lenin, specifically, was a firm believer in the self-determination of peoples as a *sine qua non* for the development of a socialist state. However, the task of reconciling a state aiming to build a communist ideal where all ethnic and cultural differences would dissolve with a state grounded in the principle of ethno-federalism was ideologically doubtful. How did the communist leaders of the early twentieth century settle for a program based so heavily on the national self-determination, that eventually led all multi-ethnic communist states in Europe (the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia) to emerge and continue to develop as ethnic-based federations? This question is important since it lies at the basis for the Soviet nationality policies that governed the relations between Moscow and the ethnic units of the union for seventy years. These policies, in turn, shaped the sometimes dramatic, and occasionally less dramatic, developments in

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Bremmer, 'Reassessing Soviet Nationalities Theory', in Bremmer and Ray Taras, eds., *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 7.

inter-ethnic relations that developed once the Soviet system collapsed. This chapter will trace the ideological and practical relationship between Communism and Nationalism from the writings of Marx to the policies of Gorbachev.

### **3.1. The National Question in Marxist Writing**

In the prolific writing of Marx and Engels, the mention of the phenomenon of nationalism is, in the words of Connor, ‘irregularly strewn throughout a number of their treatises and even their personal correspondence, for neither man attempted a detailed exposition of the topic.’<sup>2</sup> This very fact betrays the secondary role assigned to nationalism and the nation in Marxian thinking. Marx’s entire body of thought was predicated on a belief that the fundamental societal divisions were class distinctions that ignore ethnic or national boundaries. The idea that such divisions would hold a primary role in social and political life was therefore quite naturally alien to Marxian thinking. Marx’s view of the world was determined by his focus on economic determinants of political development, and the category of the nation played little role in this view.

Flowing from this neglect of the national question, Marx and Engels also never developed a clear terminology, instead confusing the terms state, nation and nationality in their writings. However, the surge of nationalism that occurred in Central Europe during the lives of Marx and Engels gradually forced them to give larger consideration to the power of nationalism. But in his *Communist Manifesto* published the same year as the national revolutions of 1848, Marx stated that ‘national differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more and more vanishing... the supremacy of the proletariat will cause them to vanish still faster.’<sup>3</sup> In other words, Marx and Engels believed that the collapse of capitalism would necessarily bring with it the dissolution of the national differences. Yet, they also saw the development of nations as a corollary of the development of capitalism. Having no esteem for nationalism as an ideology, Marx nevertheless viewed it in relations with the level of development of a society. Nationalism could be progressive in less developed societies in that it would help developing capitalism, hence moving the society further toward socialism; By contrast, in an advanced capitalist society, nationalism would be a reactionary force, since it would tie together national communities against each other, hence obscuring the common objectives of workers across borders and prevent their unification against the bourgeoisie. As Connor summarizes Marx’s position, nationalism is seen as a ‘bourgeois ideology pressed into service by that class in order to divert the proletariat from realizing its own class consciousness and interests’.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Marx, *the Communist Manifesto*, quoted in Connor, *The National Question*, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Connor, *The National Question*, p. 10.

While the category of the nation and nationalism were neglected in the early writings of Marx and Engels, they came to occupy a more important role after the wave of national revolutions throughout Europe in 1848. Whereas they came to realize the importance of the nation, this realization, especially in Engels' writings, took a rather bizarre turn. In fact, Engels could not conceal a thinly veiled racism in the 'scientific socialism' that dominated his writings. Remarkably, after 1848, Engels began to appropriate class roles to entire nations. Hence the Germans, Italians, Hungarians and Poles came to represent progress, and the numerous smaller, especially south Slavic nations came to represent backwardness and reaction. While he and Marx had long agreed that reactionary classes would be exterminated after a class war, Engels also considered that this 'progress' would include the 'disappearance from the face of the earth ... of entire reactionary peoples'. His feelings about Slavic peoples were especially notable, as he expected Germans and Hungarians to 'wipe out these petty hidebound nations',<sup>5</sup> whose 'chief mission ... is to perish in the revolutionary holocaust'.<sup>6</sup> Hence the concepts of nation and class were muddled, and apparently it was possible that nations and not classes would fight the progressive, revolutionary wars. Marx was less prone to sweeping generalizations and the careless and bigoted language of Engels, and did not abandon his focus on class as the main category in social conflict. Yet it is clear that Marx in principle had few objections Engels' views on this issue, and that he, too, after 1848 was forced to consider the enduring force of national allegiances even as compared to class allegiances.

More profoundly, the developments during his lifetime forced Marx to change his views on the manner in which the dialectics of history worked. In his early writings, including the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx had seen the forces of history working across national boundaries. By the time the first volume of *Capital* was published shortly before Germany's unification in 1871, Marx saw capitalism affect each country in a separate process. He no longer believed a socialist revolution would immediately follow the capitalist revolution in Germany, as he had earlier, but now believed capitalism would be victorious and establish itself before a socialist revolution would occur. As Szporluk notes, Marx 'unknowingly adopted the view that nations (countries, peoples) had a history which existed above and beyond history understood as the history of *class* struggles'.<sup>7</sup> This is important, because the Marxian thought that spread to Russia and contributed to the ideology of Lenin was the one of Marx after the publication of *Capital*, in which national divisions were acknowledged.

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<sup>5</sup> Ian Cummins, *Marx, Engels, and National Movements*, London: Croom Helm, 1980, pp. 39-41. Roman Szporluk, *Communism and Nationalism: Karl Marx versus Friedrich List*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 171

<sup>6</sup> Connor, *The National Question*, p. 15

<sup>7</sup> Szporluk, *Communism and Nationalism*, p. 177. Emphasis in original.

The last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a surge of nationalist activity in the empires of eastern Europe, which was influenced by the nationalist movements that had recently achieved the unification of Germany and Italy. This phenomenon, which Marx and Engels had dealt with rather summarily, was taken up by a group of thinkers that have come to be known as the ‘Austro-Marxists’. Otto Bauer and Karl Renner, in particular, tried to understand the development of nationalism and its relationship with the economically-based social classes of Marxism.<sup>8</sup> This brought them to accept the ‘nation’ as a historical phenomenon in its own right, and therefore the need to foresee its role in a socialist world or state. The ‘Austro-Marxists’, writing in the early twentieth century, were concerned with the national question in the Austro-Hungarian empire, and developed the idea of National-Cultural Autonomy. Whereas the Austrian Social-Democratic Party at its 1899 Congress proposed to divide the Empire into ethnically defined provinces, i.e. restructuring the state according to territorial autonomy, Bauer and others disagreed, instead proposing the concept of non-territorial, cultural autonomy. Eventually, the party settled for a compromise solution. In later years, Bauer and Renner developed their scheme of extraterritorial autonomy, which was based on the individual rather than on the collective. Membership in a national group was to be completely voluntary, which normally is not the case with territorial autonomy. National minorities would be given autonomy to conduct their internal affairs, but not through territorial division of the state into national provinces; instead, autonomous communities were to be organized as sovereign collectives, irrespective of their territorial locations within the state. Hence ethnic identity is not linked to territorial control; national communities are given significant self-rule without dividing the state territorially according to ethnicity.<sup>9</sup> Bauer also contributed significantly to the development of the constructivist theory of the nation. He recognized the cultural and historical origins of the ethnic group, while emphasizing the element of social construction in its creation and political existence. This sociological theory of the nation and a political program to deal with it provided an important alternative in the creation of socialist states. However, the Soviet Union adopted the diametrically opposed principle of territorial autonomy. Lenin, in particular, chastised the ideas of Austro-Marxism as a bourgeois deception.

### **3.2. Leninist Nationality Theory: Reconciling Communism with Nationalism**

The issue of nationality, though neglected on the whole by Marx and Engels, became a major contentious issue in the development of socialism. Many prominent thinkers, including Rosa Luxemburg, Georgi Plekhanov, and Karl Radek, aligned with classical

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<sup>8</sup> Tom Bottomore and Patrick Goode, eds., *Austro-Marxism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Otto Bauer, *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy*, St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. Introduction and translation by Ephraim Nimni.

Marxian thought in refuting nationalism or any relation with it. On the other hand, Edward Bernstein early on argued for the need to recognize the significance of national diversity.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, large sections of Russian socialism were influenced by the ideas of Bauer and Renner. The various groups within the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party divided according to their stance on the national question. Low has identified three main lines of thought, which he calls the Right, the Left, and the Center.<sup>11</sup> The 'Right' consisted of many of the socialist groupings of national minorities. More dispersed than any other group, the Jewish Worker's Union *Bund* enthusiastically adopted the Austro-Marxist line. In addition, the Belorussian, Georgian, and Armenian organizations also espoused this view. The Bund was the first organization to demand the federalization of the Party at its second congress in 1903; the Party's refusal led the Bund to withdraw from the Party for three years. On the 'Left' were the 'internationalists' who rejected any concessions to nationalism and the principle of self-determination. Luxemburg and Nikolai Bukharin were two of the most prominent proponents of the 'Left'. Lenin, however, took a pragmatic position of middle ground, arguing for the necessity to recognize the reality of nationalism.<sup>12</sup> More specifically, Lenin adopted what Connor calls 'strategic Marxism'. He was not ready to distance himself from Marxian thought to the level of Bauer, Renner, or Bernstein by accepting that the nation might become the principal organizational unit of the new order; yet his revolutionary pragmatism led him to develop the idea proposed by Marx that socialists needed to ally themselves with national forces for tactical reasons. Hence the Leninist emphasis on the doctrine of self-determination.<sup>13</sup>

The First world war had a decisive impact on Lenin's thought. Lenin and other socialists had not excluded the possibility of such a war breaking out, and even assessed it positively since they thought it would hasten the downfall of capitalism given that it would require the arming of the workers. But the workers did not rebel against their respective bourgeoisies and join forces in an internationalist brotherhood; quite to the contrary, they proved equally if not more appealed by nationalism than their 'oppressors'. The European socialist parties themselves were no strangers to nationalist appeal. In fact, nation and not class had been the focus of allegiance for the great majority of workers.

### 3.2.1. Tactical Elements in Lenin's Nationality Strategy

Lenin had neither positive nor negative feelings for the nation as a category or political force. He recognized its power of attraction, though he was convinced that eventually, the socialist revolution would contribute to the disappearance of nations altogether. He believed assimilation a positive, even necessary factor, and hence saw no intrinsic value in

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<sup>10</sup> Connor, *The National Question*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred D. Low, *Lenin on the Question of Nationalities*, New York: Bookman, 1958, pp. 24-26.

<sup>12</sup> Low, *Lenin on the Question of Nationalities*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>13</sup> Connor, *The National Question*, p. 30.

safeguarding the identities of various nations. However, given that historical law dictated that national movements would emerge and secede in the Russian and Ottoman Empires, the proletariat's interests coincided with those of nationalists: the nationalists become a potential ally in imperialist or otherwise oppressive states. Russia had not yet passed through the stage of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, which was a necessary stepping stone on the road to the socialist revolution. However, the revolution of 1905 convinced Lenin that the Russian bourgeoisie was neither able nor willing to carry out this revolution. By a weird leap of logic, it hence became the responsibility of the Proletariat to also undertake the Bourgeois revolution before it carried out the Socialist one.

Generally speaking, however, Lenin believed the best practical conditions for the Proletariat to wage its class struggle was democratic bourgeois systems, the most 'advanced' form of government under capitalism. Democracy would make it easier for the socialists to agitate and spread their message and eventually grow enough in strength to take over government. Lenin nevertheless had little faith in the capacity of capitalism to develop full democracy; democratic demands could only be met in a distorted and faulty manner under capitalism, whereas full democracy would be possible only under socialism: democracy could not eliminate class oppression. But in the early stages of capitalism, it was necessary for the socialists to support political democracy and forces that advocated political democracy. Again this alliance was tactical, not because of the intrinsic value of democracy but because it would speed up the process of historical evolution. Democracy, in turn, included several elements, an important one of which was the self-determination of nations. Especially in the Russian Empire where non-Russian peoples were in a majority position, Lenin saw the oppression by Czarist Russia of the non-Russian peoples as a specific target. These persecuted and oppressed nations would form an ideal ally of the proletariat. The Russian proletariat, though small in number, would rise as the leader of all democratic forces in Russia, which included prominently the oppressed national groups. The alliance between the proletariat and the oppressed nations implied that the socialists enunciated their full support for the principle of national self-determination.<sup>14</sup> The final aim of the socialists remains the achievement of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and hence the support for national movements that are non-socialist is temporary in nature.

The definition of self-determination espoused by Lenin was unequivocal: it implied the right to secession of oppressed nations. This right to secession was absolute, but did not necessarily mean that *all* nations would secede from their states. Lenin made the comparison with granting the right to divorce, which did not mean that all women would divorce their husbands. In particular, Lenin believed that economic determinants would dominate the pragmatic thinking of national leaders, and that as a result most national groups would decide not to utilize this right to secession. Even in cases where minorities

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<sup>14</sup> Low, *Lenin on the Question of Nationalities*, pp. 37-44.

used this right to secede, Lenin believed that they would soon return to a federal or other type of union with their former state for mainly economic reasons.

### 3.2.2. Ideological Elements in Lenin's Nationality Strategy

Lenin noted that nationalism was progressive in the sense of helping to build capitalism, which was a more advanced mode of production than feudalism. The destruction of feudalism was, according to Lenin, deeply intertwined with the emergence and victory of national movements. The creation of the nation-state was a result of the move from feudalism to capitalism, and was carried out by a bourgeoisie that had adopted political democracy – hence the term bourgeois-democratic revolutions. Moreover, Lenin identified the colonial problem as a national one. He famously argued that the most advanced form of Capitalism was Imperialism, which he defined as colonialism overseas. Just as national minorities would revolt in the archaic Ottoman and Czarist Russian Empires, the national groups in the colonies would themselves create national movements and revolutions. This was progressive, and therefore worthy of the support of the Proletariat.

In more plainly ideological terms, Lenin defined the right to national self-determination as a genuinely socialist demand, given that socialism was incompatible with the continued oppression of minorities. The doctrine of self-determination was also in conformity with socialism because it underlined the equality of all nations, negating the imperial tendencies of larger nations, including, prominently, the 'Great Russians'. Moreover, granting the right to self-determination would also reduce tensions between national groups and therefore strengthen proletarian unity after the revolution. The process of reducing suspicion and hatred between ethnic groups is hence of utmost value to the revolution on a global scale, and self-determination is in this context also valuable.<sup>15</sup>

Yet Lenin ran into problems as he sought to balance this both practical and ideological support for self-determination with the need to ensure that the class consciousness of the proletariat remained its main focus. Hence nationalism could be progressive, but it could not be allowed to obscure the primacy of class as the marker of identity. This is what led Marx to oppose the Austro-Marxists, since their plan of national-cultural autonomy would, according to Lenin, do precisely that – destroy the centralized party structure that was a most important asset in the proletariat's struggle.<sup>16</sup> Another paradox of Leninism was that his emphatic support for self-determination was coupled by an equally enthusiastic endorsement of the assimilation of minorities – which was inherently progressive as it prevented national ossification, and led to the tearing down of national

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<sup>15</sup> Low, *Lenin on the Question of Nationalities*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>16</sup> Low, *Lenin on the Question of Nationalities*, p. 55.

differences. But, according to Lenin, self-determination was a necessary precondition for the later assimilation of minorities.

With regard to the organization of the states, Lenin's thoughts on self-determination led many of his colleagues to assume that there was a concomitant right to autonomy or federation. Lenin rejected this idea, since the 'right' to federalism implied a 'right' to the consent of the other side (Russia) to agree to such a scheme. Lenin considered it absurd to expect a right to the other side's consent, but equally emphatically concluded that though minorities had no *right* to autonomy, his plan for the 'construction of a democratic state' was autonomy.<sup>17</sup> After the proletarian revolution, minorities would be granted autonomy. But since this was not an inherent right but merely a decision from the socialist leadership, it could be revoked at any time. Autonomy, in Lenin's thought, did not restrict the powers of the central authorities since it was the center that determined the legal framework of autonomy. Autonomy was therefore not in contradiction to democratic centralism. Autonomy would include the setting up of separate educational institutions and encourage the use of local languages, yet it was only a step in the eventual assimilation of the minority. While this appears contradictory, Lenin emphasized the *voluntary* character of assimilation. He argued that the suspicion and hatred among minority peoples for Russians needed to be done away with before these populations could voluntarily assimilate. For this purpose, a period of full national rights was necessary. While paradoxical, this plan was in conformity with the dialectic character of much of socialist thinking.<sup>18</sup> Self-determination was to be 'no more than a brief moment of independence, leading rapidly to social revolution and, thence, to the reestablishment of a unitary, revolutionary, workers' state'.<sup>19</sup> In retrospect, Lenin underestimated the enduring force of nationalism and the recalcitrance of at least some of the minority peoples in what would be the Soviet Union to voluntarily assimilate. Lenin may have been wrong in assuming that assimilation was necessary and inevitable; the millenarian nature of his ideology was a mental straitjacket. But even so, the insistence on self-determination and on the creation of an autonomy regime did reinforce and lock into place identities that may otherwise not have survived the great forces of modernization and urbanization that would follow. The practical foundation for this undesired outcome was the policy of 'Korenizatsiia', or nativization, that was imposed after the great October revolution.

### **3.3. Leninism in Practice: *Korenizatsiia***

The Bolshevik policy on nationalities, closely following the ideas of Lenin and Stalin, was composed of two rather contradictory principles. As seen above, one main determinant

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<sup>17</sup> Low, *Lenin on the Question of Nationalities*, p. 107.

<sup>18</sup> Connor, *The National Question*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>19</sup> Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, 'Determinants and Parameters of Soviet Nationality Policy', in Jeremy R. Azrael, ed., *Soviet Nationality Policies and Practices*, New York: Praeger Press, 1978, p. 40.

was the conviction that socialism would make nationalism obsolete. The end of class struggle would remove the support base of nationalism in society. In a socialist society, the nations would first grow closer (*sblizhenie*) in order to eventually merge (*slianie*). Given that this was a historically inescapable fact, the ruling socialists could without danger speed up this process by granting all national groups full rights to develop their own culture, language, even ranging to the right of secession. Nationalism was inherently transient, and would not cause a threat to socialism since it was bound to disappear. The more concessions made to national demands, the quicker nationalism itself would vanish.<sup>20</sup> Hence a policy was implemented that actively and aggressively ‘nativized’ the minority areas, bringing locals to positions of power and creating actual intellectual elites.

### 3.3.1. Self-determination and Sovietization: Re-Creating an Empire

Immediately upon assuming power on 7 November 1917, the Soviet government reaffirmed its pledge to allow the secession of minorities. And in fact, thirteen new states emerged in what had been the Czarist empire – three of which were Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Soviet Russia indeed accorded initial recognition to them, though practical and power considerations led to the forcible reintegration of areas such as the Caucasus or Ukraine as soon as that became feasible. In fact, the recognition of their independence may have been equally determined by awareness of the weak position of Bolshevik rule in Russia itself, let alone in the peripheries. As would be the case in 1991-1992 again, Moscow concentrated on maintaining its control over mother Russia herself, allowing temporarily for the secession of numerous territories but aiming at gaining them back as soon as possible. Indeed, the Bolshevik openness and apparent tolerance toward minority peoples was certainly a crucial element in its ability to win the civil war and in relatively painlessly reasserting control of most of Czarist Russia’s territories. In relation to the Great-Russian chauvinism of the white forces, in particular, the policies and promises of the Bolsheviks were important in attracting support from unlikely allies. The Red armies in the North Caucasus found shelter among natives, but after they showed scant respect for local traditions and ways of life, a rebellion broke out in Dagestan in 1920, shortly after Denikin’s armies had been defeated.<sup>21</sup> Likewise in Central Asia, the *Basmaji* Islamic rebels that spread in opposition to the atheist Bolsheviks in the 1920s posed a serious threat to Soviet rule in the area. Stalin, then Commissar for Nationalities, guaranteed both autonomy and respect for Shari’a (Islamic Law) for the concerned

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<sup>20</sup> See also Gerhard Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post-Stalinist Society*, (translated by Karen Forster and Oswald Forster) Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991, p. 135.

<sup>21</sup> Marie Bennigsen Broxup, ‘The Last Ghazawat: the 1920-21 Uprising’, in Broxup, ed., *The North Caucasus Barrier*, London: Hurst, 1992.

minorities. This was a crucial step in defeating the rebellion in Dagestan in 1921 and the *Basmaji* revolt which was practically defeated by 1926.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of the successful military reconquest of areas that did make use of the right to secession such as the South Caucasus or areas of revolt such as Turkestan or Dagestan, the Soviet state was being built in marking conformity with Lenin's ideas. Indeed, the Soviet Union developed an ethnic-based territorial structure paralleled by no other state in history, in fact amounting to what Martin has called an 'affirmative-action empire'. The Soviet state evolved into a hierarchically organized ethnic federation. As Martin puts it,

New national elites were trained and promoted to leadership positions in the government, schools, and industrial enterprises of these newly formed territories. In each territory, the national language was declared the official language of government. In dozens of cases, this necessitated the creation of a written language where one did not yet exist.<sup>23</sup>

The Bolshevik government, immediately after having won the civil war and begun to consolidate its rule in the early 1920s, launched a policy that was termed *Korenizatsiia* or nativization. The doctrine of self-determination evolved into a concept of nation-building, which in practice implied central support for the consolidation of the various ethnic groups in the Soviet Union. Importantly, all ethnic groups, irrespective of size, level of advancement, or location, were initially considered equal. It became official party policy to help the non-Russian peoples 'catch up with the better-developed Central Russia ... develop a local-language press, schools, theaters, clubs, and cultural and educational facilities altogether; to establish and further a network of courses and schools for ... education in local languages'.<sup>24</sup> By 1923, there was still a significant debate on the issue, basically along the lines outlined earlier. Representatives of the national minorities demanded guarantees that these promises would be realized and not remain solely on paper, while the left, including especially Russians, still disagreed with the departure from centralism. Yet though Lenin and Stalin disagreed at this point (Lenin supporting the federalization of the union while Stalin preferred that all non-Russian areas should have autonomy under Russia and not be put on an equal level with Russia), Lenin was at this point too ill to enforce all of his views. However, his denunciation of Russian nationalism as the most harmful of all nationalism was still strong and dominated the agenda. To Lenin, the conduct of the Bolshevik party itself after the revolution had not allayed fears of Russian chauvinism remaining strong within the ranks of the party, and he emphasized the need to differentiate between the 'nationalism of oppressor nations and the

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<sup>22</sup> Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>23</sup> Terry Martin, 'An Affirmative Action Empire: the Soviet Union as the Highest Form of Imperialism', in Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 67.

<sup>24</sup> Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, p. 24, quoting *KPSSv rezoliutsiia i resheniakh sez dov, konferentsii i plenumov CK*, vol. 2, Moscow, 1970, p. 252.

nationalism of oppressed nations', explicitly justifying the latter while condemning the former.<sup>25</sup> The problem of Russian nationalism would re-emerge under Stalin and later.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.3.2. The Creation of Federalism: the Structure of the Soviet Union

Lenin nevertheless managed to force through his position that the Union be composed of equal republics, of which Russia would be one, but not have any hierarchically superior standing. In addition, when naming the Russian Republic, the Soviets used a distinction in language that is lost in English: they employed the term 'Rossiiski', denoting not ethnic Russianness but belonging to the territory of Russia and hence including ethnic minorities, and not the exclusive and ethnic term 'Russki'.<sup>27</sup>

The Soviet Union then was created from the beginning as a hierarchical federation of ethnically defined territories. Though the number varied until the annexation of new lands in the second world war, it eventually came to constitute over fifty ethnically based territories with governmental structures. It is significant that of over a hundred ethnic groups identified in the USSR, fifty-three at some point held an ethnically determined administrative unit.<sup>28</sup>

These included first and foremost fifteen union republic or Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR), that were constructed in the manner of independent states that were joined in a federation to form the USSR. Second in the hierarchy were the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSR), of which there were over 15; thirdly, there was a lower number of Autonomous Regions or *Oblasty* and finally a few autonomous areas or *Okrugi*. These autonomous formations were subjected to the jurisdiction of one of the SSR, not directly to the central authorities. The criteria for establishing these divisions were often arbitrary, however. Especially the distinction between Union Republics (SSR) and Autonomous Republics (ASSR) were less than clear. In institutional terms, the SSR enjoyed a unilateral right to secession in all Soviet constitutions, and the status as component republics of the Soviet Union. The ASSR did not, though like the SSR they had constitutions of their own and most attributes of a state to the same extent as the SSR. A somewhat arbitrary criteria was later advanced by Stalin as the Soviet Union developed in the 1930s: a population of more than one million and an outlet to the outside world. That meant a border to a non-Soviet country, or in the case of the Baltic republics, an international sea border. In 1924, the USSR consisted of six Union Republics (Russia, Transcaucasia, Ukraine, Belorussia, Uzbekistan and Turmenistan),

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<sup>25</sup> Martin, 'An Affirmative Action Empire', p. 70-71.

<sup>26</sup> Frederick C. Barghoorn, 'Russian Nationalism and Soviet Politics: Officials and Unofficial Perspectives', in Robert Conquest, ed., *The Last Empire: Nationality and the Soviet Future*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1986.

<sup>27</sup> Connor, *The National Question*, p. 221.

<sup>28</sup> Bremmer, 'Reassessing Soviet Nationalities Theory', p. 5.

sixteen autonomous republics, and 17 autonomous regions. By 1936, the union republics had increased to eleven, (Transcaucasia split into the three republics of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, while Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan became union republics) and there were now twenty-two ASSR, nine autonomous regions, and nine autonomous areas.<sup>29</sup>

The origins of the criteria that were used for determining the status of a region were nevertheless doubtful and arbitrary, as shown by the changes of status of territories in the 1920s and 1930s. They had little ideological or other justification, and the criteria for SSR status seem to have been introduced to counter the demands from the Tatar and Bashkir ASSR to be raised to the status of SSR. Indeed, the Tatars were in 1970 the sixth largest people in the Soviet Union, larger than ten other peoples that did have an SSR of their own. Though most Tatars lived outside the borders of Tatarstan as its borders were drawn by the Soviet leadership, the populations of the republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan in 1926 and 1939 were higher than those of several union republics. Stalin, it seems, did not desire to create union republics in the middle of the Russian Federation, only 300 miles from Moscow. As will be viewed below, the very division of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan into separate republics was likely part of Soviet 'ethnic engineering'.

Officially, SSR and ASSR status was to be given to ethnic groups with a developed sense of national consciousness, whereas less 'advanced' ethnic groups were to receive the lesser level of self-rule of an autonomous region, which did not have its own constitution and was not intended to have political and economic self-determination to the level enjoyed by the ASSR. Finally, the autonomous areas were mainly restricted to the indigenous peoples of the Far North, such as the Inuits and Chukchi, that received autonomous institutions to be able to exercise and preserve their separate culture.

In all levels of the autonomous hierarchy, the local languages and cultures were aggressively promoted throughout the 1920s. In numerous cases, the Soviet authorities created alphabets and written languages for languages that had not used their language in writing. As Simon notes, 'support for and development of non-Russian languages was one of the most visible signs of the policy of nation-building'. Written languages were developed for 48 ethnic groups, which had until then had no literature in their own spoken language. This meant the introduction of native languages in public life, replacing Russian. This policy was not merely cosmetic; in fact, it formed a most remarkable example of social engineering that benefited the separate identities of the minority groups within the Soviet Union. The Russification of Ukrainians and Belorussians was dramatically turned around, and native language and identity was strengthened in the Ukraine and Belorussia.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, p. 147.

<sup>30</sup> Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, p. 42.

Not staying at linking territory with ethnicity, the Soviet leadership adopted a largely primordial conception of ethnicity at an individual level. In 1932, the registration of ethnic origin (nationality or *natsional'nost* in Soviet terminology) in the internal passports of every citizen was introduced. Very soon after the introduction of this measure, in which individuals had largely been given freedom to indicate their nationality, the possibility to change ethnic affiliation was prohibited, and the nationality of children was now determined solely by that of the parents. This made voluntary assimilation technically impossible. For example, a person whose both parents were Kazakh but was born in Moscow, who did not speak Kazakh and was culturally completely Russified, could not have his or her nationality changed to Russian in official documents. The Soviet Union hence treated ethnicity as 'an ascriptive characteristic determined by birth'.<sup>31</sup>

The communist party was at the creation of the Soviet Union in 1922 dominated by Russians and a few other ethnic groups. Russians constituted 72% of the members, while Jews were heavily overrepresented and Poles, Armenians, and Georgians were also well represented. On the other hand, Ukrainians, Belorussians, and especially Central Asians were practically absent from the party. In the higher echelons of the party, this structure was even more pronounced. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, however, a dramatic shift in the party and state structures developed. In the ten years from 1922 to 1932, the percentage of Ukrainians in the Ukrainian party structures went from 24% to 59%; and in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan from practically zero to 57%. In Armenia, the percentage of Armenians was already high at almost 90% and stayed there, while in Georgia it increased slightly from 62% to 66%. These were the only peoples that were consistently and from the start overrepresented in the party structures compared to their proportion of the population.<sup>32</sup> In fact, Georgians and Armenians dominated their respective party structures from the beginning; this, as will be seen in chapter six, is certainly related to the strong socialist movements in these areas even before the arrival of Soviet power. As the Georgian Mensheviks and the Armenian Dashnaktsutiun were the dominant parties in the pre-Soviet era and socialist in nature, these republics were better-prepared for participation in the Soviet Bolshevik administration than other peoples that had had little contact with socialism. In the case of Azerbaijan, this republic had a much higher native participation than any other Muslim republic, though it lagged behind Armenia and Georgia. As a whole, throughout the Soviet Union, party apparatuses on the provincial level in the ethnic republics were aggressively nativized, whereas the process was somewhat slower at the level of the republican apparatuses. Only Central Asia significantly lagged behind in this process, and the Soviet treatment of Turkmenistan was especially harsh: indeed, Turkmenistan seemed to pay the price for its historical

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<sup>31</sup> Victor Zaslavsky, 'Success and Collapse: Traditional Soviet Nationality Policy', in Bremmer and Taras, eds., *Nations and Politics*, p. 34.

<sup>32</sup> Simon, , *Nationalism and Policy*, pp. 31-34.

intransigence in being incorporated in the Russian empire. The figures for career advancement of ethnic Turkmens were significantly lower than in neighboring republics like Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan.

### **3.3.3. The Dubious Background of National Delimitations**

This generally rosy picture of affirmative action should nevertheless not lead to the conclusion that the Soviet Union's ethnic engineering project was conducted on exclusively objective or benevolent grounds. There is substantial evidence that the center's considerations of security or stability were important factors in the national delimitation that took place first in 1924, with important adjustments in the late 1920s and mid 1930s. As Zaslavsky puts it, 'borders between ethnic territories were drawn arbitrarily, often in accordance with a divide-and-conquer policy in obvious conflict with historical traditions and existing ethnodemographic conditions. In many regions, especially in Central Asia, this policy effectively prevented the emergence of supraethnic groupings and alliances'.<sup>33</sup> Three examples are particularly illustrative of this.

A first example is the delimitation of the northwestern Caucasus. Two main people inhabit the area, the larger being Circassians (known variously as Cherkess, Adyge, or Kabardins – the latter denoting tribes living predominantly in the East, neighboring Ossetia) living in the foothills of the mountains, and a Turkic people known as the Karachai and Malkarli (Balkar) who traditionally inhabit the highlands. As such, there was a possibility of delimiting the area by creating two relatively homogeneous ethnic units, a Circassian republic running in an east-west direction to the north of the mountains, and a Turkic republic also running from East to West South of the Circassian republic. However, instead of this rather logical division (if one assumes an objective to create solid ethnic units), the Soviet authorities created two ethnically mixed units, the Kabardin-Balkar autonomous republic and the Karachai-Cherkess autonomous oblast.<sup>34</sup> In retrospect, the decision to divide the North Caucasus in this way seems to have been predicated by concerns regarding the loyalty of these peoples. The Karachai and Balkar were distrusted as a Turkic people that could form a fifth column loyal to Turkey in case of a conflict between the Soviet Union and Turkey. Though republican Turkey's relations with the USSR were good in the early 1920s, Soviet rulers had not missed the point that the Ottoman Empire fought a war in the Caucasus as late as 1918. Likewise, the Circassian peoples had only by great force been suppressed in 1864, when hundreds of thousand Circassians were forced to flee the Caucasus for the Ottoman Empire. Hence Moscow likely considered them both as unreliable and followed a policy of divide and

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<sup>33</sup> Zaslavsky, 'Success and Collapse', p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> Svante E. Cornell, 'Ethnic Relations and Democratization in the Northwestern Caucasus', in Yaacov Ro'i, (ed.), *Democracy and Pluralism in Muslim Areas of the Former Soviet Union*, London: Frank Cass, forthcoming.

rule, aiming to weaken the capacity of each group to revolt. That Stalin deported the Karachai and Balkar in 1944 strengthens this argument.

A second example is the case of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. As alluded to above, the rationale for dividing the Muslim Turkic peoples of the Ural region into two groups was by no means obvious. Quite to the contrary, there was at the time, and still today, no clear borderline between peoples known as Tatars and those known as Bashkirs. Linguistically speaking, there is a flowing linguistic belt of Kipchak Turkic languages and dialects that stretches from western Tatarstan to Kyrgyzstan. A southern Bashkir dialect is not too distant from northern Kazakh, whereas a Bashkir in northern Bashkortostan will understand a southern Tatar dialect better than a southern Bashkir one. This is not to deny the historical differences existing between the much more numerous sedentary Tatars and the predominantly nomadic Bashkirs; however, during the revolutionary period the chief political movement in the Volga region was the aspiration to create a unified 'Idel-Ural' republic that would incorporate the lands inhabited by the Tatars and the Bashkirs. Lenin and Stalin co-opted this idea by proposing a Tatar-Bashkir republic in 1918.<sup>35</sup> Later, however, they aligned with a group of Bashkir nationalists under Zeki Velidov and in spite of Tatar objections, divided the area into separate republics. Moreover, the borders between the two were drawn such that more Tatars than Bashkirs lived in Bashkortostan, and that Tatar minorities ended up in the neighboring republics. There is little doubt that the Bolshevik leadership explicitly exploited and amplified the Tatar-Bashkir divide in order to prevent the emergence of one strong Turkic Muslim entity in the Volga-Ural region.<sup>36</sup> That this was indeed the intention of the Bolsheviks is indicated by the choice of state languages for the Tatars and Bashkirs. A southern Bashkir dialect and a northern Tatar dialect were chosen as the respective official languages of the two republics, thereby selecting languages that were as far from one another as possible. Had a southern Tatar and a northern Bashkir dialect been chosen, the official languages would have been very close to identical.

Finally, the example of the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs is analogous. These two peoples are culturally even closer than their Tatar and Bashkir kin are, with the only major difference between them being that the Kazakhs live on the steppes whereas the Kyrgyz live mainly in the mountains to the south. In 1924, the preliminary delimitation of Central Asia was made, in which six peoples (the Karakalpakhs, Kyrgyz, Kara-Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Turkmen, and Uzbeks) were identified. Two received SSR status immediately, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, whereas Tajikistan became an ASSR within Uzbekistan, and Kirgizia

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<sup>35</sup> Daniel E. Schafer, 'Local Politics and the Birth of the Republic of Bashkortostan, 1919-1920', in Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 168.

<sup>36</sup> Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire: A Guide*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 247-248; Azade-Ayşe Rorlich, *The Volga Tatars*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1986.

became an ASSR within the Russian Republic and Kara-Kirgizia an autonomous oblast. Karakalpakistan was first put under the jurisdiction of Russia, then under Kirgizia, until it finally became an ASSR in Uzbekistan. As the reader may note, there is no mention of Kazakhs here: because what is today known as the Kazakhs were called 'Kyrgyz'; today's Kyrgyz received the term 'Kara-Kyrgyz'.<sup>37</sup> Then, when the status of the various territories were changed several years later, the Kyrgyz became Kazakhs and the Kara-Kyrgyz suddenly became Kyrgyz. The fact that two peoples in various times were given the same name is testimony enough to the arbitrary character of Soviet national delimitation.

Such ethnic engineering was possible, especially in Central Asia, because of the rather weak character of ethnic identities in the early twentieth century. The primary identification of Central Asians was not ethnic, but rested on sub-state (tribal or regional) or supra-national (Islamic or Turkic) identity. In the South Caucasus, the identities of Armenians, Georgians, Abkhaz, and others were relatively well-established. In Azerbaijan, by contrast, the definition of the Azerbaijani nation was relatively recent and vague. 'Azerbaijan' as a territorial denomination is a very old term, but as an ethnic or national marker, the term is a creation of the twentieth century and is defined mainly in negative terms: an Azerbaijani is not a Persian, certainly not a Russian, but not an Anatolian Turk either. The most correct term espoused by many Azerbaijanis themselves is the term 'Azeri Turk' denoting their Turkic heritage, but also their distinction from Anatolian Turks through history and religion – the majority of Azeris are Shi'a Muslims whereas Anatolian Turks are overwhelmingly Sunni. In pre-Soviet times, the Azerbaijanis were simply referred to as 'Tatars', the common term for Muslim Turks in the Czarist era, or as 'Muslims'. In Soviet censuses, however, the Azerbaijanis were first identified as 'Turks' in 1926, until in 1938 they were re-baptized as 'Azerbaijani'. Just as in the case of Tatars, Bashkirs, Kyrgyz, and Kazakhs, the Azeris were given little choice to determine their own ethnonym – the decisions were made in Moscow on grounds that were neither obvious nor publicly known.

In sum, Leninist nationality policies *were* definitely characterized by affirmative action. However, these policies were occasionally somewhat exaggeratedly affirmative: they created and amplified distinctions that were not previously significant, without asking the opinion of the 'affirmed' peoples. However, *Korenizatsiia* was not to remain in force for too long. Perhaps because of the deep impact it had on the minority peoples, and because the national distinctions showed no signs of diminishing, far less vanishing as Lenin had predicted, Stalin began to question the virtues of nativization by the late 1920s, and to halt its implementation by the mid-1930s. Within short, the pendulum was reversed, and an aggressive campaign of assimilation was launched by Stalin, himself an assimilated

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<sup>37</sup> Kyrgyz comes etymologically from Kyrg – Yz which means forty tribes; Kara means black; and Kazakh means 'free man'.

Georgian. This reversal of policy, which occurred at the time of the ‘great terror’, would culminate in the genocidal deportations of entire nations in the early 1940s.

### 3.4. Stalinism and the National Question

As noted above, Stalin had not completely shared Lenin’s view of the nationalities question. Stalin was known as the expert on nationalities, writing the first major Bolshevik treatise on the issue in 1913, *Marxism and the National Question*. Though Stalin deferred to Lenin in 1922 on the structure of the Soviet Union, he clearly had a much more gloomy perspective on the nationalities issue. Perhaps due to his Caucasian origins and his experience from this region, Stalin seemed considerably less convinced than Lenin of the transient nature of nationalism. This perception grew stronger with time, and Stalin ever more departed in his mind from the conviction that class consciousness would necessarily and automatically surpass national consciousness. As Simon notes, Stalin ‘did not share Lenin’s optimism that the revolution had in principle ended nationalism and separatism or that the best way to neutralize these movements would be to make national concessions’.<sup>38</sup> Stalin agreed with Lenin that in the time of civil war, national concessions were necessary from a purely pragmatic perspective. While realizing the objective need to grant autonomy to the minorities and espouse the theoretical concept of self-determination, Stalin early on favored a granting of equal autonomous rights to all minorities within the Russian state, rather than the gradual, hierarchically different federal status granted to different non-Russian groups.

#### 3.4.1. Centralization and the Concept of ‘Socialist Nations’

Stalin also saw the very concept of nation in a more realistic and less ideologically determined way than most Bolsheviks, including Lenin. He ‘considered relations between nations to be similar to relations between classes, that is, to be determined by force rather than by education or understanding’.<sup>39</sup> By the late 1920s, Stalin’s rhetoric had changed with the introduction of the term ‘Socialist Nations’. He argued that the nation-building of the USSR had helped the oppressed nations to blossom, which was a necessary stage in the historical process that would eventually lead to the merger of nations (*shianiie*). This term of ‘Socialist Nations’ would gain currency after Stalin’s death; yet already then, Stalin argued that the socialist nations were stronger and more tightly knit than ‘bourgeois nations’, because they lacked the internal divisions of ‘irreconcilable class antagonism’ that split the bourgeois nation. As such, the different nations had no contradictions or conflicts with each other, and were therefore in a better position to move closer to one another and eventually merge into a qualitatively new, victorious socialist Soviet nation. This nation would share one language and culture, which, predictably, would be the

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<sup>38</sup> Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, p. 22.

<sup>39</sup> Carrère d’Encausse, ‘Determinants and Parameters’, p. 48.

Russian one.<sup>40</sup> Stalin explicitly referred to this concept as paradoxical and contradictory, but emphasized that this was inherent in the dialectic nature of historical development.

Practically, one of the measures strengthened by Stalin during the 1930s and later was the centralized character of Soviet rule. In this respect, it should be recalled that the Soviet Union's federative structure was not mirrored in the organization of the Communist Party. The Party had always been a highly centralized institution directed by the center in Moscow. This lever was constantly available to regulate the level of actual self-rule by the indigenous elites in the ethnic units of the union. From 1934, Stalin began dismantling the institutions that promoted nativization or the rights of minorities in various cities, autonomous republics and regions. In 1936, he abolished the Presidium of the Council of Nationalities, an organ introduced in the early 1920s as a second chamber of the Central Executive Committee, and had aggressively promoted *Korenizatsiia* and defended the position and rights of minority populations. In the place of these institutions, and especially in the economic realm, the centralization of the state was accelerated, a process which began with the onslaught of collectivization in 1929, when the administration of agriculture was centralized in Moscow. Economic and political power was concentrated at the SSR level, and increasingly at the level of the Union authorities, which gained the ability to overrule republican decisions in most matters of importance. Hence by the mid-1930s, the autonomy granted to the ethnic republics had been halted and was gradually being reduced. This included the sphere of education: in 1934, a uniform school system for the entire country was introduced, and higher education in the country also became centralized in the All-Union Committee for Institutions of Higher Learning. Stalin, however, was careful not to touch the outer symbolic status of the ethnic republics. Centralization did not mean the abolition of autonomous units, far from it: numerous ethnic units had their status raised from autonomous regions to ASSR, and two ASSR (Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan) became union republics in 1936. What was taken away in practice was given back in form.<sup>41</sup> This incidentally corresponded well to Stalin's dictum 'national in form, socialist in content'. Similarly at the center, the Council of Nationalities was expanded in size and standing; however, its Presidium that had been introduced against Stalin's wishes in 1923 disappeared in the 1936 constitution, which clearly showed the move toward increased centralization.

### **3.4.2. Russification**

The centralization of political and economic power launched the period of the 'great terror' in the Soviet Union. The great purges that led to the deaths of millions were its most tragic elements. Stalin's personality cult was an outward show of the increased power that was now vested in his person. Language policy also changed by the late 1930s,

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<sup>40</sup> Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, p. 136.

<sup>41</sup> See Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, pp. 138-147, for a thorough discussion of the centralization efforts.

and the thrust of the policy turned toward a Russification of the local languages. In fact, Stalin was convinced it was time to move forcibly toward *sblizhenie*, and in his interpretation, this meant the assimilation of minorities to Russian culture and language. Where *Korenizatsiia* had introduced the Latin alphabet for the Turkic languages of Central Asia and Azerbaijan, among other, this process was now reversed, and by 1938 these republics were forced to adopt modified versions of the Cyrillic alphabet. This created a large disruption in the republics, as it meant the second change of alphabet in little more than a decade. Before the 1920s, the alphabet used locally had been the Arabic one; the switch to the Latin alphabet had left many people unable to read or write, and this was repeated with the redirection to Cyrillic. Only the Georgians and Armenians with their distinct alphabets, and later the three Baltic republics when they were incorporated into the Soviet Union, were exempted from this switch to Cyrillic. In addition, Russian vocabulary was now inserted into the languages of the minorities. This was particularly notable in less developed languages of smaller minorities, including those in the North Caucasus, which lacked a technical and professional vocabulary in their own language. Though this process is not unique, visible in the French influence on West Africa or the English influence on languages of the Indian subcontinent, its forcible and enthusiastic enforcement by Soviet authorities was remarkable.<sup>42</sup>

Stalin's understanding of the power of nationalism, and his likely doubts regarding the mobilizing force of class consciousness, led him to launch a campaign to create Soviet patriotism. This campaign was obvious in the war, when the 'motherland' was a powerful rallying cry, but predated the war by several years. Stalin clearly saw the glue of Soviet patriotism in a stronger emphasis on the predominance of the Russian nation. Lenin had from the outset outlined two threats: that of Great-Russian nationalism and that of the nationalism of the minority peoples. While both were considered negative, Lenin considered Great-Russian nationalism the far greater evil and a threat to the Soviet state. Stalin, however, reversed these priorities and downscaled criticism of Russian nationalism while increasing the rhetoric about 'bourgeois nationalism' among the minorities.<sup>43</sup> From 1937 onwards, the Russian people's standing departed from that of the other nations: the Russians were now 'first among equals', 'loved by all the other peoples of the union'; the Russian workers were 'vanguard of Soviet workers', who selflessly offered their assistance to other nations in overcoming their 'backwardness'.<sup>44</sup> By 1938, decrees were issued that imposed the teaching of the Russian language in all non-Russian schools, and Russian became the sole language used in the military. Rhetoric from the central party authorities now also spoke derogatorily of some policies of *Korenizatsiia*, which were branded as

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<sup>42</sup> Connor, *The National Question*, p. 272.

<sup>43</sup> Hugh Seton-Watson, 'Russian Nationalism in Historical Perspective', in Conquest, ed., *The Last Empire*, p. 25.

<sup>44</sup> Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, p. 149.

divisive. The emphasis on denouncing nativization especially in the Ukraine is a clear testimony to the increase of Russian nationalism: nothing is more anathema to Russian nationalists than assertion of Ukrainian separate nationhood. As Simon puts it, 'no longer did one hundred different peoples live in the Soviet Union, but rather one people and ninety-nine others'.<sup>45</sup> During the great purges of 1936-38, the ethnic units were heavily targeted. During collectivization almost a decade earlier, the anti-Kulak repression had led to the death of millions of peasants particularly in Kazakhstan and the Ukraine, but this time, it was the Soviet elite itself that was targeted. Most purged officials that were subsequently arrested, taken to labor camps, and usually executed by firing squads were accused of 'bourgeois nationalism'. Interestingly, the purges found no Russians guilty of great-Russian chauvinism. The purges dealt heavy blows to the national elites in the South Caucasus. On Stalin's orders, Beria personally killed the head of the Armenian Central Committee and had the Chairman of the Abkhaz party poisoned; but the purges covered the entire Soviet elite, which Stalin did away with. In Chechen-Ingushetia, the purges eliminated 2% of the population; considering that it was the elite strata that was purged, it is clear that the consequences for the societies of the ethnic republics were dire. In the Ukraine, only three of 102 members and candidate members of the Central Committee survived the purges. On the whole, two chief aims of Stalin's purges can be identified. A general aim was to deflect blame for the failure of all the promises of building socialism and prosperity, and from the excesses of collectivization – Stalin's person was whitewashed. Secondly, and specifically in the area of nationalities policy, the purges eliminated every person, mainly members of the national minorities, who had opposed Stalin's policies or advocated greater rights for the non-Russian peoples – and everyone associated with these objectors.<sup>46</sup> With the complete and calculated physical elimination of the opponents of his nationality policies, Stalin could now declare that for the first time in history, the national question had been solved. This declaration paved the way for the next stage of Stalin's excesses, the genocide committed against selected nations when the Second World War would prove Stalin wrong in his assertion that the national question was no more.

### **3.4.3. War and Genocide**

The Second World War showed that the national question in the USSR did not belong to the past. The weakening of central power led to unrest in the traditionally troublesome areas, including Ukraine, the Caucasus, and the Baltics.<sup>47</sup> In the North Caucasus, the restive areas of Chechnya-Ingushetia again saw a rise in anti-Soviet agitation. This was not new, but had been present during the mid-1930s as well. In 1940, even before the Soviet

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<sup>45</sup> Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, p. 158.

<sup>46</sup> Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, pp. 160-166.

<sup>47</sup> Carrère d'Encausse, 'Determinants and Parameters', p. 50.

Union attacked Germany, a resistance movement had emerged in Chechnya, whose leader, Hasan Izrailov, declared that 'the Caucasus will be a second Finland'. This revolt, which soon controlled several areas in Chechnya, was inspired by the heroic Finnish resistance to Soviet aggression. But it was also significant as it was the first time that a revolt in the North Caucasus had been launched on a *national* rather than religious or tribal basis.<sup>48</sup> In a sense, the national character of the revolt was a result of *Korenizatsiia*. The Chechen people, divided into clans, had previously been united only by their joint allegiance to Islam, and organized by Sufi brotherhoods. However, these were not involved in the 1940 revolt. That a national revolt had received significant following showed that a national consciousness was emerging in Chechnya, undoubtedly in great part due to the nativization policies of the Soviet regime.

Meanwhile, as the war broke out, Stalin fell back on Russian patriotism. Nation replaced class as the rallying cry for mobilization, and reinforced the position of the Russians as dominant element in society. He launched the concept of 'fatherland', a particularly non-socialist concept. This was coupled by an obvious display of discontent in the ethnic peripheries. Large Ukrainian volunteer formations fought against the Soviet forces, and the Caucasus was, as mentioned, in unrest. It became clear that minority nationalism had not been eradicated, strengthening Stalin's conviction of the strength of national feeling. For the smaller and unreliable nationalities in the Caucasus, as well as for Volga Germans, Koreans, Cossacks, and others, Stalin found that if these peoples could not be pacified, then a more radical solution was needed.

The first people to be deported was the Volga Germans, who were removed in July and August 1941, immediately after the German invasion. This was a preventive measure, whereas the deportations that followed after the Germans retreated were punitive. In November 1943, without prior notice, the whole Karachai people was loaded on cattle wagons and transported to Central Asia. In December, the Kalmyks were deported, followed by the Chechens and Ingush in February and March 1944, who were unaware of the fate of the Karachai and the Kalmyks. Finally, in April, the Balkars, and in May, the Crimean Tatars were deported. Deportation was not new in Soviet practice, as it had been widely employed during collectivization. But for the first time, entire peoples were targeted, surgically removed from their places of origin, and maps redrawn as if these people had never existed. These North Caucasian nations were branded as collaborators with Nazi Germany and as traitors to the Soviet Union. At roughly the same time, the Ahiska Turks that lived in the Meskheta area of Georgia were summarily deported to

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<sup>48</sup> For more details, see Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Richmond: Curzon, 2000, p. 200; Abdurrahman Avtorkhanov, 'The Chechens and Ingush during the Soviet Period and its Antecedents', in Broxup, ed., *The North Caucasus Barrier*; John Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: The Roots of a Separatist Conflict*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Uzbekistan, though they were not charged with any specific crime.<sup>49</sup> The Ahiska, known also as 'Meskhetian Turks' after the region in Georgia where they lived, were likely selected because of their ethnic identity as Turks. It is no coincidence that three Turkic peoples, the Meskhetians, Karachai, and Balkar, were deported whereas the Circassian peoples, that had historically been more prone to rebellion, were not. It has by now been proven beyond doubt that the official reason for the deportation had no connection with reality. The German armies never reached Chechnya though they did briefly incorporate the Karachai and Balkar areas. These peoples, as many Chechens and Ingush, fought on the frontlines *against* German occupation. Even Izrailov's revolt had no links to Germany, but was purely indigenous.<sup>50</sup> In any case, the deportations targeted not individuals guilty of treason but punished entire peoples for the alleged wrongdoings of a few in their midst. The tragedy of the deportations for the peoples involved was immeasurable. The deportations were undertaken during the harsh winter of 1943-44, and the people loaded onto cattle wagons without sanitary arrangements and transported thousand of miles into Central Asia and Siberia, a journey that took over a week, in which most of the deportees were only fed once. A high proportion of the deportees died of cold, starvation or disease during transport; around a quarter of the total number of deportees are estimated to have perished either during transport or within a few weeks after arrival; individual groups lost over half of their members. The demographic consequences of deportation were staggering. The Chechens had grown by 36% during the eleven-year period between 1926 and 1937; their growth rate in 1959-1970 was of 40%. But in the twenty years between 1939 and 1959, the Chechens only grew by 2%, whereas they would almost have doubled in this period in normal conditions.<sup>51</sup>

Those who survived were confined to a life in an alien land and were not given adequate food rations or shelter. The local population had been told of the alleged treason of the newly settled peoples, or that wild tribesmen, rebels, or cannibals were being resettled there. In spite of this, it was often only because of the help of the local population that the deportees survived. The deportations, administered by Beria in the North Caucasus, had clear orders: no individuals of the punished peoples were to remain. This occasionally met with practical difficulties: one highland areas near the Georgian-Chechen border was unreachable by trucks, and the population that could not be transported was burnt alive in a stable.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, *'Punished Peoples' of the Soviet Union: the Continuing Legacy of Stalin's Deportations*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991.

<sup>50</sup> The authoritative works on the deportations are Robert Conquest, *The Nation Killers: the Soviet Deportation of Nationalities* London: Macmillan, 1970; Aleksandr Nekrich, *The Punished Peoples*, New York: Norton, 1978.

<sup>51</sup> Conquest, *The Nation Killers*, p. 160.

<sup>52</sup> Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*, London: Pan, 1997, pp. 64-67.

This description of the reality of the deportations serves to show the extent to which Soviet nationality policy changed from the 1920s to the early 1940s. From having embarked upon an unprecedented process of nation-building of small and large minorities alike throughout the country, the Stalinist era was a time of repression and disaster that by the onset of collectivization in the late 1920s had begun to affect the minority peoples far worse than the Russian mainland. The famines in the Ukraine and Kazakhstan showed the disastrous effects of these policies. But collectivization was only the beginning; by the late 1930s, Stalinism had turned against its own communist elite, especially in the national minority areas. Since ethnic elites had disagreed with Stalin's nationality policies, they were particularly targeted and eliminated, and again the case of the Ukraine stands out. Stalin had already launched his very simple yet infamous principle 'Net chelavek, net problem' (If there is no person, there is no problem) and applied it in the purges; that he should extend this dictum to entire nations with genocidal results is therefore actually not surprising – in a sense, Stalinism came to its logical conclusion with the deportations.

### 3.5. The National Question after Stalin

After the end of the second world war, Stalin increasingly overtly and explicitly continued his transformation of the Soviet Union from a multinational state where all nations were equal into a Russian-dominated one, justified by the superior culture and civilization of the Russian people. His toast to the Russian people on May 24, 1945, set the trend: 'I drink to the health of the Russian people because it is the most outstanding of all the Soviet Union's nations ... it has a clear mind, a firm character, and patience.'<sup>53</sup> The *Zhdanovshchina*, the crackdown on intellectuals throughout the union that followed, was particularly severe in the national republics. In a further rebuttal of *Korenizatsiia*, the historical accounts of the individual nations were questioned and criticized, blamed of 'bourgeois nationalism', while the historical relations between these peoples and Russia were altered to portray a historical friendship. Very little about Russian culture was considered reactionary, however. Quite to the contrary, the exploits of Russian history, science, and culture were officially celebrated in the last years of Stalin's rule.

#### 3.5.1. Khrushchev's Two-Pronged Destalinization

Stalin's successors saw the need to return some rationality to the functioning of the state, and this did affect nationality policy. Moreover, they were more cognizant of the real threat that had been exposed during the war by the disaffection among national minorities.<sup>54</sup> Even more pressingly, the reality that the Soviet Union had a non-Russian majority became especially clear in the power struggle after Stalin's death. Support of

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<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, p. 207.

<sup>54</sup> Carrère d'Encausse, 'Determinants and Parameters', p. 51.

entrenched republican elites became a key issue for the contenders, and the national institutions provided an institutional and territorial base for some of the contenders, like Beria or Khrushchev. Beria, initially, tried to position himself as the champion of the non-Russian peoples, and advocated a return to the policies of *Korenizatsiia*. Already in June 1953, only weeks after Stalin's death, the Presidium of the Central Committee instructed the state apparatuses to improve conditions in the national republics, and to promote as many titulars as possible to leading positions. Together with decrees that directed official paperwork to be done in titular languages, the instructions from the center unequivocally indicated a return to *Korenizatsiia*.<sup>55</sup> Suddenly, the party line had changed by 180 degrees. The pro-Russian policies that had been the imperative only months earlier were now branded as 'deviations', and a great reshuffle of party cadres in favor of natives was undertaken. This policy concurred with a policy of decentralization that transferred substantial power from the union authorities to the republican institutions. This was especially true in what regarded control over the economy. The emerging Khrushchev regime was seeking to jumpstart the economy by giving larger incentives at the local levels and to eliminate excessive centralization that stifled the economy. In larger republics, these measures were replicated on a lower level, increasing the real power vested in both autonomous and non-autonomous regional institutions.<sup>56</sup>

Khrushchev in his famous secret speech at the twentieth congress of the CPSU in February 1956 directly attacked Stalinism, specifically targeting its excesses in the nationalities question. Referring to the deportations, Khrushchev stated that 'no Marxist-Leninist and no sensible human being can understand how anyone can hold an entire people ... responsible for hostile activities, to inflict mass reprisals on them, and to expose them to hardship and misery for the subversive actions of individuals or small groups'.<sup>57</sup> Khrushchev mentioned by name the Karachai, Balkars, Chechens, and Ingush, and the national republics of these peoples and of the Kalmyks were reinstated in January 1957. Yet Crimean Tatars, Germans, and Meskhetian Turks were not mentioned and were not rehabilitated. The Meskhetians and Crimean Tatars would struggle for the next several decades to be granted the right to return, but in vain.<sup>58</sup>

However, in its familiar way, the pendulum soon swung back beginning in 1959. Khrushchev had by 1957 consolidated his rule, and began to restrict the wide-ranging rights given to national republics, that had occasionally exceeded those of the 1920s. Khrushchev now returned to Lenin's visions of a socialist state, and announced at the

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<sup>55</sup> Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, p. 228. The resolution has not been published, but is confirmed among other by Khrushchev's memoirs.

<sup>56</sup> Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, p. 237.

<sup>57</sup> Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, p. 241.

<sup>58</sup> Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, *Punished Peoples of the Soviet Union: the Continuing Legacy of Stalin's Deportations*, New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 1991.

twenty-second Party Congress in 1961 that the national groups in the Soviet Union had come to espouse a socialist consciousness, not longer a national one; hence the Soviet Union, having completed the flourishing of nations, had achieved their drawing together, *Sblizheniie*, and now needed to move on to the final stage in Lenin millenarian vision, the achievement of *Slianii*, the merger of nations, where the peoples would rise from a socialist to a communist consciousness.<sup>59</sup> This proclamation of, as it turned out, an unrealistic development flowed not from an analysis of reality but was inherently ideological; this increased the confusion in the nationality policy under the late Khrushchev years. The final ‘fusion’ of nations again demanded that the role of a single language and culture be emphasized; the culture was termed Soviet, though the weakness of the conception of a ‘Soviet culture’ forced it to lean on Russian culture, whereas in terms of language, the return to emphasis on Russian was an unavoidable consequence. More than Stalin had, Khrushchev reformed the educational system. He greatly reduced the role of the native languages as media of instruction in the autonomous republics and regions, and to a lesser degree in the union republics; native languages were now relegated to being media of instruction in primary and, to various degrees, secondary schools; it nevertheless remained a subject taught in Russian-language schools in minority areas. This policy may to some extent have been based on objective criteria. Command of Russian was essential for advancement, either economic or political, in the Soviet Union, and hence many parents were not opposed to the concept of having their children receiving education in the Russian language. But Khrushchev also removed the already poorly enforced requirement that ethnic Russians in the national republics learn the local languages, and in practice, ‘native-language education was virtually discontinued’.<sup>60</sup> Khrushchev’s about-turn nevertheless betrayed the fact that the Communist party had been unable to reconcile the inherent contradictions of Leninism, and lent towards its ideological conviction that nations were, after all, transient. As Dunlop puts it, ‘despite numerous tactical zigzags, beginning with the NEP, this concept of nations as ultimately ephemeral has never been abandoned by the Soviet leadership’.<sup>61</sup> Paradoxically, the Soviet leader who understood the tenacity of national consciousness and realized the limitations of the Soviet state’s capacity to transform societies was Stalin – a conviction that certainly impelled his great purges of national elites and the deportations.

### 3.5.2. The Brezhnev Era: Reliance on Local Elites

The Fall of Khrushchev in 1964 at first accentuated these tendencies. In the late 1960s, his decentralization measures were reversed, and much of the authority delegated to

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<sup>59</sup> Carrère d’Encausse, ‘Determinants and Parameters’, p. 51.

<sup>60</sup> Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, p. 269.

<sup>61</sup> John Dunlop, ‘Language, Culture, Religion, and National Awareness’, in Conquest, ed., *The Last Empire*, p. 266.

national republics and lower administrative units were taken back by the center. Yet the Soviet state never regained the power that Stalin had welded. Society was not totally controlled in the way it had been, and grew increasingly diverse. Increasingly, representatives of minority peoples were able to restore some of the deliberate mistakes in Stalin's history-writing, and to reassert their national cultures and languages without being repressed. Already in the late 1960s, Ukrainian demands resurfaced, especially in the field of culture and education. National demands and denunciations of Russification were now supported by the highest levels of the Ukrainian party hierarchy. This trend was slowed with the removal of Ukrainian party head Shelest in 1972, but was paralleled by developments elsewhere. Even in Central Asia, officially condoned literature now began to amplify the cultural roots of the native population and glorify past heroes.<sup>62</sup> The novels of Chingiz Aytmatov, whose themes include the preservation of the memory of the past, were also published during this time. The Uzbek glorification of Amir Timur (Tamerlane), which reached large proportions after independence, took off in the 1970s.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, the Islamic revival in Central Asia and the North Caucasus also has its roots in the 1970s, though it would grow significantly due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the opportunity this war provided for Central Asians to establish contacts with kindred peoples in Afghanistan, whose Islamic consciousness was very high. In Georgia, the national movement that had briefly surfaced in 1956 grew strong in the late 1970s. An attempt to reform the Georgian constitution to weaken the status of the Georgian language led to substantial public unrest in Tbilisi in 1978; in 1981, student protests again took place in Tbilisi against the attempts by the center to promote the Russian language in higher education. (see chapter seven) Similar events occurred in the Baltic republics, with public demonstrations against Russification in Estonia in the 1980s. Emigration was another issue that showed that the Soviet Union's hold on society was withering away. Over two hundred thousand Jews were permitted to emigrate in the 1970s.<sup>64</sup> The increase of national dissent may have been related to the foreign policy of *détente*, which forced Soviet authorities to allow emigration, permit Helsinki watch associations, etc. But even when the late Brezhnev regime tried to backtrack on its concessions in the early 1980s, the pressures from below had grown in size and intensity.

Brezhnev's rule was characterized by less explicit attention to the national question. However, the regime itself grew increasingly reliant on a number of union republics as the source of its power. Azerbaijan under Heydar Aliyev, Uzbekistan under Sharaf Rashidov, Kazakhstan under Dinmuhhammad Kunaev, as well as Georgia under Shevardnadze and

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<sup>62</sup> Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, p. 287.

<sup>63</sup> Alexandre Bennigsen, 'Soviet Minority Nationalism in Historical Perspective', in Conquest, ed., *The Last Empire*, p. 143.

<sup>64</sup> Simon, *Nationalism and Policy*, pp. 333-339.

Ukraine after 1972, were republics that formed a loyal power base for Brezhnev.<sup>65</sup> In fact, the Soviet Union in the 1970s increasingly came to approximate a network of patron-client relationships, in which Brezhnev granted republican leaders practical independence to run their internal affairs, while these leaders in return provided political stability and support for Brezhnev in Moscow. The republics that formed part of this scheme enjoyed exceptional political stability at the higher echelons during this time. The Aliyev and Shevardnadze regimes in Azerbaijan and Georgia are most well-known, given that these two leaders in the 1990s returned to power in independent Azerbaijan and Georgia. But also in Kyrgyzia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the local communist party heads held their positions for two decades, mostly in stark contrast to the purges and reshuffles that took place in the Stalin and Khrushchev eras.<sup>66</sup> This meant the strengthening of ethnic elites in the peripheries, but also the inclusion of non-Russians and non-Slavs in the power structures at the center. Hence Aliyev and Kunaev both became full members of the Politburo, whereas Sharifov became a candidate member. By contrast, Khrushchev had promoted a large number of Ukrainians, breaking with Stalin's practices, though non-Slavic minorities were increasingly badly represented at the center – including the formerly influential Georgians and Armenians.

A result of the patron-client system used by Brezhnev, the entrenched local elites developed strong networks of their own in their respective republics, with ensuing shadow economies, particularly in Georgia, and corruption. In the case of Azerbaijan, Brezhnev's brother-in-law Semyen Tsvigun, deputy head of the USSR KGB, had worked with Heydar Aliyev in earlier times and nominated Aliyev first to the post of head of the Azerbaijani KGB in 1966, and then strongly supported his accession to the helm of the republic in 1969. Aliyev soon undertook a major reshuffle of the republican administration that consolidated his power base; he then moved on to gradually become one of the most influential leaders of the entire union, being known as one of Brezhnev's protégés and as a close associate of his successor Andropov.<sup>67</sup>

The close patronage networks were no secret to Moscow, and indeed condoned by the Brezhnev regime as a part of an implicit agreement, yet would come back to haunt reformers like Andropov and Gorbachev. The increased leeway accorded to the national republics also meant that the nationalities policy in general was less ideologically motivated than previously. But as Suny has noted, 'those policies and processes that strengthened the nationalities in their own republic deeply conflicted with contradictory policies and processes that pulled non-Russians toward acculturation, even assimilation,

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<sup>65</sup> Mikhail Agursky, 'The Prospects of National Bolshevism', in Conquest, ed., *The Last Empire*, p. 99.

<sup>66</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, 'Central Asia: the Reformers Challenge a Traditional Society', in Lubomyr Hajda and Mark Beissinger, eds., *The Nationalities Factor in Soviet Politics and Society*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990, p. 257

<sup>67</sup> John P. Willerton, *Patronage and Politics in the USSR*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 191-222.

into a general, russified, Soviet culture'.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, while elite politics favored the ethnic republics, Russification in the educational system continued. This policy did show some success, especially in Belorussia and the Ukraine, where the number of people stating Russian as their native language increased. Fluency in Russian also increased rapidly in the 1970s, especially in Uzbekistan. In urban areas in the ethnic republics, this process reached noticeable proportions. Cities like Baku, Riga, Tashkent, Bishkek and Almaty were increasingly becoming culturally Russian cities, where the titular population was culturally becoming russified rather rapidly, especially the young generation. The results of this process can be observed still today, although a new *Korenizatsiia* is developing since independence. In the autonomous republics and regions of the RSFSR, especially in the Volga-Ural region, Russification was even more pronounced. Russian nationalism was also allowed to prosper in the Brezhnev era. Just as he tolerated the building of fiefdoms in the national republics, Brezhnev also tolerated the expression of Russian nationalism, and himself referred to the Russian people as a 'first among equals'.<sup>69</sup>

### **3.6. The Last Years: from Andropov to Gorbachev**

Andropov, coming to power in 1982, was a believer in both socialism and in the transient character of nationalism, to use Lenin's terminology. In his first speech, he reiterated the ambition to achieve the fusion of nations, *slianii*,<sup>70</sup> a term that Brezhnev had avoided but that Khrushchev had employed. A dedicated reformer but also a dedicated communist, Andropov initiated attempts to crack down on corruption, especially in Central Asia, but did not stay in office long enough to implement his vision of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev, who succeeded Andropov in 1985 after the short interlude of Chernenko, found a Soviet Union in deep trouble. The lack of strong power since the late Brezhnev era had allowed for the strengthening of local fiefdoms. Gorbachev set out to uproot them, to reintegrate the peripheries under central control. Between 1985 and 1988, most leaders in the South Caucasus and Central Asia were replaced. These measures often worsened public perceptions of Moscow and occasionally sparked ethnic unrest. When Kunaev was removed in Kazakhstan in 1986 and replaced with an ethnic Russian, large demonstrations ensued, forcing Gorbachev to tread more carefully in his discipline campaigns in the southern peripheries. But Gorbachev's policies of *Glasnost*' and *Perestroika* also had another consequence: they undermined the role of ideology. In 1989, Alexander Motyl compared ideology to 'a dog that barked incessantly in the Brezhnev era,

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<sup>68</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 125.

<sup>69</sup> Dina Rome Spechler, 'Russian Nationalism and Soviet Politics', in Hajda and Beissinger, eds., *The Nationalities Factor*, p. 295.

<sup>70</sup> Gertrude E. Schroeder, 'Social and Economic Aspects of the Nationality Problem', in Conquest, ed, *The Last Empire*, p. 292.

[and] has literally stopped barking since then'.<sup>71</sup> Unlike Brezhnev, who kept the ideological rhetoric at high steam, Gorbachev neglected it. Neglecting ideology meant neglecting the purported glue that held the disparate Soviet Union together; where political openness opened the playing field for the free expression of thoughts, the decrease of ideology created a vacuum that was gradually filled by nationalism. Moreover, openness also meant a reduction of the use of repression.<sup>72</sup> As media grew more free and people understood that they could associate and advance political claims without adverse consequences, the central authorities would grow even more dependent on indirect control over the non-Russian peoples through the client governments in the national republics. But Gorbachev, far from trying to use these structures, was trying to dismantle them and exercise more direct control over the periphery. As a result, the central authorities' instruments for control over non-Russian areas became fewer. Instruments of indirect control were disappearing, leaving Moscow with the option of direct intervention. The use of this instrument in two of the most unruly areas, the Caucasus and the Baltics, shows the desperation of the authorities, but also contributed greatly to speed up the demise of the entire union. The bloody military interventions in Tbilisi in April 1989, in Baku in January 1990, and Vilnius in January 1991, had a profound psychological impact on the affected peoples, and eliminated any legitimacy the Soviet state had left in the eyes of these minorities. Gorbachev's attempts to salvage the union through a new union treaty in 1991 were largely futile; for all practical purposes, the Baltic states and Georgia and Armenia had seceded at this point, leaving at best a truncated union. The coup against Gorbachev in August 1991 further accelerated and confirmed the unraveling of the union.

### 3.7. Conclusions

Soviet Nationality policy presents a bewildering sequence of nation-building through affirmative action, deportation and genocide, patronage networks, Russification attempts, and pragmatic realpolitik. How does this inform an understanding of the predicament of minorities in the very end of the Soviet era? One primary element is that the frequent pendulum swings created a strong level of distrust for the higher authorities among minorities. Whether union republics for the federal center or autonomous republics and regions for the republican or central authorities, the federal structures and their functioning were subject to change, and with the partial exception of the Brezhnev era, purges from the top were the rule rather than the exception. This naturally created a distrust for federalism as a concept. However, it would be wrong to conclude that the Soviet autonomies were not autonomous. During extended periods of time in the 1920s, partly in the immediate post-Stalin period and certainly in the Brezhnev era, they enjoyed substantial autonomy stretching into the political sphere, beyond the administrative

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<sup>71</sup> Alexander J. Motyl, 'The End of Ideology?', in *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1989, p. 17.

<sup>72</sup> Paul Goble, 'The Rise of Ethnic Politics', in *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1989, p. 59.

autonomy that they always held. And during the entire Soviet period, the autonomous structures of Soviet ethnofederalism actively promoted the distinct separate identity of the minority ethnic groups in the Union. The level to which local elites could promote separateness varied, but basic schooling in the native language existed in practically all republics, autonomous republics, and autonomous oblasts during the entire Soviet era, hence clearly fulfilling Lapidoth's criteria for defining a territorial autonomy as an 'arrangement aimed at granting to a group that differs from the majority of the population in the state, but that constitutes the majority in a specific region, a means by which it can express its distinct identity'.<sup>73</sup> The Soviet form of autonomy was unique in its historical shape and context; however, its long-term consequences were not as dissimilar from that of the intention of autonomous regions throughout the world that some authors have argued. They effectively cemented the national identity of numerous ethnic groups, in fact building many of these nations, provided ethnic institutions for education, culture, and national development, as well as political institutions, indigenous political elites, and defined borders. The very fact that so many of the Soviet autonomous regions asserted their separate status in some way in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR testifies to the fact that Soviet autonomy was not an easily dismissible entity. While keeping in mind the differences with autonomy regimes in other parts of the world, the relevance of Soviet autonomy for the study of autonomy worldwide must be stressed.

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<sup>73</sup> Lapidoth, *Autonomy – Flexible Solutions to Ethnic Conflicts*, Washington, D.C.: USIP Press, p. 33.

# 4

## Research Design

The purpose of this study – to investigate whether territorial autonomy was a contributing factor to the violent ethnic conflicts that erupted in the South Caucasus since the late 1980s – presents a number of methodological challenges. In general, systematic research on the origins of ethnopolitical conflict is relatively scarce—for good reasons. With the abundance of possible explanatory factors discussed in chapter two, researchers have found the task of identifying a clear and consistent pattern of the origins this phenomenon grueling. Moreover, determining the explanatory value of one factor—such as that of autonomy—for the emergence of conflict is a distinct challenge, raising the issues of multiple and conjunctural causation: how to gauge the relative importance of one causal factor and to isolate it from others? As stated earlier, autonomy is neither expected to be a sufficient nor a necessary condition for the emergence of ethnopolitical conflict. Such conflicts do emerge where there is no territorial autonomy for minority groups; moreover, autonomies do not invariably end up in conflict with their central governments. The argument is that autonomy may increase rather than decrease the likelihood of conflict, in contrast with the findings of much of the literature. Hence it becomes crucial to understand in connection to which other factors and through which mechanisms autonomy, if it does, contributes to the likelihood of conflict. Before that, however, two crucial questions at the outset deserve to be addressed.

Firstly, if one argues, as many scholars do, that the Soviet Union never introduced true federalism or true autonomy, is the analysis of the role of autonomy in the former Soviet context then misplaced? A credible argument could even be made that for most practical purposes, the Soviet Union differed little from a unitary state, and many researchers indeed do argue that the USSR was in reality not a federation. However, this would miss the point. As seen in chapter one, one of the mechanisms through which autonomy is likely to operate with relation to conflict is in the realms of institutional structure and symbols. Moreover, in certain realms such as education and, equally importantly, the creation of national cadres and elites, federal structure was functional throughout the Soviet era even though real political autonomy was absent. As Leff has argued with reference to the union republic level in the former Yugoslavia and USSR, ethnofederal institutional arrangements during the time of transition took on in practice the role they were earlier accorded on paper: ‘It is in that context that the bargaining environment for ethnonational disputes clearly differs from that of unitary multinational states: in the

course of political opening, federal structures provide republic-level political bases for challenges to the existing political order and offer distinctive opportunities to key actors in the transition.<sup>1</sup> Although written in the context of union republics under a non-territorial federal center, this statement is equally valid for the case of autonomous regions.

A second common objection to the argument presented in this study is that the minorities that were initially granted autonomy in the first place were those minorities with greater grievances and in a higher degree of conflict with their central government. After all, autonomy is normally granted in response to ethnic demands; groups that have expressed such demands are arguably more likely to experience renewed secessionism than minorities that have not voiced such claims in the past. However, the more than thirty autonomous regions that were created in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s were not established as a result of ethnic demands. The very structure of the Soviet state was built on ethnic federalism; minority groups were mapped, evaluated, and assigned a certain status, often according to the whims of the highest decision makers, notably Stalin himself. The full explanation as to why certain minorities received autonomy and others did not may never be available; it is relatively safe to argue, however, that the decisions had little to do with actual ethnic demands.

#### **4.1. Definitions**

The research question in the present study is to explain violent ethnopolitical conflict between an ethnically defined, compactly settled minority population and its central government, and in particular to identify the role of autonomy as an explanatory factor. The criteria for classifying a case as a case of conflict, is the emergence of sustained organized acts of violence by military or paramilitary formations representing on the one hand the minority population and on the other the central government and by extension the majority population. As such, terrorist deeds performed by fringe groups against either military or civilian targets, even if performed in the name of either the minority or the majority population, will not be deemed sufficient. Likewise, unorganized ethnic riots will not satisfy the criteria unless they develop into organized violence. Finally, political confrontation between ethnically based groups not leading to serious acts of violence will not be included. The explanatory factors under study are guided by the working propositions established in chapters one and two. Of specific concern is to assess the role of one specific factor—that of territorial autonomy provided for a minority group—in the emergence of ethnopolitical conflict. As is apparent from the research question and the earlier discussion, the present study has a primarily theory-generating purpose. Given the

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Skalnik Leff, “Democratization and Disintegration in Multinational States: The Breakup of the Communist Federations,” *World Politics*, vol. 51, January 1999, p. 210.

absence of any theoretical framework connecting autonomy and conflict, there is no theory to test; the ambition is to investigate the possible link between autonomy and conflict, which is suggested in chapter one. In this context it is important to note that chapters one and two do not form a rigid theoretical ‘model’ that is to be ‘tested’ in the subsequent chapters. Research on the relationship between autonomy and conflict being practically non-existent, the underlying theory of the study is by necessity underdeveloped. As there is no theory to test, the present study aims to contribute to the building of such theoretical precepts. Whereas this requires a primarily inductive approach, this does not make the study atheoretical, or a purely historical account. The aim is not to write a history of the emergence of conflict in the South Caucasus; nor does it attempt to inductively collect all possible relevant factors affecting the likelihood of conflict. The study is guided by the working propositions, and is as such theoretically grounded and focused on the study of certain specific phenomena.

## 4.2. Causal Effect and Causal Mechanism

This discussion relates intimately with the methodological debate regarding causality. Philosopher David Hume identified three ‘sources of causality’. One of them was ‘constant conjunction’ — a high degree of covariance between events. This corresponds in modern social science to statistically proven covariation. Hume’s two other items of causality were ‘temporal succession’ and ‘contiguity’. Constant conjunction or covariation can be seen as related to the causal *effect* tying an independent variable to a dependent variable, whereas temporal succession and contiguity can be said to refer to the causal *mechanisms* involved. The difference is far more than semantic. Bennett defines the causal effect of an explanatory variable as the ‘change in probability of and/or value of the dependent variable that would have occurred if the explanatory variable had assumed a different value’. By contrast, he defines causal mechanisms as ‘causal processes and intervening variables through which causal or explanatory variables produce causal effects’.<sup>2</sup> An illustration is the relationship between smoking and cancer. Scientists have long known that smokers are statistically more likely to fall victim to cancer than non-smokers. That is, they have established the causal *effect* that smoking causes cancer. However, it is only recently that the *mechanism* by which this takes place in the human body has been revealed. Likewise, a major thrust of political science theory in recent decades has been the ‘democratic peace’ paradigm. Statistically, researchers have been able to prove that democracies hardly ever fight each other. This amounts to the discovery of a causal effect. However, the debate on exactly *why*, or what within the democratic system

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Bennett, ‘Lost in the Translation: Big (N) Misinterpretations of Case Study Research’, paper presented at the 38th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, Toronto, March 18-22, 1997.

makes one democracy reluctant to fight another, is still raging. In other words, the causal mechanism is not known. Especially in social science, however, the value of knowing the causal effect, without comprehending the causal mechanism, is limited. Indeed, if one seeks knowledge in the democratic peace literature that can help in preventing future conflict, very little in terms of policy tools is available. In the context of this study, a hypothetical conclusion based on statistical evidence that autonomy is in fact correlated statistically with conflict to an extent providing a proven causal effect would not necessarily be practically helpful unless one also knows *what* it is that makes autonomy a cause of conflict. As Andrew Sayer has noted, ‘what we would like . . . is a knowledge of how the process works. Merely knowing that ‘C’ has generally been followed by ‘E’ is not enough; we want to understand the continuous process by which ‘C’ produced ‘E’’.<sup>3</sup>

In both of the cases mentioned above, knowledge of causal effects predated knowledge of causal mechanisms. This was the case because researchers had at their disposal a pool of data large enough to statistically establish causal effects without knowing the causal mechanisms. All spheres of research, however, do not possess such luxury. For example, Homer Dixon et. al. have been trying to show the relationship between environmental scarcity and conflict.<sup>4</sup> In so doing, they based their research on numerous single case studies in order to develop an understanding of the causal mechanisms linking environmental scarcity to conflict. This methodology drew heavy criticism from statistically minded researchers for being methodologically unsound and failing to qualify as ‘systematic research’.<sup>5</sup> Responding to this criticism, Homer-Dixon et. al. argue convincingly for the need to focus on causal mechanisms when a research program is in its early stages and the underlying theory largely underdeveloped.<sup>6</sup> As they argue, estimates of causal effects without understanding of causal mechanisms carries certain pitfalls: ‘First, researchers will not know which potentially confounding variables they should control in their statistical tests; and second, researchers may overlook key processes and causal relationships that are hidden in the data’.<sup>7</sup> The qualitative methodology of process tracing, explained in greater detail below, is on the other hand useful in identifying variables or factors particularly important to control; to identify relationships between explanatory factors by treating them qualitatively and not merely as numbers; and to

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Sayer, *Method in Social Science*, London: Routledge, 1992, pp. 106-107. See also discussion in Bennett, ‘Lost in the Translation’.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Homer-Dixon and Marc Levy, ‘Environment and Security’, *International Security*, vol. 20 no. 3; Thomas Homer-Dixon, *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Nils Petter Gleditsch, ‘Armed Conflict and the Environment: A Critique of the Literature’, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 35 no. 3, May 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Homer-Dixon, Tom Deligiannis, and Daniel M. Schwartz, ‘The Environment and Violent Conflict’, in Paul Diehl and Nils Petter Gleditsch, *Environmental Conflict*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

discover causal patterns that may not be found through quantitative analysis. It goes without saying that the establishment of causal mechanisms does not preclude the investigation of causal effect, where the data and the existing theoretical framework make that possible. As Bennett has noted, the establishment of causal inferences should operate, as far as possible, by establishing both causal mechanism and causal effect. The methods do not exclude one another, but are complimentary.

The state of research on the topic of this study dictates a qualitative methodology. A main challenge to the present research problem is the large number of possible causal factors, or in statistical terms independent variables. Chapter two identified close to two dozen such factors. The limitation of the study to a distinct geographical area, the South Caucasus, was instrumental in reducing the number of factors to less than a dozen. Yet the number of possible causes of the phenomenon of ethno-political conflict remains high, in fact higher than the number of cases under study.

### 4.3. The “Degrees of Freedom” Problem

Qualitative case study methods have been criticized of inherently suffering from a degrees of freedom problem. The number of ‘degrees of freedom’ is obtained by subtracting the number of independent equations linking the unknown quantities from the number of unknown quantities. As a unique solution is desired for each simultaneous equation, the number of unknowns, or cases, needs to be larger than the number of equations, or the risk of spuriousness is inevitable.<sup>8</sup> However, by focusing on the arithmetic counting of observations, this criticism fails to account for the qualitative nature of case study methods. As Bennett notes,

Statistical researchers tend to aggregate variables together into single indices to get fewer independent variables and more degrees of freedom, but case study researchers do the reverse: they treat variables qualitatively, in all of their relevant dimensions, and they try to distinguish qualitatively different types of each independent and dependent variable. ... In addition, within a single case there are many possible process tracing observations along the hypothesized causal paths between independent and dependent variables. A causal path may include many necessary steps, and they may have to occur in a particular order. At each step, the researcher may measure the magnitudes and signs of intervening variables to see if they are as the hypothesis predicts. These many predicted observations may provide sufficient ‘degrees of freedom’, or many more observations than variables, even when the researcher is studying a single case and using several independent variables.<sup>9</sup>

Especially in the study of complex social situations such as violent conflict, the researcher inevitably faces the problem of the complexity of reality. Some researchers attempt to

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<sup>8</sup> See Andrew Bennett, ‘Lost in the Translation: Big (N) Misinterpretations of Case Study Research’, Paper presented at the MacArthur Workshop for Case Study Methods, Harvard University, Oct. 17-19, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3

simplify reality by claiming that ‘any social system is as complex as the theory developed to study it’<sup>10</sup>, thereby denying any intrinsic complexity to social phenomena, outside the control of the researcher. As it is likely that events take place whether or not a researcher has designed a model to study it, and indeed that the researcher’s theory may be flawed and unable to grasp the full context of the social phenomenon under study, one is forced to acknowledge that social phenomena have a number of possible causes that interrelate with one another in ways that are extremely difficult to explain or understand in their totality. Estimating the explanatory value of one factor among others is hence, by necessity, a methodologically intricate matter.

#### **4.4. Mill’s Method of Difference and Multiple Causality**

Case study methods normally find their origin in the methods of agreement and difference established by John Stuart Mill over a century and a half ago. These methods both suffer from intrinsic liabilities, which Mill was himself very aware of. The method of agreement is the most problematic; it assumes that if several cases show a similar outcome on the dependent variable, and if these cases have similar scores on an independent variable, then this is the cause of the outcome. In most social contexts, however, monocausal explanations are unsatisfactory. A specific outcome is seldom generated by one single factor irrespective of others. The method of agreement is incapable of accounting for multiple or conjunctural causality. The method of difference is more developed, being ‘a double application of the method of agreement’.<sup>11</sup> The method of difference focuses on different outcomes in the dependent variable among cases, and seeks to find a corresponding variance in an independent variable. The logic is that if two cases have different outcomes on the dependent variable, but identical values on a given independent variable, then that variable cannot be sufficient to cause the outcome. However, as Mill himself noted, this method requires demanding and unrealistic assumptions in order to provide non-spurious inferences.<sup>12</sup> Also, as Bennett has noted, in the method of difference, ‘the causal relations being investigated must be deterministic regularities involving conditions that are either necessary or sufficient for a specified outcome.’<sup>13</sup> Such conditions are not always present; in the case of ethnopolitical conflicts, the multiple

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<sup>10</sup> Gleditsch, ‘Armed Conflict and the Environment’, p. 392.

<sup>11</sup> See Charles Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*, Berkeley: University of California, 1987, p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> See Andrew Bennett, ‘Causal Inference in Case Studies: From Mill’s Methods to Causal Mechanisms’ Paper Presented at the American Political Science Association Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, 1999, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Bennett and Alexander L. George, ‘Process Tracing in Case Study Research’, Paper presented at the MacArthur Workshop for Case Study Methods, Harvard University, Oct. 17-19, 1997, p. 11.

causal factors seem individually not to be either sufficient or necessary to produce the outcome of conflict.

This raises the issue of multiple and conjunctural causality. Conflicts seldom or never emerge as a result of one single, easily identifiable causal factor. Rather, there is an intricate array of causes lying behind the occurrence of conflict. As has been shown in chapter two, theory assists in the quest to achieve some kind of understanding of the interrelationship between various factors thought to be at the origin of communal conflict. In particular, the differentiation between background and catalyzing factors, and between factors relating either to capacity or incentives, are important in increasing the understanding of the various factors necessary for a conflict to occur. Yet the problem remains how to assess the causal impact of one factor in relation to others. Neither of Mill's methods provides a solution. Individual case studies involving process tracing (see below) are a possible solution, enabling the detailed study of the causal mechanisms at work in each case. Contrasting case studies, comparing cases with similar characteristics save for differences in one factor under study, are another. But drawing on Mill's method of agreement, it is also possible to outline a factor-driven or 'variable-oriented' study. Mill's method of difference identifies an independent variable thought to have causal effect on the dependent variable – that is, an explanatory factor thought to have produced a certain outcome. The next step is to identify cases of presence of the outcome (in this case conflict), and match this with concomitant presence of the explanatory factor thought to have caused this effect. Finally, an attempt is made to match an absence of the outcome (i.e. non-conflict) with absence of the explanatory factor in question. In this way, a two-by-two matrix is created where all cases in the ideal case would fit in two cells in order to support the proposition—the absence/absence and the presence/presence cells. This would also correspond to a zero-order correlation in statistical terms.<sup>14</sup> In Mill's method of difference, any deviant case—i.e. falling in one of the two presence/absence cells that do not support the proposition—would be a significant limitation to the study, necessitating explanation for the assumption to hold. However, the problem is that this technique presupposes that explanatory factors are both sufficient and necessary to arrive at the outcome. There are scarcely such factors in the study of communal conflict. In other words, it is more than likely, especially given the multitude of factors studied, that several if not all factors would in certain cases fall in a cell that does not support the assumption; and moreover, that several different explanatory factors will be present in all cases of conflict.

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<sup>14</sup> See Ragin, *The Comparative Method*, p. 39.

	Absence of explanatory factor	Presence of explanatory factor
Absence of conflict	<b>Support</b>	<b>Non-Support</b>
Presence of conflict	<b>Non-Support</b>	<b>Support</b>

The presence of a certain explanatory factor in cases of non-conflict should not be taken as evidence that this factor is of no consequence whatsoever in terms of the likelihood of conflict. It may still be a factor increasing the likelihood of conflict; in fact it may theoretically even be a necessary factor for conflict, only not a sufficient one. The absence of a certain explanatory factor in cases of conflict is also possible, but should inspire larger doubt as to its explanatory value. Admittedly, there are different types of conflicts, and the discussion on economic factors in chapter two highlighted that conflicts can occur both in economically viable and non-viable areas. Or, to take another example, conflicts undoubtedly do take place without the presence of external support, as in Chechnya in 1994; this does not mean we should dismiss that factor from the discussion. As a whole, however, in a given universe of cases, one would expect to be able to discriminate between explanatory factors based on their ‘correlation’ with the outcome or lack of outcome, i.e. conflict. The word correlation is deliberately placed between inverted commas, given that a small number of cases would question the statistical significance of the evidence in the study, and hence the basis on which to dismiss or confirm the explanatory power of a given explanatory factor. Still, studying each independent variable’s scores on each case and its relationship with the outcome gives a good indication as to the explanatory value of the given explanatory factor. A series of two-by-two matrixes, one for each explanatory factor, can hence be constructed; the empirical cases are then placed in any of the four cells of the matrix, giving a very visual illustration of the explanatory factor’s relationship with reality.

Such an operation, undertaken in the next chapter, is expected to give valuable hints as to the most important factors leading to ethnopolitical conflict. For the purposes of the present study, the exercise provides an opportunity to judge the explanatory value of autonomy as compared to other factors. This exercise is nevertheless not likely to provide satisfactory results. First of all, while it could be fashioned as a semi-statistical study (in fact corresponding to the Fisher’s Exact Probability Test) and have limited statistical significance, even if it does show a higher ‘correlation’ of some factors as compared to others, it would not explain what causal mechanisms have been active. Just like other statistical methods, it would fail to grasp the human mechanisms by which causal factors

and the outcome are tied to each other, as well as the relationship between various causal factors.

#### 4.5. Process Tracing

In order to deepen the understanding of the empirical processes leading to ethnopolitical conflict, the method chosen is to trace these processes empirically. This tracing process combines induction and deduction. While open to the empirical data at hand, and in principle consisting of an attempt to structure and explain the empirical data, process tracing is not entirely inductive. It is guided by the explanatory factors outlined in chapters one and two, and cognizant of the preliminary findings of chapter five. Yet it also seeks, at every instance of the empirical process, to find both evidence that corroborates the theoretical propositions and evidence that might contradict it. In particular, it seeks to explore, to the extent possible, the interactions between various variables; it explores the particular temporal succession of events in search for links between various factors.

Process tracing in this study also has a comparative ambition. It aims at contrasting the cases with divergent outcomes; practically speaking, to explain, to a satisfactory extent, the emergence of conflict in some of the cases but not in others. This necessitates an assessment of the various theoretically derived factors, their specific importance in a given case, and their relationship with other factors. For this purpose, the case studies will need to avoid being comprehensive and holistic studies of a given minority's political development or relationship with its central government. For all the merits of this type of single, intensive case studies in providing the reader with an increased understanding of and familiarity with the given case, this type of studies are not conducive to orderly, cumulative development of knowledge and theory about the phenomenon in question.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the study needs to be structured, i.e. addressing the very same issues in the very same manner in all cases; and focused, that is restricted to the theoretical focus of the study, omitting other perhaps interesting or valuable information not directly related to the aim of the study. A short introduction of each of the nine cases, determining the level of conflict, will precede the factor-based study in chapter five, whereas a detailed overview of Georgia in chapter six will precede the deeper case studies in chapter seven.

#### 4.6. Case Selection

An important issue is the number of cases to include in process tracing. This study spans over nine cases, which is a number high enough to raise doubt on whether a structured and focused comparison can be carried out among these cases. All in all, with ten

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<sup>15</sup> As noted by Andrew Bennett and Alexander George, 'Research Design Tasks in Case Study Methods', Paper presented at the MacArthur Foundation Workshop on Case Study Methods, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (BCSIA), Harvard University, October 17-19, 1997, p. 2.

different independent variables, there are close to a hundred observations, which cannot realistically be assimilated into the study. It is necessary to reduce the number of cases selected for in-depth study, and ideally cases as similar as possible, with as much variation as possible on the outcome, should be selected. In the context of the present study, one of the three countries under study, Georgia, includes five cases. Of these, two have been cases of violent conflict (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) whereas three were cases of non-conflict. Three of the cases (the aforementioned two and Ajaria) were autonomous regions or republics, whereas the Armenian and Azeri minorities lacked autonomy. In particular, the case of Ajaria, being the only autonomous region not involved in conflict, is significant. These characteristics, with the increased comparability that the inclusion of all cases in one national political sphere provides, speaks for the selection of the cases in Georgia as detailed case studies.

#### **4.7. Sources**

In the study of ethnic relations in the Caucasus, the selection of empirical sources is a distinct problem. For the Soviet era, few comprehensive English-language studies exist; moreover, Russian-language sources are often doubtful due to the ideological control exercised by Soviet authorities. Be they newspaper reports or academic writings, these works must therefore be treated with caution. Even in the non-Russian language literature on the region, instances of bias in both journalistic and academic writings is plentiful, calling for discretion and repeated control of data. Moreover, direct and intentional disinformation is also present either directly or indirectly in the literature, sowing confusion on certain events, sequences of events, and the like. In the 1990s, an increasingly rich literature has nevertheless developed on the Caucasus region, and then mainly on the overt conflicts taking place there, as well as on the regional politics and the politics of oil and pipelines emanating from the Caspian basin. This literature has been more plentiful on some of the cases in this study than others; for example, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Mountainous Karabakh has been the subject of most attention, with the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in second place. Comparatively little has been written on South Ossetia, whereas the minorities having been spared conflict have received very little attention. Given the tense situation and the strategic importance of the region, the Armenians of Javakheti and Ajaria have seen some writings focusing on their situation; likewise, some literature exists on the Lezgins in Azerbaijan. On the other hand, the Talysh of Azerbaijan and the Azeris of Georgia have virtually been left out of the scholarly debate, both in the west and in the region itself. This circumstance complicates the study. For the general background to the region and the overt conflicts, this study relies on earlier empirical research carried out by the author on ethnic relations in the

Caucasus.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the study uses secondary sources published on the region or presented at conferences by various scholars, and both regional and international primary sources, especially news reports. Interviews with political and academic figures from the region itself have been used wherever this has proven useful or necessary. However, the study does not have a specific interview methodology, and does not base its findings on these interviews.

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<sup>16</sup> Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000.



# 5

## Factors in Ethnopolitical Conflict in the South Caucasus

As was outlined in chapter four, this chapter seeks to examine whether the propositions found in chapters one and two have an explanatory value for the emergence of ethnic conflict in the South Caucasus. For this purpose, each proposition and its outcome in the nine cases is examined and contrasted with the existence of armed secessionist conflict in the nine cases. Before this factor-based study is undertaken, a short overview of the nine cases under study is called for.

### 5.1. Ethnic Groups in the South Caucasus

The Caucasus is known for the diversity of ethnic groups inhabiting the region. This is most pronounced in the northern part of the Caucasus, belonging to the Russian Federation. South of the mountains, three large peoples dominate the demography: the Azerbaijanis, the Georgians and the Armenians. The Azeri Turks are the largest ethnic group in the Caucasus, with close to seven million members—in the Caucasus. Over twenty million reside in Iran, chiefly in its northwestern provinces, separated from their brethren in the Caucasus politically since 1828. Azeris speak a Turkic language closely related to the one spoken in the Turkish republic, and are Muslims, overwhelmingly of the Shi'a denomination. The neighboring Georgians number over four million, speak a South Caucasian language, and are Orthodox Christians. The Armenians number around three million in the Caucasus, but as is the case with Azeris, more Armenians live outside Armenia than in the Caucasus. The Armenians are dispersed in a large Diaspora consisting of close to five million people, mainly in Russia and the United States. They speak an Indo-European language and are Monophysite Christians. These three groups have dominated the South Caucasus politically as well as demographically for the last century. Whereas Georgians and Armenians are old nations with a strong national identity, the Azeris are a by comparison more recent nation, the term Azerbaijani coming to use only in the twentieth century, before which the Azeris were referred to as Turks, Tatars, or Muslims. Nevertheless, these three groups were clearly in presence at the independence of the South Caucasus following the Russian revolution of 1917. In 1918, leaders of the three communities formed an abortive Transcaucasian Federation, before establishing three separate 'Democratic' republics with the same names as the three states hold today, but with slightly different borders.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Firuz Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951.

The present borders between the three states were established by Soviet authorities in the 1920s, in a less than transparent process that left several contentious issues. Minority issues were paramount among these. Two types of minorities existed: the first type were members of these three peoples left within the borders of either of the other two states. Most problematic was the delimitation of borders between areas inhabited by Azeris and Armenians. As both groups inhabited vast areas of the southwestern Caucasus in an overlapping fashion, the creation of clear borders was close to impossible. Three areas in particular were claimed by both: Nakhchivan, Zangezur, and Mountainous Karabakh. In the final delimitation, Zangezur was granted to Armenia, whereas both Nakhchivan and Mountainous Karabakh became parts of Azerbaijan. This effectively separated Azerbaijan into two non-contiguous parts, the mainland and Nakhchivan, encircled by Iran and Armenia but with a 7-km border with Turkey. Nakhchivan was given the status of an Autonomous republic; however, given that it is populated by Azerbaijanis to over 90%, its population was not a minority within Azerbaijan, and is therefore not included in this study. Karabakh, with its Armenian majority population, became an autonomous region within Azerbaijan. Zangezur, home to numerous Azeris as well as Armenians, received no autonomy at all. Hence two of the minorities included in this study were created: the Armenians of Mountainous Karabakh and the Azeris of Armenia. In addition, both Azeris and Armenians were found in compact settlements on Georgia's territory, especially along the southern borders of Georgia with Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan. A second type of minorities was groups that did not hold a titular soviet republic. These included the Abkhaz, Ossetians, and Ajars in Georgia, and the Talysh and Lezgins in Azerbaijan. The Abkhaz and Ajars were accorded autonomous republic status, whereas Ossetians, deemed to have a homeland in North Ossetia, received the lower status of an autonomous region. Talysh and Lezgins received no autonomy at all. This crystallizes the nine minorities of the South Caucasus that form the empirical universe of this study. The development of these nine cases is detailed below.

### **5.1.1. Mountainous Karabakh Armenians in Azerbaijan**

The issue of Mountainous Karabakh was the first ethnic problem to emerge in the South Caucasus in late 1987, with increasing popular Armenian demands for the transfer of the Nagorno (Mountainous) Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) from Azerbaijani to Armenian jurisdiction. Armenians formed over 75% of the NKAO's population of 180,000 in 1979, the last census before the disturbances began. The area is encircled by Azerbaijan but only 12 km from the Armenian border at the closest point. Ethnic clashes between Armenians and Azeris in the region date back to the so-called Armenian-Tatar war of 1905-6 (as Azeris were generally referred to as Tatars in Czarist Russia), and erupted again in the short era of independence in 1918-20. Mountainous Karabakh has correctly been identified as a conflict where ethnicity and history is pitted against geography and economy. The History of the region, and its population, is hotly debated,

but the majority Armenians firmly believe they have always been a majority in the region – a claim disputed by Azerbaijani scholars.<sup>2</sup>

Ethnic mobilization was at full speed in early 1988, with large demonstrations by Armenians in Armenia and Mountainous Karabakh throughout February. The Supreme Soviet of the NKAO petitioned to central authorities for the transfer of the territory to Armenia in February, and after the rejection of its petition, voted for independence in the summer of the same year. Ethnic violence and ethnic cleansing developed rapidly in both republics, leading to the flight of Azeris from Mountainous Karabakh and Armenia, and of Armenians from areas of Azerbaijan other than Mountainous Karabakh. The Armenian Supreme Soviet unilaterally annexed the NKAO to Armenia in December 1989, and in response the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet abolished the NKAO's autonomy in early 1990. Armed conflict between paramilitary groups emerged and escalated between 1989 and 1991, leading to the gradual Azerbaijani loss of control over the NKAO. Full-scale war ensued in 1992 after the collapse of the USSR, with well-documented instances of direct Armenian involvement. This gives the conflict over the NKAO a clear inter-state dimension in addition to its intra-state dimension. The conflict remains unresolved though a cease-fire ended active hostilities in May 1994. Mountainous Karabakh Armenian forces control Mountainous Karabakh and large tracts of territory outside the former NKAO's territory connecting it with Armenia and Iran. This is obviously a case of conflict.<sup>3</sup>

### 5.1.2. Lezgins in Azerbaijan

The Lezgins are a Sunni Muslim people speaking a north Caucasian language, who live in roughly similar numbers on both sides of the border between Azerbaijan and Dagestan. In Azerbaijan, they officially number 200,000, and are compactly settled in northern Azerbaijan. However, the number of Lezgins is probably higher due to intermarriage and widespread registration of Lezgins as Azeri, but the number is unlikely to be as high as Lezgin sources claim (over 600,000). The transformation of the Samur river from having been a relatively meaningless administrative border to a frontier between independent states (Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation) awakened Lezgin ethnic mobilization and political activity in 1992. An organization named *Sadval* (unity) was formed whose political

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<sup>2</sup> Historiographical controversies are summed up in Donald D. Schwartz and Razmik Panossian, eds., *Nationalism and History: The Politics of State-Building in Post-Soviet Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994. Also George Bournoutian, *A History of the Armenian People*, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1993, 2 volumes; Khachig Tololyan, 'National Self-Determination and the limits of Sovereignty: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Secession on Mountainous Karabakh', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 1 no. 1, Spring 1995, pp. 86-110.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed study of the conflict, see Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers, A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000, pp. 61-141; Cornell, *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, Uppsala: Department of East European Studies, 1999; Michael P. Croissant, *The Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict: Causes and Implications*, New York: Praeger, 1998.

aims have varied with time, at most demanding the creation of a Lezgin republic under the Russian Federation on areas of Azerbaijan and Dagestan. A great number of Lezgins refused draft into the Azerbaijani army and especially to fight in the Mountainous Karabakh conflict, creating suspicion among Azeris. This was worsened by a 1994 bomb blast killing 12 people in the Baku metro that has been attributed to *Sadval*. The organization has also been accused of collusion with Armenian security services. The level of actual popular support for *Sadval* has nevertheless been doubtful. Especially following the political stabilization of Azerbaijan after 1994, coupled with the deterioration of the political situation in Dagestan and in particular the factual collapse of the power-sharing system in that republic to the detriment of the Lezgins, Lezgin political activism has diminished and according to Dagestani sources, *Sadval* has lost its momentum.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the appointment of General Safar Abiyev, a Lezgin, to the post of defense minister of Azerbaijan calmed tensions in the late 1990s. His appointment is in fact thought to have been intended precisely for that reason.

### **5.1.3. Talysh in Azerbaijan**

The Talysh are Shi'a Muslim people speaking a western Iranian language. Their numbers are, like the Lezgins, a matter of debate. The actual number is estimated at 300,000.<sup>5</sup> The Talysh, inhabiting the southeastern part of Azerbaijan, are typically bilingual and have seen little ethnic mobilization in the post-Soviet era. One major political event related to the Talysh took place in August 1993, during severe Azerbaijani setbacks in the war with Armenia and less than two months after the June 1993 Coup d'État in Baku. A renegade army commander, Alikram Humbatov, declared the creation of a Talysh-Mugam republic in southeastern Azerbaijan and attempted to delimit and fortify its borders. However, even before government troops intervened, large demonstrations by local citizens spurred a mass desertion among the rebel forces. The leader of the abortive rebellion fled to Iran, spurring speculations on Iranian support for the insurgency, but was later detained and sentenced for treason by Azerbaijani authorities.<sup>6</sup> The Talysh have remained calm with virtually no incidents ever since, although Azerbaijani military presence has been negligible. In retrospect, the abortive rebellion seems to have been related more with power politics in Baku than with Talysh ethnic mobilization. In fact, Humbatov was likely

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<sup>4</sup> See Cornell, 'Conflicts in the North Caucasus', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 17 no. 3, 1998, pp. 425-428. Regarding *Sadval*'s present following, communications from Enver Kisriev, Dagestan Academy of Sciences, October 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Official Soviet Census data, though contradictory, helps corroborate the findings of the 1999 Azerbaijani census. In 1926, 77,000 Talysh were registered in the Azerbaijani republic; by the 1959 census this figure had dropped to ninety people, due to registration of almost all Talysh as Azerbaijani. In 1989, the figure had jumped to 21,000. The first census of independent Azerbaijan, carried out in 1999, showed the figure of ca. 300,000.

<sup>6</sup> Reports in *The Times*, 24 August 1993, 25 August 1993.

allied with coup-maker Surat Husseinov in an attempt to weaken the position of President Heydar Aliyev. The Talysh case is a case of non-conflict.

#### 5.1.4. Azeris in Armenia

Azeris in Armenia were mainly located in the southern region of Zangezur, but Azeri villages existed in the neighborhood of the whole stretch of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. With the emergence of the Mountainous Karabakh conflict, a mass flow of Azeris from Armenia ensued. Some villages negotiated swaps with Armenian villages in Azerbaijan; others were subjected to more outright ethnic cleansing. By 1989-90, the quasi-totality of Azeris had left Armenia. The Azeris in Armenia were hence involved in ethnic conflict. However, they were not the primary party to a conflict, and their involvement was the result of contagion emanating from the conflict over Mountainous Karabakh. Azeris in Armenia were never involved in an armed secessionist conflict with their central government.

#### 5.1.5. Javakhetia Armenians in Georgia

Armenians live in three distinct areas in Georgia: in the capital Tbilisi, in Abkhazia, and in southwestern Georgia on the border with Armenia. The Armenians of Abkhazia to a significant degree took part in the Abkhaz rebellion and will be mentioned in the context of Abkhazia. The main concentration of Armenians is nevertheless found in the districts of Akhalkalaki and Akhaltsikhe in the province of Samtskhe-Javakhetia. Armenians form a compact majority in the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda *raions*, and roughly half of the population of Akhaltsikhe. Totally, their numbers are circa 150,000. The area is referred to as Javakhetia by Armenians. Javakhetia Armenians were alarmed by the nationalist leadership in Georgia under Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and a political organization named *Javakhetia* has at various times campaigned for Armenian autonomy in Georgia. However, the organization has not managed to gather significant active popular support, and seems to be ridden by internal differences. The Georgian government has been very careful not to provoke the Javakhetia Armenians; meanwhile, the Armenian government, mindful of the importance of its relations with Georgia, has been careful to defuse potential problems in the region, intervening once to talk *Javakhetia* out of plans to hold a referendum on autonomy or secession. However, a Russian military base exists in Akhalkalaki which is composed of local Armenians for the quasi-totality of non-combatants, for over two thirds of its soldiers and non-commanding officers, and a third of its officers. Whereas the situation is tense in Javakhetia, there has so far been no armed secessionist conflict.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Voitsekhi Guretski, "The Question of Javakheti", in *Caucasian Regional Studies*, vol. 3 no. 1, 1998; Ugur Akinci, "Javakhetia: The Bottle-Neck of the Baku-Ceyhan Pipeline", in *Silk Road: A Journal of West Asian Studies*, vol. 1 no. 2, December 1997; Igor Rotar, "Tbilisi Has Only Partial Control Over Georgia's Armenian Regions" *Jamestown Prism*, vol. 4, no.10, May 15, 1998 Levon Sevunts, 'Squeeze Play in the Caucasus: Russia Could Tighten its Grip as Georgia, Armenia Break out of Bear Hug', *The Gazette (Montreal)*, 29 November 1999.

### **5.1.6. Azeris in Georgia**

Azeris reside compactly in the southern and southeastern regions of Georgia, especially in the Marneuli region 40 km south of Tbilisi. Little unrest has been noted among Azeris in Georgia; however in the late 1980s, Georgian extreme nationalists exerted great pressure on Azeris, especially in the Bolnisi region, to leave Georgia. This led to the emigration of up to two thousand families, yet no self-defense organizations emerged among local Azeris, neither did they coalesce politically to demand rights from the Georgian government. In the post-independence era, the close and improving relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia has lowered the risk of conflict further.<sup>8</sup>

### **5.1.7. Ajars in Georgia**

The Ajars are in fact Muslim Georgians, having lived for centuries under the Ottoman Empire. Only in 1878 did present-day Ajaria come under Russian control. Ajaria received the status of an Autonomous Republic in the early 1920s, the only entity to be given autonomous status on religious and not ethnic grounds. Since the 1930s, Ajars were classified as Georgians in official censuses, and for this reason there are no official statistics on the ethnic break-up of Ajaria. Over half of the population is believed to be Muslim (that is, Ajars), and most of the remainder Christian Georgians.<sup>9</sup> Ajars feel at the same time a common identity with Georgians and a distinct Ajarian identity based on their Muslim faith and divergence in customs. Tensions emerged during the Gamsakhurdia rule 1990-91 as the Georgian nationalist leadership talked of abolishing Ajaria's autonomy. However, these tensions were defused as the idea was dropped. With the escalation of conflict between the Georgian central government and South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the Ajar leadership has been able to work for an increased autonomy without prompting a reaction from Tbilisi, which was, with an euphemism, busy elsewhere. In 1991, the leadership of the ASSR was assumed by Aslan Abashidze, who has since built a dictatorial regime in the republic. Abashidze has built strong economic relations with Turkey and political and military relations with Russia, including the continued stationing of a Russian military base in Ajaria. This has served as a strong bargaining chip against the central government and a virtual guarantee against Georgian military action. Moreover, Ajaria has benefited from border trade with Turkey, and has withheld payments to the central budget. The economic situation in Ajaria is far better than most other districts of Georgia. A strong autonomist movement has existed in Ajaria, but no armed conflict.

### **5.1.8. Ossetians in Georgia (South Ossetia)**

Ossetians are a Christian people speaking a northeastern Iranian language. Ossetians were the titular nationality of the North Ossetian ASSR in the Russian Federation, and the

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<sup>8</sup> Personal interviews, Tbilisi and Marneuli, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> See Elizabeth Fuller, "Georgia's Adzhar Crisis", in *Report on the USSR*, 9 August 1991.

South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast (SOAO) in Georgia. Ossetians formed just over two thirds of their autonomous region's population of 98'000 in 1989, the remainder mainly composed of Georgians. Another 100,000 Ossetians also lived scattered in other regions of Georgia. Increasing nationalism in Georgia spurred a reaction in the SOAO, with a popular front, the *Ademon Nykhas*, emerging in early 1989. In August 1989, steps were taken to make Georgian the sole official language of the republic, prompting *Ademon Nykhas* to petition to the USSR central government for unification with North Ossetia. A first round of inter-ethnic riots took place in the SOAO in late 1989. In late 1990, after regional parties were banned from contesting Georgian elections, the SOAO Supreme Soviet unilaterally upgraded South Ossetia to an 'Independent Soviet Democratic Republic'. In December 1990, the Georgian parliament abolished South Ossetia's autonomy, and the region is since then referred to as 'Shida Kartli' or the 'Tskhinvali and Java' regions in official Georgian discourse.<sup>10</sup> An armed clash was prevented by units of the Soviet Ministry of Interior. By mid-1991, however, the situation deteriorated and South Ossetia's capital Tskhinvali was under artillery fire. By November, when the Soviet Union was in a state of dissolution, North Caucasian volunteers vowing to support the Ossetian side had gathered in North Ossetia. North Ossetian authorities exerted strong lobbying on Moscow, and the hardliner-dominated Russian Supreme Soviet's speaker threatened military actions against Georgia. In December, Gamsakhurdia was overthrown in Tbilisi, but the situation again turned explosive after a pause in early 1992. Finally, a cease-fire was signed under Russian President Yeltsin's auspices in June 1992, and trilateral peace-keeping troops introduced. Georgia with this agreement in practice lost control of South Ossetia, and the conflict remains unresolved. However, peacebuilding at grassroots level has shown limited success, with the return of numerous refugees and the opening of trade and economic links.<sup>11</sup>

### 5.1.9. Abkhaz in Georgia

Abkhazia was sovietized before Georgia in 1921, with the status of a union republic. However, it was associated with Georgia in 1925 and reduced to an ASSR under Georgia in 1931. Abkhazia has always been multiethnic, but the Abkhaz proportion of the population declined during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. In 1989 the Abkhaz formed only 17% of the ASSR's population of half a million, with 45% Georgians, 14% Armenians and 12% Russians. Interethnic tensions had erupted briefly in 1978, and resurfaced in 1988 with 60 leading Abkhaz intellectuals sending a letter detailing

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<sup>10</sup> President Shevardnadze has nevertheless publicly stated that 'no one should be afraid of the term South Ossetia'. *The Georgian Times*, October 1999.

<sup>11</sup> See Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, pp. 142-196; Julian Birch, "The Georgian/South Ossetian Territorial and Boundary Dispute", in Wright et. al. (eds), *Transcaucasian Boundaries*, pp. 151- 189; Julian Birch, "Ossetia: A Caucasian Bosnia in Microcosm", in *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 14 no. 1, 1995, pp. 43-74; Alexei Zverev, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-94", in Bruno Coppetiers, (ed.), *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, Brussels: VUBPress, 1996.

Abkhaz grievances to the central leadership in Moscow. Demands followed for Abkhazia to be reinstated as a union republic, and in June 1989 ethnic clashes in the capital Sukhumi left a dozen dead and several hundred wounded. Abkhazia was interestingly enough calm during Gamsakhurdia's rule, whereas all other minorities in Georgia, as viewed above, were uneasy. In retrospect, it seems that Gamsakhurdia had good contacts with the Abkhaz leadership.<sup>12</sup> After Gamsakhurdia's fall from power, tensions began heating up between Tbilisi and Sukhumi in Summer 1992. When Abkhazia reinstated its 1925 constitution, which was perceived as an act of secession in Tbilisi, Georgian paramilitary forces under poor control and discipline attacked Abkhazia in August. The Abkhaz formations were driven up to the northwestern corner of Abkhazia, and Georgian forces occupied the capital. The Abkhaz suddenly counter-attacked in October, with heavy armament, helped by North Caucasian volunteers and air support which came from Russian forces in the Caucasus that obviously also had provided the heavy weaponry to the Abkhaz. The war went from bad to worse for the Georgians during 1993, and Sukhumi was eventually recaptured by Abkhaz forces in September. Virtually all Georgians living on the ASSR's territory were evicted in a campaign of ethnic cleansing. An unstable cease-fire has reigned since late 1993, with resumption of hostilities in early 1994 and during May 1998.<sup>13</sup>

## **5.2. Factors in Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus**

To actually study the impact of the ten potential explanatory propositions on the nine cases presented above, a simple four-square matrix is employed, where the horizontal axis has two possible outcomes on the proposition under study, and the vertical axis two possible outcomes on the dependent variable. The cases are then 'placed' in one of the four squares of the matrix. In this matrix, a perfect covariation between the dependent variable and the proposition in question takes the shape of a diagonal axis where all cases are found in the upper left and lower right squares of the matrix. In other words, cases of no conflict have a low score on the proposition, and cases of conflict have a high score. The aim of this part of the study is to investigate which propositions formulated earlier in the study indeed do seem to have an explanatory value for the level of conflict. If six cases out of nine (that is, two thirds) show a positive correlation between the propositions and

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<sup>12</sup> Gamsakhurdia actually staged an attempt to recapture power in Georgia in late 1993. From exile in Chechnia, Gamsakhurdia flew to Abkhazia and from there made his way to his native Mingrelia to the immediate south of Abkhazia. As a result, many of the Georgian forces fighting the Abkhaz at this moment then defected to Gamsakhurdia's camp, as he tried to gather a military force to March on Tbilisi. As this rebellion failed, Gamsakhurdia escaped to the mountains and apparently took his life around new year's eve 1994. However, his actions together with Russian support for the Abkhaz had brought Georgia to the brink of disintegration. Although a Georgian nationalist, Gamsakhurdia in this way actually played into the hands of the Abkhaz secessionists and actually sealed the *de facto* secession of Abkhazia.

<sup>13</sup> Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, pp. 142-196.

the outcome, the proposition is deemed interesting and worthy of further investigation. If, however, five or less cases show this correlation, the explanatory value of a proposition is doubtful. For reasons of increasing the readability of the matrixes, a three letter code is given to each case: **ABK**—Abkhaz in Georgia / Abkhazia; **AJA**—Ajars in Georgia / Ajaria; **ARG**—Armenians in Georgia; **AZA**—Azeris in Armenia; **AZG**—Azeris in Georgia; **LEZ**—Lezgins in Azerbaijan; **NKA**—Armenians in Azerbaijan / Nagorno-Karabakh; **SOS**—Ossetians in Georgia / South Ossetia; **TAL**—Talysh in Azerbaijan.

### 5.2.1. Cultural Differences

*Proposition 1: the deeper the cultural differences between two groups, and the stronger group identities and cohesion particularly among the minority population, the higher the risk of conflict’.*

By virtue of being minorities, all ethnic groups in this study by definition do have cultural differences with the titular populations of the states they inhabit. What is interesting is to determine whether the *degree* of cultural differences affects the salience of conflict. Indicators used to determine the degree of cultural differences have been limited to the two most marked characteristics: language and religion. Among Caucasian groups, differences in appearance may exist to the trained observer, however, there are no clear delimitations or generally observable characteristics. The Caucasus is a multiethnic though not a multiracial society. Customs do vary among groups, but common Caucasian customs do exist, and 70 years of Soviet rule inculcated many similar customs into the different groups. Most important are therefore the differences in language and religion. Language by itself is not an exclusive category: whereas people can not be both Christian or Muslim, they can speak both Georgian and Abkhaz.<sup>14</sup> Yet, language remains perhaps the main marker of ethnic and national identity. The most obvious characteristic of an ethnic group is its separate language. Of course, certain national groups are determined by their religion; the Jews and Sikhs are examples. Yet, in many such cases, a separate language is sought for as an additional marker. The efforts in the 1990s to create separate and distinct languages of Bosnian, Serb and Croatian are an excellent example of this. Likewise, the efforts made to restore the status of Hebrew in Israeli society in that country’s early decades testifies to the importance that language, as a means of communication and symbol of nationhood, represents. Secondly, religion is crucially important as a marker of identity. Religion lies at the ground for virtually all societies’ moral values. Secularized states in the west are no exception, permeated strongly as they are by Christian values. Different religions imply different understandings of the world, different sets of values, different customs and different cultures. For differences among

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<sup>14</sup> David D. Laitin, *Identity in Formation*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998. Also discussion in Ted R. Gurr, *Peoples Versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century*, Washington DC: USIP Press, 2000, p. 67.

two groups to be coded as high, a significant difference in both language and religion between the minority and the titular population of the central state is necessary. Significant implies larger differences than of dialectal character in language – meaning that people of the two groups cannot understand each other if speaking in their native tongues. In terms of religion, larger differences than sectarian are implied. This is not to deny that sectarian conflict, as between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims may exist and be very virulent. Indeed, hatred toward 'heretics' is often stronger than that toward 'infidels'. For example, the militant Sunni Taliban of Afghanistan despise Shi'a Muslims more than Christians, whom they tend to accept as 'people of the book'. But in the context of the former Soviet Union, religion has so far played a role in communal identities not *per se*, but as elements of ethnic identity in the relatively strongly secularized states of the region. In relation to this, the importance of sectarian differences have to a large extent been reduced by the impact of Soviet secularization. For example, the Azerbaijani nation is divided into roughly 75% Shi'a and 25% Sunni Muslims, whereas this ratio is reversed among Azeris in Georgia. However, with the exception of fringe radical groups, this distinction is not an important issue in Azerbaijani society.

The logic behind the categorization used here, requiring significant differences on both accounts, is that cases scoring high would imply the lack of any common denominator between the two populations. In the former Soviet context, where people already share the common Soviet heritage and normally share a language of communication, Russian, cultural differences can be said to be high only if they share neither strong religious nor linguistic affinities.

As a result, only three cases among the nine studied qualify for a 'high' score: two cases involving Azeris and Armenians; one involving Azeris and Georgians.<sup>15</sup> Among other groups, the Lezgins of Azerbaijan and Armenians in Georgia come closest to a 'high' score: Lezgins are Sunni rather than Shi'a and have strong linguistic differences with the Azeris. Armenians are Monophysite rather than Orthodox and have strong linguistic differences with Georgians. The Abkhaz case is more ambiguous, given that they are religiously split, with around two thirds Orthodox Christian and one third Sunni Muslim. They are coded as a case of 'low' as a religious split within a group would largely disqualify religion as a reason for rebellion against another group sharing the religion of the majority of the group. It is notable that only one of three cases of conflict have high cultural

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<sup>15</sup> Armenians are Monophysite Christians speaking an indo-European language. The Azeris differ by being predominantly Shi'a Muslims speaking a Turkic language. Hence (AZA=High differences). In Azerbaijan, Armenians in Mountainous Karabakh differ as above, hence (NKA=High); Talysh are Shi'a Muslims speaking an Indo-European language, hence differing in one category (TAL=Low); Lezgins are Sunni Muslims speaking a North Caucasian language, hence (LEZ=Low). In Georgia, Georgians are Orthodox Christians speaking a South Caucasian language. Minorities differ as follows: Abkhaz are religiously divided, and speak a North Caucasian language (one significant difference, hence coded as ABK=low); Ajars are Sunni Muslims but speak Georgian (AJA=low); Armenians, see above (ARG=Low); Azeris, see above (AZA=High); Ossetians are Orthodox Christians speaking an indo-European language (SOS = Low).

differences. As a whole, only five out of nine cases (the non-shaded cells in the table below) support the proposition relating cultural differences to violent conflict.

**Table 5.1: Cultural Differences**

	Low	High
No Conflict	AJA ARG LEZ TAL	AZA AZG
Conflict	ABK SOS	NKA

### 5.2.2. National Conception

*Proposition 2: The more the national conception of either the minority or the state's titular nation approximate an ethnic conception, the higher the likelihood of conflict.*

This proposition is more difficult to define and test, when applied both to the state and the minority. An ethnic minority group in a state can in the traditional definition of the term not have a civic conception of itself, since a civic conception would imply appertenance to the civic nation of the state they live in. However, the ethnic group may be either inclusive or exclusive when it comes to accepting outsiders into its fold through either marriage or what could be termed naturalization – basically to what extent it is possible for outsiders to ‘become’ co-ethnics of the group.

To a much clearer degree, an autonomous region can have either a civic or an ethnic conception of the ‘nation’ composing the population this region, as the example of Tatarstani identity cited in chapter two illustrates. Hence one could speak at the outset of a discrepancy between non-autonomous and autonomous cases. In the case of non-autonomous minorities, the national conception of the *state* is what matters most: whether it tends toward the civic or the ethnic. In autonomous cases, there are four combinations of national conceptions of the state and the autonomous region: ethnic state/ethnic autonomy; ethnic state/civic autonomy; civic state/ethnic autonomy; civic state/civic autonomy. This confusing matrix is attenuated by adding the concept of inclusion. In autonomous cases, the question will be whether the national conceptions of the state and that of the autonomy are exclusive of one another, where a yes answer in one of the two will be sufficient to code the case as ‘yes’; in non-autonomous cases it will be whether the national conception of the state is inclusive or exclusive of the minority in question.

As is clear from table 2, ethnic and exclusive conceptions dominate in the Caucasus. Given the complexity of coding, a further explanation is warranted. Armenia and Georgia both have a predominantly ethnic conception of the nation, although Georgia may be moving toward a more civic conception.<sup>16</sup> The Azerbaijani conception of the nation is *mainly* civic—although not exclusively—based on the ideology of ‘Azerbaijanism’ that is inclusive of non-Turkic ethnic groups.<sup>17</sup> The case of Ajaria are easily coded as ‘No’ given that specific case that the ethnic conception of ‘Georgian’ *includes* the Ajars, who are considered Georgians; moreover Ajaria has itself a civic conception of ‘Ajarian’ as a citizen of the region. Abkhaz, Ossetians, Azeris and Armenians in Georgia are not included in the conception of ‘Georgian’, thereby making all these cases fall under ‘Yes’. Armenia’s ethnic conception of the nation unquestionably excludes the Azeris, making it a ‘Yes’ case. Azerbaijan’s civic conception is inclusive of the Lezgins and Talysh, making them cases of ‘No’. Mountainous Karabakh Armenians is however a case of ‘Yes’. First of all, it is doubtful whether Armenians would, even before the present conflict, classify under the *mainly* civic conception of Azerbaijani. The problem is that the Azerbaijani national conception is not completely clear and elaborated and still subject to debate. The most liberal versions would be inclusive of Armenians that paid allegiance to the Azerbaijani state and learnt its official language; most definitions would nevertheless exclude the Armenians on various grounds, including their Christian religion. The coding of this case is nevertheless made easier by the fact that the national conception of the self-proclaimed Republic of Mountainous Karabakh as espoused by its Armenian majority was and remains purely ethnic.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that most titular union republics had an ethnic *and* a civic term defining, respectively, the ethnic titular group and citizenship of the republic. Hence an important difference existed between terms like Russky/Rossiyany, (untranslatable in the English language, the latter meaning a citizen of Russia which includes all ethnic minorities), Kazakh/Kazakhstani, Uzbek/Uzbekistani, etc. Some autonomous republics had the same, such as Tatar/Tatarstani. In the Caucasus, only Azerbaijan has this semantic distinction between the terms Azeri and Azerbaijani. Georgia and Armenia do not, where these identities are predominantly ethnic. Hence a Lezgin or Talysh can identify as a citizen of Azerbaijan, and Azerbaijani (but certainly not as Azeri) whereas this was less possible for citizens of Armenia or Georgia. Though these semantic understandings are difficult to substantiate or explain to readers unfamiliar with the region, there is no contradiction in a person claiming to be simultaneously a Lezgin and an Azerbaijani; however, claiming to be an Armenian and a Georgian simultaneously is less obvious.

<sup>17</sup> See Audrey L. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1992.

<sup>18</sup> Even in present negotiations, the Mountainous Karabakh side is highly reluctant to grant Azeris from Mountainous Karabakh the right to return after a settlement.

**Table 5.2: Ethnic/Exclusive National Conception**

	No	Yes
No Conflict	AJA LEZ TAL	ARG AZA AZG
Conflict		ABK NKA SOS

Six cases support the proposition linking ethnic/exclusive national conception to violent conflict. Importantly, no case of conflict took place in a case where national conceptions were inclusive.

### 5.2.3. Past Conflict and Myths

*Proposition 3: The Greater the intensity of past conflict and the myths surrounding it, the greater the risk of conflict.*

This factor is partially related to perceptions. As such, the coding of the cases requires an understanding of the histories and, moreover, historiographies predominant among the peoples of the Caucasus. The research is complicated by the fact that past conflict has existed to some degree between almost all peoples involved in this study; the Talysh and Lezgins of Azerbaijan being possible exceptions which are straightforwardly coded 'No'. No mention exist in historical works of the Caucasus of violent conflict between Azeris and Lezgins, or Azeris and Talysh.

What is today the southeastern areas of Georgia and northwestern areas of Azerbaijan were claimed by both republics in the 1917-24 period. The Democratic Republics of Georgia and Azerbaijan did fight a short war over the area in 1919; isolated radical nationalists on both sides have issued territorial claims in the post-Soviet era, but have found little following. Basically, the Georgian and Azeri communities' relationship are not significantly marked by this history at present. The case of Azeris in Georgia is hence coded 'No'. A similar situation exists in Ajaria, where during the First World War a religiously based pro-Turkish movement was strong. However, with the diminishing role of religious identity in the Soviet era, the identification of Ajars with Georgia has increased; past conflict is low and not present in the minds of most Ajars or Georgians; this is also a case of 'No'. The clearest cases of 'Yes' are the Armenians and Azeris (Mountainous Karabakh and Azeris in Armenia). Bloody conflict between the two communities took place in 1905 and 1918-20, and the degree of remembrance is high; moreover the historiographies of the past conflict in the two communities diverge strongly, with obvious tendencies towards whitewashing and glorification. Abkhazia is

also a case of ‘Yes’, with the Abkhaz strongly remembering the SSR status of the 1920s, blaming the ‘Georgian Stalin’ for Abkhazia’s status under Georgia, and Georgia for attempts to assimilate the Abkhaz. Perceptions of the past are also highly divergent, making Abkhazia a clear ‘Yes’. South Ossetia is a narrower case of ‘Yes’, with a lower level of conflict and divergent perceptions dating back to the Soviet conquest of Georgia in 1921, in which Georgians blame Ossetians for supporting the Bolshevik forces. Still, the creation of an autonomous Ossetian territory in Georgia is resented by many Georgians, who see the Ossetians as a willing bridgehead in Russian attempts to control and sunder Georgia. The Armenians of Georgia are also a case of ‘Yes’. In 1918-19, a bloody war was fought between the Armenian and Georgian Democratic Republics over this area; mutual suspicion has remained high between the two communities, and has actually increased over the latter part of the 1990s.

**Table 5.3: Past Conflict**

	No	Yes
No Conflict	AJA AZG LEZ TAL	ARG AZA
Conflict		ABK SOS NKA

As table 3 illustrates, there is a relatively strong support among the nine cases for the proposition that violent conflict at present is related to the occurrence of past conflict and the mythification thereof. Seven of nine cases support the proposition.

#### 5.2.4. Rough Terrain

*Proposition 4: Rough terrain, in particular mountains or heavy forests, increases the risk of conflict.*

This indicator is related to the physical geography of the area inhabited by the minority. In a larger study a more precise definition of what constitutes rough terrain is undoubtedly necessary; however, in the present cases the categorization is relatively straightforward: the superimposition of ethnographic and topographic maps gives a relatively clear picture. Azeri-populated areas in Armenia and Georgia, and Talysh-populated areas in Azerbaijan are not predominantly mountainous. Ajaria, Armenian-populated areas in Georgia and

Lezgin-populated areas in Azerbaijan, by contrast, are. Most significantly, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Mountainous Karabakh are all mountainous. All cases of conflict emerged in a mountainous areas with rough terrain suitable for guerrilla warfare. In total, six cases show a positive correlation.

**Table 5.4: Rough Terrain**

	No	Yes
No Conflict	AZA AZG TAL	AJA ARG LEZ
Conflict		ABK NKA SOS

### 5.2.5. Relative Demography

*Proposition 5: The greater the demographic dominance of the minority in the region it inhabits, the greater the risk of conflict.*

The proposition suggests that minority groups compactly settled in the area they inhabit pose a larger risk of conflict. This implies not only that the minority is not scattered on the territory of a state, but that within the given ‘homeland’ of the minority, it constitutes a majority of the population. Practically, the difficulty is in determining the area classified as the homeland. For autonomous regions, the borders of the region are given and therefore taken as the norm. For non-autonomous region, the administrative division most commensurate with the minority’s settlement patterns is adopted.

Among autonomous regions, Ossetians and Armenians form clear demographic majorities in South Ossetia and Mountainous Karabakh, respectively. Although there are no specific censuses, Ajars are accepted to form a solid majority of Ajaria’s population. These three groups hence form clear cases of ‘Yes’. Only the Abkhaz form a remarkable minority in the Abkhaz ASSR. During the 1970s, Abkhaz were outnumbered not only by Georgians, but also by Armenians in the ASSR. In the 1989 census, however, their position as second largest group was restored, but still form a clear ‘No’. Among non-autonomous groups, of course, it is harder to gauge the demographic situation; there are no clear borders within which to calculate ethnic ratios, though a raion division is used in some cases. As such, any delimitation becomes arbitrary. Armenians and Azeris in Georgia both form relatively strong majorities in the regions they inhabit, most clearly in the case of Armenians. The same can be said for Lezgins and Talysh in Azerbaijan; these are cases of ‘Yes’. Moreover, these populations are not largely spread out beyond their

core areas. Only the Azeris in Armenia qualify as a case of ‘No’. This proposition is hence supported only by three cases.

**Table 5.5: Relative Demography/Compact Settlement**

	No	Yes
No Conflict	AZA	AJA TAL LEZ AZG ARG
Conflict	ABK	SOS NKA

### 5.2.6. Existence of Ethnic Kin

*Proposition 6: If a minority has ethnic kin in another country, the likelihood of conflict increases.*

Table 6 shows that most groups under study actually do have ethnic kin abroad, often in positions of titular nationality of either an independent state or an autonomous region. Armenians in Georgia and Mountainous Karabakh have Armenia; Azeris in Armenia and Georgia have Azerbaijan; South Ossetians have North Ossetia; the Abkhaz have Circassian peoples in the North Caucasus; the Lezgins have Lezgins in Dagestan; the Talysh have close ethnic kin in Iran, beyond the fact that they are related to the dominant Farsi culture of Iran. Only the Ajars have no ethnic kin. Hence, only four cases correlate positively with the proposition. However, it is significant that all three cases of conflict do correlate positively with the proposition. Hence, while ethnic kin may theoretically, judging from these results, be a necessary factor, it is obviously not a sufficient one.

**Table 5.6: Ethnic Kin**

	No	Yes
No Conflict	AJA	ARG AZA AZG LEZ TAL
Conflict		ABK NKA SOS

### 5.2.7. Economic Viability

*Proposition 7: Economic viability increases the likelihood of conflict— especially where the indigenous people have not hitherto benefited from it.*

Beyond domestic natural resources, this factor is in practice very much related to geographic access to the world, outside support and ethnic kin. However, the factor is here treated in isolation, focusing on domestic economic capacity and resources, and in comparison to the neighboring regions of the respective countries. Javakheti in Georgia, Azeri areas in Armenia, and Lezgin and Talysh areas in Azerbaijan are all poor even compared to the rest of these countries, with few natural resources and basically no industry. Their potential for economic survival in isolation from Georgia or Azerbaijan is dim. They are hence cases of 'No'. So is South Ossetia if left without economic support from the North. Ajaria, Kvemo Kartli, Abkhazia and Mountainous Karabakh are nevertheless areas that could 'function' on their own resources. The case of Mountainous Karabakh is blurred by the fact that it has received substantial support from the Armenian Diaspora, and is in a sense kept alive by Armenians outside Armenia as well as the Armenian state itself. It is hence difficult to determine whether Mountainous Karabakh could survive otherwise. Yet its natural resources, including agriculture, are such that it has a potential for survival on its own devices.

**Table 5.7: Economic Viability**

	Low	High
<b>No Conflict</b>	ARG AZA LEZ TAL	AJA AZG
<b>Conflict</b>	SOS	ABK NKA

### 5.2.8. Radical Leadership

*Proposition 8: the emergence of a radical leadership in either the minority population or the central state significantly increases the risk of conflict.*

The coding of the cases on this proposition requires elaboration. First of all, the term 'radical' needs to be qualified. In this study, a leadership is termed radical if it displays clear tendencies of ethnic nationalism.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, 'leadership' refers to either the

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<sup>19</sup> This can take the shape of rhetoric promoting the ethnic group in question; or, the utilization of historical myths to mobilize population along ethnic lines; or policies of altering political status. In the latter case, ethnic nationalism in the central government could include steps to downgrading the status of autonomous minorities; among the minority group, to improve status. For a non-autonomous

government of an autonomous region, the government of a state, or a radical movement claiming leadership among a non-autonomous minority. As discussed in chapter two, radical leadership in both the state and the minority is likely to have significance for the outcome. As a result, it is logical to assume that the likelihood of conflict is high if at a given point in time, either the minority group or the central government is led by a radical leadership. Naturally, the risk is highest if both 'sides' are led by radical forces. In fact, a radical leadership in the central government is unlikely to lead to conflict unless a challenging radical movement emerges among the minority population. Again, the cases of autonomous and non-autonomous minorities differ. A radical or anti-minority change in the leadership of the central government may, if background factors are present (if the situation is 'ripe', so to speak) be a spark that triggers the emergence or strengthening of national feelings among the minority. This depends to a large extent on the prior level of organization existing within the minority population. If there is a pre-existing ethnic leadership, the likelihood of increased tension is significant. In the absence of such, however, a radical change in state leadership may not lead to increased tensions. In the case of autonomous minorities, there is by default a pre-existing minority leadership. Of course, this leadership may be co-opted by the central government or otherwise subservient to it; but logically, one would assume that autonomous areas would be more likely to protest radical leadership in the center. This is only natural, given that a radical, ethnic leadership at the central level almost invariably targets devolution of power to minorities and seeks to centralize the power in its own hands; this implies that a radical leadership at the center presents a threat for elites in autonomous regions; and as such, these elites are likely to take counter-steps to safeguard their power.

The analysis of the impact of radical leadership is complicated by the fact that all three states at some point in the 1990s had governments that could be described as 'radical'. The Gamsakhurdia regime in Georgia (October 1990 to December 1991) is only the clearest example of a government coming to power on a nationalist basis, targeting especially Soviet rule but also certain minorities seen as accomplices to the latter. The Georgian experience is discussed in detail in the next chapter. The Armenian government led by Levon Ter-Petrosyan, which was in power between 1991 and 1998, emerged out of the Karabakh movement, the political movement organized for the sole purpose of securing the transfer of Mountainous Karabakh to Armenia. Hence there is no exaggeration in calling that government a nationalist one as well. Of course, the Armenian situation is relevant for this study only as regards 1988-1990: after 1990, the Azeri minority was no longer present in the country. In Azerbaijan, the Popular Front

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minority, this could be either demands for autonomy or independence; for an autonomous one, demands for independence.

government also came to power in the Spring of 1992 on a nationalist undercurrent, very much due what was publicly perceived as the previous, Communist government's inability to handle the Mountainous Karabakh conflict.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, some of the Front's policies could be interpreted as hostile to minorities. The Mountainous Karabakh conflict was already in a condition of full-scale war at this point, hence the Popular Front's advent to power cannot be identified as a cause of this conflict's emergence. No Talysh activity has been noted at this point; the 'Humbatov affair' mentioned earlier occurred after the Front government fell from power, in the Fall of 1993. Temporal succession would hence not suggest any link at all in the Talysh case. Only with the case of the Lezgins can a plausible argument be made that the Popular Front's advent to power in Azerbaijan increased radicalism in Lezgin political circles. Even here, however, Lezgin unrest had been prompted mainly by the transformation of the administrative border on the *Samur* river into an international border, with the independence of Azerbaijan. Determining whether or not the Popular Front's rise to power affected the increase of Lezgin radicalism would require a closer analysis of the case. As for Georgia, the five minorities reacted very differently to the rise of the nationalist Gamsakhurdia government, as will be studied in subsequent chapters. Suffice it to note here that whereas the South Ossetian rebellion, only in terms of temporal succession, may be related to the rise of Gamsakhurdia, the Abkhaz rebellion occurred after the arrival of the arguably more moderate Shevardnadze regime. All in all, there seems at first sight to be little correlation between government radicalism and radicalization of minorities and rebellion.

Another possibility is analyzing only the minority population and the emergence or not of a radical leadership, as illustrated by table eight. Two cases have clearly seen no radical leadership – in fact no organized leadership at all, during the entire period under study: the Azeris of Armenia and of Georgia. No radical political movement has existed among either these groups, let alone achieved a significant popular support. By contrast, the Talysh of Azerbaijan are coded 'Yes'. Although the separatist movement that existed for two brief months in 1993 seems to have been totally devoid of popular support, as described in chapter five, it did nevertheless emerge and hence did provide the opportunity of an outlet for any popular feelings that may have been present. The Lezgins of Azerbaijan, as viewed above, have had a radical leadership alluded to above, *Sadval*. Although its popular support has been doubtful, it is clear that large tracts of the Lezgin population at times had significant sympathies for *Sadval*, as proven by the following of demonstrations it organized especially between 1992 and 1994.<sup>21</sup> By the same token, the Armenians of Georgia are coded 'Yes' given the existence of the *Javakhk* political

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998; Audrey Altstadt, *the Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1992.

<sup>21</sup> Clem McCarthy, *The Lezgins: A Situation Assessment*, International Alert Report, May 1997. Also Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, pp. 268-272.

organization, which undoubtedly commands the loyalty of many Javakheti Armenians. Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Mountainous Karabakh are clearly cases of ‘Yes’ given the existence of nationalist and secessionist forces in the government of these Autonomous units, forces that presided over the war efforts to separate these regions from Georgia and Azerbaijan.

The case of Ajaria is more complex. Although the Abashidze administration in Ajaria has been highly autonomist, Abashidze himself has especially in the second half of the 1990s profiled himself as a politician on the Georgian political scene, in fact heading the largest opposition bloc to the Shevardnadze regime. A presidential contender in the 2000 elections, Abashidze can hardly be defined as a radical ethnic leader of an ethnic group. Hence Ajaria is coded ‘No’.

**Table 5.8: Minority Radical Leadership**

	No	Yes
No Conflict	AJA	ARG
	AZA	LEZ
	AZG	TAL
Conflict		ABK NKA SOS

### 5.2.9. External Support

*Proposition 9: the emergence of a radical leadership in either the minority population or the central state significantly increases the risk of conflict.*

External support can take many shapes, ranging from moral and diplomatic support to military intervention. For a case to be coded high on this proposition, political and military support from another state or overt promises of such support is necessary. The Azeris in Armenia, Azeris in Georgia and Talysh of Azerbaijan are all clear cases of ‘No’, never having obtained any political or military support from any state or non-state actor, nor any promises to that effect. Rumors of Iranian or Russian involvement of the Gumbatov affair of 1993 exist, but remain unsubstantiated. Regarding the Lezgins in Azerbaijan, the Russian government has been accused by Azerbaijan to have given birth to *Sadval*. However, no political or military support for *Sadval* has been observed. It is hence coded ‘No’. The Armenians in Georgia have not received political or military support from Armenia. This is the case because Armenia, for its own strategic reasons, has exercised a calming influence on Javakheti Armenians. However, the existence of a Russian military base in Akhalkalaki and the fact that local Armenians are heavily enrolled

there points to a degree of present and potential Russian military support for the Javakheti Armenians. In case of a conflict between the Georgian central government and the Javakheti Armenians, it is highly doubtful whether the Russian military command can abstain from involvement on the side of the insurgents. that the military base in Akhalkalaki will be a source of support for the local Armenians, who form two thirds of the soldiers and NCOs, and a third of the officers of the base. This case is a borderline case given the lack of overt political support from either Russia or Armenia. In Ajaria, the case is similar. The Russian military base is widely known to be tightly linked to the Abashidze regime; moreover, overt Russian support for Ajaria has been voiced at different occasions. For example, former Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev once flew directly to Ajaria's capital Batumi without passing through Tbilisi or consulting Georgian authorities, in a clear breach of diplomatic code of conduct. Both cases are coded as 'yes', with reservations for the nuances discussed in later chapters. The clear Russian military support for the Abkhaz and South Ossetian rebellions is well-established, as seen above and discussed in detail in chapter six. The Armenian political and military support for the secession of Mountainous Karabakh is, if possible, even clearer.

Table 9 shows a reasonably clear picture, with a positive correlation in seven cases. The further explanation of border cases, such as Ajaria and Javakheti, remains important.

**Table 5.9: External Support**

	No	Yes
<b>No Conflict</b>	AZA AZG LEZ TAL	AJA ARG
<b>Conflict</b>		ABK NKA SOS

### 5.2.10. Autonomous Status

*Proposition 10: The existence of territorial autonomy significantly increases the risk of conflict.*

Having examined nine propositions where a variance can be observed among the cases under study, this chapter has tentatively mapped the correspondence between various theoretically derived propositions and the realities on the ground in the South Caucasus. The proposition regarding autonomy is perhaps the easiest to code, given that the existence of autonomous status is easily observable and dichotomous, the answer being either 'yes' or 'no'. There were four autonomous units in the South Caucasus: Ajaria,

Abkhazia, Mountainous Karabakh, and South Ossetia. Moreover, these four autonomous areas had existed for over half a century without territorial change. The latest change of status was Abkhazia's downgrading to an autonomous republic under Georgia in 1931. Violent conflict has taken place in three areas: Abkhazia, Mountainous Karabakh, and South Ossetia. No case of violent conflict has occurred in non-autonomous minorities. Ajaria is the only deviant case, being an autonomous region devoid of conflict. This proposition hence shows the highest correlation of all, with eight of nine cases correlating positively with the outcome.

**Table 5.10: Autonomous Status**

	No	Yes
No Conflict	ARG AZA AZG LEZ TAL	AJA
Conflict		ABK NKA SOS

### 5.3. Summary of the Findings

This section aims to make an initial screening of the findings of the factor-based study carried out in this chapter. It is important to note that this initial screening is based on numbers and scores of cases on various propositions. As such, it can be termed a quasi-quantitative approach, discussing only the observable causal effect; it is not qualitative as it does not explain causal mechanisms, nor does it differentiate between factors or explore their interaction and relationship to one another. Moreover, it is unable to account for the varying degrees of importance the listed factors may carry. However, it does not either aspire to statistical rigor, and can certainly not provide any explanations that are statistically 'proven' or correct. The aim of this chapter is to better understand the results of this part of the study and identify the elements requiring further examination.

Table 11 summarizes the findings of the proposition-based overview of the cases. The last row of the table shows to what degree the nine propositions are supported by empirical evidence. It should be noted that columns 1 through 7 are background factors, and columns 8 and 9 are catalyzing factors in the typology. Column 10 is autonomy. Taking this into account, the explanatory value of the six background factors are relatively straightforward to interpret. Three of them clearly fall below the arbitrary criterion of a positive correlation in two thirds of the cases. The proposition related to cultural differences is supported only by five cases; moreover, two of the cases of conflict occur in cases of less than deep cultural differences. Hence, it appears that the degree of cultural differences is a poor indicator to the level of conflict, at least as far as these cases are

concerned. The same is true for relative demography, supported only by three cases; moreover, one case of conflict scores low on this factor. Ethnic kin is supported only by four cases, although all cases of conflict do score high on this factor. But the mere presence of ethnic kin seems to relate poorly to violent conflict.

**Table 11: Summary of Ten Propositions in Nine Cases**

Case	Prop.	1. CDIF	2. NATC	3. PCNF	4. ROGT	5. RDEM	6. ETHK	7. ECOV	8. RALD	9. EXSP	10. AUTN
<b>ABK</b>		NS	S	S	S	NS	S	S	S	S	S
<b>AJA</b>		S	S	S	NS	NS	S	NS	S	NS	NS
<b>ARG</b>		S	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	S	NS	NS	S
<b>AZA</b>		NS	NS	NS	S	S	NS	S	S	S	S
<b>AZG</b>		NS	NS	S	S	NS	NS	NS	S	S	S
<b>LEZ</b>		S	S	S	NS	NS	NS	S	NS	S	S
<b>NKA</b>		S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
<b>SOS</b>		NS	S	S	S	S	S	NS	S	S	S
<b>TAL</b>		S	S	S	S	NS	NS	S	NS	S	S
<b>SUPPORT</b>		5/9	6/9	7/9	6/9	3/9	4/9	6/9	6/9	7/9	8/9

The remaining background factors, (national conception, past conflict, rough terrain, and economic viability) are all supported by six cases or more. Moreover, it is interesting to note that with one exception, no conflict has erupted in cases scoring low on any these four factors. Only the case of South Ossetia, with low economic viability, experienced conflict. Out of twelve observations on these four factors and the three territories involved in conflict, only one diverges from the anticipated outcome. Both catalyzing factors seem to have a significant relationship with the outcome, although both factors undoubtedly require further analysis. Recalling the discussion in chapter three, the lack of a full correlation does not necessarily lower the explanatory value of these propositions. Catalyzing factors do not in and by themselves cause violent conflict; only in the presence of background factors are they susceptible to having an influence on the outcome. Hence any analysis of catalyzing factors needs to be carried out with reference to the scores on background factors in the various cases.

To further the analysis, it is interesting to confront the actual outcome on cases to what the theoretical framework would have suggested. Aggregating all 10 propositions and the observations on each of them on each case, a 'ranking' can be made of the conflict potential, based on the theoretical framework, of the cases. The propositions were all formulated such that a 'yes' score would indicate an increase in the likelihood of conflict. Hence the simple addition of 'Yes' scores for a given case provides a 'ranking'

where the highest number of ‘Yes’ scores implies the highest conflict potential, and vice versa.

**Table 12: The Propensity for Conflict**

Case	CDIF	NATC	PCNF	ROGT	RDEM	ETHK	ECOV	RADL	EXSP	AUTN	SUM
<b>NKA</b>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	<b>10</b>
<b>ABK</b>	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	<b>8</b>
<b>SOS</b>	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	<b>8</b>
<b>ARG</b>	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	<b>7</b>
<b>AJA</b>	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	<b>5</b>
<b>AZG</b>	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	<b>5</b>
<b>AZA</b>	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	<b>4</b>
<b>LEZ</b>	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	<b>4</b>
<b>TAL</b>	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	<b>3</b>

The propensity for conflict that the table purports to indicate corresponds rather well to the degrees of actual tensions and conflict characterizing the nine cases. Mountainous Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia rank first, second and third; the Armenians in Georgia rank fourth. The three cases of conflict are also the first three according to the typology. Finding the Talysh in last place is also no surprise, given that the lowest level of ethnic mobilization among the nine cases is indeed found in that group.

Only looking at the numbers—that is, being unable to differentiate between the factors—the figures in table 12 in fact lead to a relatively straightforward division of the nine cases into two groups. The first group can be called the group of cases with high conflict potential, including Mountainous Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, as well as Javakheti. These cases all have seven indicators or more pointing to a likelihood of conflict. The remaining five cases, constituting the cases with low likelihood of conflict, have from three to five indicators pointing to a likelihood of conflict. There is hence a clearly visible gap between the two sets of cases. This circumstance directs interest to the case of Javakheti Armenians. Its conflict potential is almost as high as two cases of conflict – South Ossetia and Abkhazia – both of which took place in the same political sphere, Georgia. Moreover, a closer look at table 12 indicates that the observations in Javakheti are identical to those in South Ossetia on nine out of ten indicators. Only one factor differs: while the Ossetians had an autonomous status, Javakheti Armenians did not. Of course, this does not prove that autonomy is the ‘cause’ of the difference in outcome of the two cases. However, it does imply that Javakheti is a crucial case in this study. Explaining the divergence of outcome in three cases, sharing the same tumultuous political environment of the Georgian republic as well as having a similar conflict potential, must be a priority issue in the forthcoming chapters of this study.

## 5.4. Conclusions

One of the primary arguments of this study, as outlined in chapter two, was that an autonomous status, by significantly affecting both the willingness and the capacity of a minority to act, constitutes a significant factor in explaining the salience of violent secessionism. This chapter has shown that the indicator of autonomy has the highest positive correlation with violent conflict of the ten indicators examined in this study of nine minorities in the South Caucasus. A whole eight out of nine cases support the relation between autonomy and conflict. The study has recorded no instance of conflict in cases where the factor of autonomy was not present. This is however not an exclusive characteristic of this indicator, as it is shared by six other factors: no conflict has taken place where there has *not* been an ethnic conception of the nation; significant past conflict; rough terrain; ethnic kin; radical leadership; and external support. Hence whereas the study has shown a significant relationship between autonomy and conflict as far as the South Caucasus is concerned, it has not been able to isolate autonomy as a clearly exceptional factor.

In general, the empirical record of armed secessionist conflict in the South Caucasus corresponds reasonably well with the general typology of background and catalyzing factors outlined in section one. One serious challenge is nevertheless to explain which factors, if any, have been of specific importance for the emergence of armed secessionist conflict. This chapter has done limited headway in advancing the understanding of the causal effects linking the indicators advanced in chapters two and three to violent conflict in the Caucasus. Foremost among these tentative causal effects is the autonomy factor, lending a certain credence to the arguments developed in chapter two. However, it remains to be understood in what way, through which causal mechanisms, autonomy affects or influences the outcome of conflict. Needless to say, this is true not only for autonomy but also for the other indicators studied in this chapter. Equally importantly, his chapter has done nothing to advance the understanding of how different factors influence or affect each other. To explore the causal mechanisms and the linkages between various factors influencing secessionism and conflict, the study will now turn to process tracing in the individual cases before contrasting the results and experiences obtained. As was mentioned in chapter four, the number of indicators and cases is high enough to question whether a comparative study of ten indicators (and the relationship between them) in nine cases is feasible. Moreover, the tentative results of this chapter tend to indicate that a detailed study of all cases may not be fruitful. Hence, limiting the case studies to the minorities present on the territory of Georgia will provide several advantages. First of all, the number of cases is reduced to five, making cross-case comparisons more feasible than had nine cases been studied in detail. Secondly, This will also facilitate the study as the very important actor of the central government of the state will be one and the same for all five cases. Tracing the differences among various minorities in response to state behavior will be more feasible. Furthermore, the crucial cases of the study are located in

Georgia. Georgia possesses two cases of violent conflict (South Ossetia and Abkhazia), a case of an autonomous region not involved in conflict (Ajaria), and a minority with high likelihood of conflict as predicted by the indicators of this study, but which has not seen violent conflict (Javakheti Armenians). In addition, a fifth minority, the Azeris of Georgia, are present, but have had a limited conflict potential and seen very little political activity.

Before going into the cases themselves, an overview of Georgian political development in the last decade is undertaken, in order to provide the setting for the five sets of center-periphery relations that are the actual subject of study.

# 6

## Political Development in Georgia

This chapter aims at setting the scene for the different center-minority relations that developed since the mid-1980s. For this purpose, a brief history of the Georgian state and its relations with neighbors and non-Georgian peoples both within its historical borders and outside of them is of necessity. It should be noted that the Caucasus is a place where history carries greater depth and meaning than in many parts of the world. The importance given to national history and literature in the Caucasus, and then especially in Georgia and Armenia, is remarkable; school curricula testify to the place history and remembrance of history holds for these nations. The undeniable antiquity of these nations and the richness of their culture have undoubtedly contributed to this situation – but equally importantly, their tumultuous histories and their denial of statehood for centuries at a time have reinforced the role of historical memory in the collective identity of these groups. This is true not least for the Soviet era and the Caucasian nations’ struggle to resist Sovietization and retain their specific national characters. It is noticeable that the Armenian and Georgian languages remained state languages of their respective republics during the Soviet era, whereas in most other areas of the Soviet Union, Russian was imposed as state language.

### 6.1. Georgian Identity and History

To a larger extent than its two neighbors, Georgia is a multiethnic society. Around 70% of the country’s population is composed of Georgians, or ‘Kartvelians’. This figure includes peoples belonging to sub-ethnic groups speaking languages incomprehensible to Georgians from Tbilisi, such as the Mingrelians or Svans, and also encompasses one of the groups included in this study, the Ajars. Georgian, or ‘Kartvelian’ identity is primarily defined in linguistic terms, with religion occupying a secondary position. Georgian or ‘Kartuli’ is the sole literary language of the Kartvelian family of languages, which in and by itself constitutes the separate South Caucasian linguistic group. Other languages or dialects in this group include Svanuri and Zanuri – the latter itself divided into Mingrelian (Megruli) and Laz (Lazuri), spoken mainly in eastern Turkey.<sup>1</sup> The literary Georgian language is written with its unique alphabet, created in the fifth century CE (Christian

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<sup>1</sup> See Revaz Gachechilidze, *The New Georgia: Space, Society, Politics*, London: University College of London Press, 1995, p. 17.

Era), although evidence of the tribes later coming to constitute the Georgian nation are traceable in the region since the second millennium BCE (Before Christian Era). What could be conceived of as proto-Georgian statehood emerged mainly in the western parts of today's Georgia, with the kingdom of Colchis (Kolkheti) in the sixth century BCE. In the eastern parts, a Kartli kingdom was formed by the Kartuli-speaking Karti tribes in the end of the fourth century BCE, which came to exert influence on the western, predominantly Zanuri-speaking western areas.

### **6.1.1. Early History to the Mongol Invasions**

Since the conversion of the majority of Georgians to Christianity in the third and fourth decades of the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, religion held a major role in the formation of the Georgian nation; Christianity was adopted as a state religion in the Kartli kingdom in 331 CE, and rapidly spread westward. It is interesting to note that as opposed to Monophysite (Gregorian) Armenia, Georgia adopted the Chalcedonian (Greek Orthodox) faith in the seventh century. This distinction has remained important, as Kartuli-speaking people professing Monophysite Christianity have continuously been referred to as 'Somekhi' – the word denoting a person of Armenian ethnicity in Georgian – literally meaning “those under us”<sup>2</sup>. As such, the importance of Orthodox Christianity in the formation of the Georgian nation is significant. Indeed, when Georgia as a national and geographic entity was conceptualized in the tenth century, it was as the area in which church service were held in the Georgian/Kartuli language.<sup>3</sup> The Church itself had recently been unified, with the Catholicos of Mtskheta (just North of Tbilisi) gaining acceptance in western Georgia.<sup>4</sup>

Politically, Georgia has throughout its long history been characterized by difficulties in internal cohesion on the one hand, and a hostile international environment on the other; these two elements have at times interacted to complicate matters further. A divide between the western and eastern parts of Georgia has existed since time immemorial, in the past in the form of different kingdoms or principalities, while presently taking the shape of regionalism and individual identity components familiar to most European states. In the west, Colchis and its successors gave way to the *Abkhazta Samepo* in Georgian, or 'Abkhazian Kingdom' in translation, which expanded over western Georgia in the ninth century CE. Though originating in today's Abkhazia, its language was not the Northwest Caucasian Abkhazian or '*Apsny*', which remained unwritten until the late nineteenth century, but Kartuli. Some of its inhabitants were clearly Abkhazians, but the language of culture was Kartuli. South of it lay the *Kartvelta Samepo*, (literally Kartvelian Kingdom) consisting of today's Ajaria and Samtskhe-Javakheti as well as parts of Guria,

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<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Armenians refer to Georgia as “Vraci”, i.e. “those above us”.

<sup>3</sup> Gachechiladze, pp. 19-20.

<sup>4</sup> On the Georgian Church and its role in Georgian History, see Lothar Heiser, *Die Georgische Orthodoxe Kirche und Ihr Glaubenszeugnis*, Trier: Paulinus Verlag, 1989.

Shida Kartli, Kvemo Kartli, and northeastern Turkey. To the north, the duchies of Shida Kartli retained autonomy, while in the east, the Kakheti principality and the Hereti Kingdom (on present Azerbaijan's territory) subsisted.<sup>5</sup>

In 978, for the first time, a state roughly corresponding to today's Georgia was created through the unification of the Abkhazian and Georgian kingdoms by dynastic succession. In 1010, Kakheti and Hereti were incorporated into the Kingdom. Significantly, the new state's name was 'Sakartvelo', ('the place of Kartvelis') which remains the name of the Georgian state today; Georgia was briefly a major power in the region. However, in the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the confrontation between the Seljuk empire and Byzantium escalated. The major Byzantine defeat at Mantzikert in 1071, whereby the Byzantine emperor was captured by the Seljuks, left Georgia practically the only Christian kingdom in the East.<sup>6</sup> Continued Seljuk incursions briefly incapacitated the Georgian state, and forced Giorgi II to pay an annual tribute to the Seljuk Sultan, Malik Shah. As the state weakened, Giorgi was forced to abdicate in favor of his son David in 1089. David is remembered in Georgian History as *David Aghmashenebeli* or 'David the re-builder'. As the Seljuk empire was bogged down by a succession struggle, and European crusaders marched on the Holy Land, David reunified Georgia and established royal authority over the church. Georgia expanded southward and eastward, and defeated the Seljuks at a major battle near Didgori in 1121. Tbilisi was captured in 1122, and became Georgia's capital. This set off a period of further expansion into present Armenia and Azerbaijan, reaching an apex during the reign of the legendary Queen Tamar (1184-1213), and in the early thirteenth century the Georgian state covered roughly the double of its present territory. This expansion was checked and the state itself wrecked by Mongol invasions from the South that begun in 1220. In 1226, the troops of the shah of Khorezm took control over eastern Georgia. The Georgian monarch recognized the overlordship of the Mongols in 1243. As Imeretia broke free from the Mongols in 1260, Georgia was again broken up into western and eastern kingdoms, the latter under Mongol tutelage; moreover, Georgia was further fragmented into various autonomous principalities. During the early fourteenth century, a weakening of the Mongol empire helped Giorgi V (Giorgi the Brilliant) to successfully free Georgia of Mongol influence by 1327.

However, the Mongol influence was to return a few decades later. In 1386, Amir Timur (better known in the west as Tamerlane) sacked Tbilisi in one of eight invasions that led to 'gutted towns, ravaged countryside, and a weakened monarchy'.<sup>7</sup> In the early fifteenth century, yet another attempt at unifying Georgia took place under the rule of

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<sup>5</sup> For detailed accounts of Georgian ancient history, see David Braund, *Georgian in Antiquity. A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia 550 BC - AD 562*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Suny, p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994 (rev. ed.), p. 45.

Alexander I (1412-1442) but internal divisions again accentuated the east-west split of the Georgian state. By the end of the fifteenth century, Georgia was divided into three kingdoms (Kakheti, Kartli and Imereti) and a number of principalities. It would remain divided until the Russian annexation in 1801.

### **6.1.2. Georgia between Shahs, Sultans, and Czars**

The next centuries saw Georgia sandwiched between two powers that came to dominate its history until the nineteenth century: the increasingly powerful Ottoman and Persian empires. Here, geopolitics intersected with the internal divisions of Georgia, as its western parts came under the influence and rule of the Ottoman empire, whereas Persia extended into eastern Georgia.<sup>8</sup> The internal divisions of Georgia meant that local princes often sided with the Turkish or Persian empires for favors; ethnicity or religion were not dominant elements in the politics of the time. In fact, numerous conversions to Islam took place at this time. Moreover, the conflict between Safavid Persia and the Ottomans during the first half of the sixteenth century to a large extent took place in Georgia. The treaty of Amasa between the two great empires in 1555 divided Georgia into two spheres of influence coinciding with the existing east-west divisions within Georgia. However, in 1578 the Ottomans attempted to conquer the entirety of the south Caucasus, and after some resistance by the prince of Kartli, succeeded in controlling the region, and had Iran recognize its suzerainty there. However, Iran's submission did not last long. Already by 1602, the Caucasus was in flames again, as Shah Abbas I waged war on the Ottomans, and forced the Georgian kings to join the war effort.

The seventeenth century was characterized by the arrival on the Georgian scene of the Russian empire. Imperial Russia briefly cultivated the Georgian princes in the hope of gaining a foothold in the Caucasus, and some Georgian kings and princes even swore allegiance to the Czar. This forced Safavid Persia to step carefully, in order to avoid direct Russian involvement. However, Russian promises of support were not kept, and the Persian empire regained its erstwhile position, restoring the border as it had been in 1555. The constant warfare had disastrous consequences for the economy and society of Georgia. Over a hundred thousand Kakhetians had been deported to Iran, slave trade and warfare had impoverished the people, major cities like the Black Sea ports and Kutaisi had populations numbering only in the few thousands. During the late eighteenth century, numerous Kakhetian and Kartlian princes served the Safavid empire, often with distinction, embracing Islam and acting as subservient vassals to their overlords. So did – in appearance – Vakhtang VI, who reluctantly converted to Islam in 1716. Six years later, Isfahan fell to the Afghan Abdali tribes at the battle of Gulnabad. In the same year, 1722, Russia under Peter the Great made its first expedition into the South Caucasus. Relying on Russian support, Vakhtang left the Persian Shah to his destiny. But the Russian forces

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<sup>8</sup> Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*.

never reached Georgia, instead withdrawing and leaving the South Caucasus to be conquered by the Ottomans, who controlled the area from 1723 to 1735. Beginning in the seventeenth century, Abkhazian princes began converting to Islam, something that attenuated the high-culture link between the Abkhaz and the Georgians.

With the rise of Nadir Shah in Iran, Georgian princes grabbed the opportunity to rid themselves of Ottoman suzerainty, and supported the Iranian reconquest of Kakheti and Kartli. Nadir's commander of heart was a Georgian, and there was even a Georgian suburb of Isfahan. In 1747, Nadir Shah was murdered, leaving Kartli and Kakheti practically independent. Kartli and Kakheti united in 1762, and its King, Erekle II, reigned until 1798. During his reign, Georgia moved closer into the Russian orbit. Erekle was convinced of the need for a close tie with Russia to ensure Georgia's survival, and attempted to receive Russian pledges of support in 1773. However, Catherine the Great was more interested in making peace with Turkey, leading to the treaty of Kuchuk-Kainarji in 1774 that profoundly neglected Georgia's interests. But not a decade later, Russian interest had returned, and in 1783 the treaty of Georgievsk was signed, making the Kartli-Kakheti kingdom a Russian protectorate. This increased the fortunes of the Georgian state only in appearance, for when the next Russian-Ottoman war broke out in 1787, Russian troops were removed from Georgia. In 1795, Tbilisi was sacked and burned by the Persians, without any Russia reaction. In spite of this, Kartli-Kakheti was formally annexed to the Russian empire in 1800. Less than a year later, the kingdom itself was abolished.

### 6.1.3. Georgia Under Russian Rule

During the centuries of turmoil that composed Georgia's history from the twelfth until the early nineteenth centuries, most of the population, notably the ethnic Georgian population, had lived in the countryside. Wars, invasions, and taxation by various rulers had kept cities small and people poor. In this sense, Russian rule was to mean a certain stability. Moreover, Russian rule meant that the Georgian-populated regions were once again unified under a single political roof. Russia conquered Imeretia in 1810, and subsequently Samtskhe, Meskheta, and Javakheti, areas that had long been under Ottoman rule. Numerous Georgian princes accepted Russian suzerainty in exchange for self-rule, but eventually were incorporated directly under Russian rule. Guria lost its autonomy in 1828, after the entire South Caucasus had come under Russian control after the treaty of Turkmanchai with Iran the same year. Samegrelo and Svaneti kept their self-rule until 1857 and 1858, respectively, and Abkhazia until 1864. Finally, in 1878, Ajaria was ceded to Russia by the Ottomans in the treaty of Berlin.<sup>9</sup> But these positive consequences of Russian rule were offset by the official negation of a single Georgian nation. In the 1897 census, a total of 11 sub-ethnic Kartvelian groups were listed. Having failed to russianize

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<sup>9</sup> Gachechiladze, *The New Georgia*, pp. 26-27.

Georgia, the Russian rulers resorted to division to secure their rule. This included listing Svans and Mingrels as separate groups, but also fairly abstract constructions such as the 'Samurzakanians', denoting the Mingrelians living in contemporary Abkhazia.

Abkhazia's loss of self-rule in 1864, which happened simultaneously with the submission of the Circassian rebellion in the North Caucasus, was accompanied by a forced exile of large numbers of Abkhaz. This mass movement, the *Mohajirstvo*, irrevocably changed the demographic and religious situation in Abkhazia. The mainly Muslim highland Abkhaz were especially targeted and forced to leave whereas many of the Christian Abkhaz, who mainly lived in the lowlands, had better chances to stay. The number of exiles was so large that hence the majority of the Abkhaz in Abkhazia now gradually switched from being Muslims to being Christians. More importantly, the numbers of the Abkhaz were decimated, further lowering their demographic position in their ancestral lands.

Heavy-handed Russian rule led to uprisings led by elements of the Georgian nobility. In Kakheti in 1802, in Mtiuleti in 1804, again in Kakheti in 1812-13, and in Imereti in 1819, dissatisfied nobles led rebellions or uprisings against the Russian yoke. By the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, a Georgian intelligentsia had formed. In 1829, a secret society was formed with the aim of restoring the Bagratid dynasty, which had ruled Kartli and Kakheti intermittently for almost a thousand years, to power. This society planned to murder all high-ranking Russian officers in Georgia, but was betrayed by one of its members. Although the society was suppressed, the Russian rulers realized a need for concessions to the Georgian nobility to quiet dissent. A last peasant rebellion took place in Guria in 1841. Over the 1860s and 1870s, serfdom was gradually abolished in Georgia although remnants of it existed up until 1912.

#### **6.1.4 The Emergence of a Georgian Nation**

The first emergence of a national intelligentsia in Georgia can be traced back to the romantic age, the poets and writers of the early nineteenth century that recorded and reassembled Georgia's cultural heritage. The Georgian national revival was a product of the nobility, for obvious reasons. In fact, the ethnic balance in the Russian-ruled South Caucasus was such that Georgians and Azerbaijani Turks were mainly rural populations, overwhelmingly peasant, with small nobilities. In the Azerbaijani Turks' case, the nobility was culturally Persianized, as had been the case for parts of the Georgian nobility in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But Azerbaijan was much more intimately tied to Persia than Georgia, sharing Shi'a Islamic culture and religion with the Persians. Georgia, on the other hand, was Christian, a fact that pulled it more naturally, through Russia, into the European cultural orbit, leading to the import of European ideas at a much earlier stage than Azerbaijan. But Georgians remained a mainly rural people. The cities were from an early time onward populated mainly by Armenians, to which Russians were later

added. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Tbilisi itself had a majority of Armenians, but all cities in Georgia had comparatively small populations altogether. There being no Georgian bourgeoisie to lead a national movement, this task was taken up by sectors of the nobility. These were led by poets such as Aleksander Chavchavadze, Nikoloz Baratashvili, and Grigol Orbeliani, who awakened the memory of the Georgian golden age of centuries ago. Meanwhile, a small circle of aristocrats began writing scholarly works on the history and geography of Georgia. Subsequently, small numbers of equally aristocratically rooted Georgians traveled to Russia for further education in the 1850s and 1860s. As their contemporary students of Russian or other nationality, they were impressed by the radical movements sweeping through Europe at the time, not least Garibaldi in Italy. At this point, a turn of attention from Russia to Europe among the emerging Georgian intelligentsia can be noted – something that did not happen in Armenia. Indeed, Georgia was since the nineteenth century consistently looking for models in the west, not the north.<sup>10</sup> Returning to Georgia, they found increasingly few schools teaching Georgian or other local languages; Russian education was dominant. The group of former students, known as the *tergdaleulni*<sup>11</sup>, began publishing journals and periodicals in Georgian, but soon realized the need to effectuate a reform of the Georgian literary language, bringing the written language closer to the vernacular spoken by the people, replacing the archaic church language used hitherto. Undoubtedly, this association with the ‘peasant language’ was related to their exposure to radical, including leftist, ideas. Led by figures such as Ilia Chavchavadze, Akaki Tsereteli and Niko Nikoladze, the *tergdaleulni* published their own periodicals in vernacular Georgian since 1863, and spread ‘progressive’ ideas in the South Caucasus. Various movements sprang up from this time onwards, and predominantly western ideas ranging from liberalism to anarchism were introduced to the Georgian educated public. But this also gradually led to the fracturing of the Georgian intelligentsia by the mid-1870s. Three chief movements existed, the romantic nationalists, the reformist liberals, and the emerging revolutionary, later Marxist movement that was to grow in strength until the revolution.<sup>12</sup>

Georgian society differed markedly from Armenian society by its primarily rural character and the size of the nobility. Whereas over 20% of Armenians in the Caucasus were city dwellers, less than 10% of Georgians were; the nobility composed 5% of the

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<sup>10</sup> Ghia Nodia, ‘The Conflict in Abkhazia: National Projects and Political Circumstances’, in Bruno Coppieters, ed., *Georgians and Abkhazians: the search for a Settlement*, Brussels: Vrije Universiteit Brussels, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Literally, ‘those who drank from the Terek river’, which separated Georgia from Russia, in opposition to the first and older generation of writers that were called the *mtkvardaleulni*, or ‘those who drank from the Mtkvari (Kura) river’, that flows through Tbilisi.

<sup>12</sup> Suny, p. 132.

Georgian population, but only 1% among Armenians.<sup>13</sup> As has been seen above, the Georgian national movement's emergence was heavily tied to the nobility, which did not have a significant level of attachment to the people as a whole. But parallel to the national movement, socialist ideas were on the rise as in many areas of Eastern Europe at the time – in spite of the quasi-absence of a proletariat in Georgia. Whereas a proletariat was beginning to develop in the oil boom of Baku, industry was only nascent in Georgia.

Interestingly, as Kazemzadeh notes, class feeling merged with national feeling in Georgia. In the Caucasus of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ethnic Armenians heavily dominated the bourgeoisie, specifically the latter, who dominated most of Georgian cities' commercial life, and gradually acquired land previously belonging to the Georgian nobility. Russians controlled much of the infrastructure and in a sense colonized the country. In 1828-29, numerous Armenians settled in Javakheti and in Abkhazia, while many Muslims were forced out of the western part of the Caucasus. Meanwhile, the Georgian population was chiefly divided into nobility and peasantry; there was practically no Georgian bourgeoisie, whereas the small bourgeois class was dominated by Armenians. This meant that the class lines and ethnic lines ran parallel, that Russians and Armenians came to be seen as alien exploiters earning wealth at the expense of Georgians. By the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the socialist movement, part of the Russian Social-Democratic Worker's Party, was increasing in strength. Its chief Georgian ideologue was Noi Jordania, who had come into contact with socialist ideas while studying in Warsaw. Jordania, as most other dominant personalities of the Georgian Socialist movement, were Mensheviks. In fact, with the one exception of the large industrial city of Baku, socialism in the entire Caucasus was dominated by the Menshevik faction. Indeed, as Kazemzadeh notes, 'Elsewhere in Transcaucasia the Soviets found it possible to work in relative harmony with other organizations representing various social and economic classes of the population'.<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note that an ideologically based movement, the Mensheviks, were able to achieve primacy in the Georgian political sphere. In the case of the Azerbaijanis, a national, partly religiously based party, the Müsavat, emerged as the largest political formation. Among the Armenians, the Dashnaksutiun, an even more strongly nationalist party achieved dominance. In the case of Georgia, nationalist movements remained on the periphery of the political spectrum.

## **6.2. The First World War and the Russian Revolution**

A body of large importance in the first-world war Caucasus was the Tiflis Soviet of Worker's Deputies. The Tiflis Soviet was formed by the regional committee of the Russian Social Democratic worker's Party on 18 March 1917. The Soviet assumed a

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<sup>13</sup> Firuz Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia, 1917-1921*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1951, p. 5, quoting V.B. Stankevich, *Sud'by Narodov Rossii*, Berlin, 1921, pp. 215-216.

<sup>14</sup> Kazemzadeh, p. 37.

position of responsibility over state and society, in fact taking on a quasi-governmental character. The Mensheviks held the majority of the seats of the Tiflis Soviets, as well as other regional Soviets in the rest of Georgia. By contrast, the Bolsheviks were, by their own account, weak in the Caucasus, a fact which allowed the Menshevik and Bolshevik factions to cooperate for a few months during 1917 before splitting again after the Petrograd congress in April. The split was followed by increasing tension between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, and especially by a struggle for influence over the military garrison in Tiflis. The Bolsheviks, though lesser in number, were opposed to the continuation of the war effort, and as a result enjoyed the support of a significant number of the soldiers, who were overwhelmingly ethnic Russians. Yet following the Bolshevik takeover in Petrograd on 25 October, the Georgian Mensheviks disarmed the Bolshevik soldiers and gained control over Georgia and large parts of the South Caucasus. Only Baku was firmly in the hands of the Bolsheviks.<sup>15</sup>

### 6.2.1. Ottoman Invasions and Divisions in the Caucasus

The Bolshevik takeover affected Georgia deeply, given that it dissolved the link that had existed between Tiflis and Moscow. Indeed, addressing a meeting of all revolutionary organizations a few days after the takeover, Jordania noted that ‘the connection with Russia has been broken and Transcaucasia has been left alone. We have to stand on our own feet and either help ourselves or perish through anarchy’.<sup>16</sup> Only days later, a ‘Transcaucasian Commissariat was formed, composed of three Georgians, three Armenians, three Azerbaijanis, and two Russians.

Indeed, anarchy dominated among the army, which simply refused to continue the war. Russian soldiers abandoned the Caucasian front, and early in 1918 Ottoman troops started crossing the border, met only by resistance from irregular Armenian formations.<sup>17</sup> The Ottoman threat, moreover, divided the peoples of Transcaucasia along ethnic lines. The Georgians and especially the Armenians, generally fearful of the Muslim Turks – this being less than three years after the events of 1915, tried to resist, but the dominant Russian element of the military deserted the battlefield, simply feeling that this was not their war to fight. But the Azerbaijanis, on the other hand, had been feeling subjected to Christian Russian and Armenian domination and exploitation, and were on the whole positively inclined to the Ottoman forces. This was to be accentuated following the bloody events of March-April 1918, when civil war raged in Baku, especially between the Armenian Dashnaktsutiun and the Musavat, which spread to general race riots.<sup>18</sup> This was nothing new in the Caucasus, given that the first Armenian-Azerbaijani clashes had taken

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<sup>15</sup> Suny, *The Making of Modern Georgia*, p. 188-190; Kazemzadeh, pp. 58-59.

<sup>16</sup> Noi Jordania, *Za Dva Goda*, Tiflis 1919, pp. 51-52, quoted by Kazemzadeh, p. 55.

<sup>17</sup> Suny, *The Making of Modern Georgia*, p. 191.

<sup>18</sup> Kazemzadeh, p. 73, Audrey Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*.

place in 1905-07. These clashes eventually weakened both the Dashnaktsutium and the Musavat, and left the Bolsheviks the dominant force in Baku.

Given the increased tension both in the relations between peoples of the region and the external environment of the first world war, as well as the legal vacuum created by the Bolshevik coup in Petrograd and its non-recognition by the Caucasian political formations, the road toward separation from Russia was inevitable. Although Jordania and other Mensheviks, in particular, spoke of the need to stay within 'democratic Russia' once re-established, reality was that there was no 'democratic Russia' – and most immediately, the local peoples needed to create of self-defense military units. This was in practice done through the three leading political formations, the Mensheviks, Dashnaktsutium and Musavat – and as such, took place along ethnic lines. The vacuum also led to the necessity of creating governing bodies for Transcaucasia. As a result, a Transcaucasian Commissariat exercising executive authority was created in November 1917, and a legislative body, the *Seim*, was created on 23 February from the electoral results of the elections to the All-Russian Constituent Assembly that had already been undertaken before the Bolshevik takeover. The Mensheviks and the Musavat got 30 seats each, the Dashnaktsutium 27, and 10 seats were shared among smaller parties. One of the most immediate issues before the assembly was to consider a Turkish proposal for a separate peace. Given that the Caucasian military formations were highly unqualified to withstand the Turkish army, the Seim on 1 March 1918 adopted a resolution declaring its intention to sue for peace with Turkey.<sup>19</sup> Yet the very next day, news reached Tiflis that the Petrograd government had surrendered the Kars, Ardahan and Batumi to the Porte at the treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The Seim, not recognizing the Bolshevik government, did not recognize the surrender of Caucasian territories. But the confusion in the Caucasus had prevented the creation of a state. Indeed, the politicians in Transcaucasia were unsure whether they formed a part of Russia or an independent state. Transcaucasia had not declared independence, but was building governing structures that amounted to those of an independent state. As a result the legal foundation of Transcaucasia was shaky at best, something the Ottoman delegations could not but take advantage of in negotiations. Meanwhile the Ottoman forces were securing control of Ardahan and Kars, with the active assistance of local Azerbaijanis – leading to increased tension between Azerbaijanis and Armenians.

### **6.2.2. The Federative Government of Transcaucasia**

In spite of Turkish ultimatums and against the advice of its chief negotiator, Chkhenkeli, the Mensheviks, Dashnaktsutium and the Social Revolutionaries decided to proceed with a war they knew was doomed to failure rather than surrender Batumi. By its own account, the Seim chose war over 'a shameful peace and slavery', and declared war on the

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<sup>19</sup> Kazemzadeh, p. 90.

Ottomans on 14 April. Predictably, Batumi was taken within a day, and apparently, the Ajarian Muslim population of the region had been supporting the Ottoman forces. Faced with the need to adjust its limbo, the Seim after long hours of debate declared independence on 22 April, giving birth to the Independent Federative Republic of Transcaucasia. The only party that ardently supported independence was nevertheless the Musavat, whereas the other parties voting in favor of it had done so reluctantly, seeing no other way out.<sup>20</sup> The first step the new government took was to accept the terms of the Brest-Litovsk treaty, and hence surrender the remaining area of contention, Kars. This enabled the Ottoman Empire to recognize Transcaucasia on 28 April. But given the new state's weakness, the Porte demanded additional territories: the districts of Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki, (basically corresponding to today's Samtskhe-Javakheti province of Georgia, an area where Meskhetian Turks cohabited with an Armenian population), large parts of the Echmiadzin region, forming the better part of today's Armenia, and the city of Alexandropol. Again, the divisions between Azerbaijanis on the one hand and the Georgians and Armenians were amplified. The Azerbaijanis had nothing to lose from the Ottoman demands, whereas Georgia and Armenia were vehemently opposed to them. Yet neither the Armenians nor the Georgians could do anything to oppose the Ottoman advances, which occurred very practically on the ground as the Ottoman armies, supported by Azerbaijani formations, marched over present Armenia, headed for Baku.

### **6.3. The Rise and Fall of the First Georgian Republic**

At this point, the Georgian leaders seem to have realized the futility of hanging on to a Transcaucasian Federation. Given the Ottoman threat, which was clear and present to Georgia (although the Ottoman armies were mainly passing South of Georgian-inhabited areas), Georgia needed a foreign sponsor to safeguard its security. In order to appeal to a foreign state, Georgia needed to be a subject of international law. With Transcaucasian statehood thoroughly incapacitated by the disagreements among its main component nations, the Seim dissolved itself barely three months after its inception, on 26 May 1918. On the same date and in the same building, Georgia declared independence. This move was undertaken with a mixture of reluctance and enthusiasm, with the former dominating given the dire circumstances of the time. With regard to interethnic relations, it is worth noting that the authors of the declaration had considered the fact that the new state would be a multi-ethnic one: Point no. 6 stated that 'the Georgian Democratic Republic shall give extensive freedom of development to all the peoples inhabiting her territory.' As will be seen below, this stated intent did not prevent ethnic issues from gaining salience.

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<sup>20</sup> Kazemzadeh, pp. 105-107; Suny, p. 191.

### 6.3.1. Georgia's Quest for Recognition and Patrons

Before even having proclaimed independence (in fact, probably instead giving additional impetus to the decision to do so), Georgian negotiators had begun to seek a deal with Germany for protection.<sup>21</sup> From a Georgian perspective, this made perfect sense: the Brest-Litovsk treaty had freed German soldiers on the eastern front, Germany in the eyes of many looked like a winner in the war although it was destined to collapse only six months later, and Germany was allied to the Ottomans, giving them a certain influence over the actions of the Porte in the Caucasus. But, as Suny argues, the tilt toward Germany was not only expedient, but rooted in a perception of Germany as a center of the European culture toward which Georgia was oriented.<sup>22</sup> Within short, German soldiers were deployed on Georgian soil, though not in great numbers, and were generally greeted with enthusiasm by the population. Their correct and disciplined conduct was noted, especially compared with the British forces that followed them. For Germany's fortunes in the war did not allow it to continue its Caucasian adventure for long. The main document governing Georgian-German relations was signed on 27 August 1918; less than three months later, Germany and the Ottoman empire were clearly losing the war, and taking measures to remove their troops from the Caucasus. In their place, British troops landed in Baku on 17 November, and were to stay in the Caucasus until 1920. Yet British troops presence was never very large; in fact, in spite of the obvious possibility for the entente powers to acquire a foothold in the Caucasus, none of the great powers were seriously interested, neither were they ready to recognize the three Caucasian states as full-fledged members of the international community. This notwithstanding, the latter desperately sought recognition and membership in the League of Nations. Briefly, Italy showed an interest in a mandate over the region, but a change of government in Rome ended Italy's interest.<sup>23</sup> The entente powers eventually recognized the three republics in January 1920, but no troops would be committed to defending them against a Bolshevik invasion, which was not late in coming – Bolshevik forces took over Baku in late April of the same year, and moved westward toward Georgia. At this point, however, the recently constituted Georgian army was able to push back the Red Army, even staging a counter-offensive that temporarily halted Bolshevik designs on Georgia. In fact, Georgian resistance was instrumental in obtaining the signature a treaty on 7 May 1920 between the Georgian Menshevik government and the Russian Bolsheviks. This treaty granted Georgia recognition, and the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.<sup>24</sup> Yet it was soon clear that the Bolsheviks never intended to let Georgia remain

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<sup>21</sup> Kazemzadeh, p. 115, citing G.V. Khachapuridze, *Bolshevikiki Gruzii v boiakh za pobedu sovetskoii vlasti*, Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatelstvo Politicheskoy Literatury, 1947.

<sup>22</sup> Suny, p. 193.

<sup>23</sup> Kazemzadeh, pp. 227-229.

<sup>24</sup> Kazemzadeh, p. 296-299.

independent. Pressure mounted against the Menshevik government to succumb to the Bolshevik forces in Tiflis, to follow the example of Azerbaijan and simply allow the Sovietization of Georgia without a fight. However, the Georgian government refused to give up, in fact putting up stiff resistance when the Red Army eventually attacked Georgia in early 2001. In late February, though, the Bolshevik army broke through the Georgian defenses, and the Menshevik government fled Tiflis for Batumi on 25 February 1921.

### 6.3.2. Inter-Ethnic Relations in Independent Georgia

During its brief tenure, the Menshevik government came across significant problems with ethnic minorities. There were difficulties with regard to the Abkhaz, Ossetian, and Ajarian minorities, and a major conflict with Armenia over Armenian-inhabited territories within Georgian territory.<sup>25</sup> Already in the Winter of 1918, an uprising took place in today's South Ossetia. This uprising was crushed by the Menshevik government's People's Guard, generating resentment among Ossetians against the Tiflis government; by the same token, this also open the way for Bolshevik inroads into the Ossetian areas. Again, ideology and ethnicity became linked, Mensheviks being equated with Georgians. In 1920, a much larger Ossetian uprising took place, which was supported by the Bolshevik Regional Committee, which had gathered a military force in Vladikavkaz, today the capital of North Ossetia. As this Ossetian force moved southward, it expelled the Georgian forces and actually integrated Ossetia with Soviet Russia. In Ossetian eyes, this period is recalled as a time of Georgian oppression, and Ossetian historiography cites over 5,000 dead and many more wounded due to Georgian brutality. The Georgians, on the other hand, see the episode in the light of Russia's first inroads into Georgia, the use of minorities within Georgia as a tool to weaken the country, which is viewed as a recurrent feature of Moscow's policy against Georgia ever since.<sup>26</sup>

In the Spring of the same year, a peasant revolt took place in Abkhazia and Mingrelia, which was also suppressed by the People's Guard. However, subsequent relations between the Menshevik government and Abkhazia are more complex. It should be noted at the outset that the Menshevik government, though intent on creating a unitary Georgian state, did foresee a certain level of self-rule for Abkhazia. Article 107 of the Constitution of the Georgian Republic stated that "Abkhasie (district of Soukhoun), Georgia Musulmane (district of Batum), and Zakhathala (district of Zakhathala), which are integral parts of the Georgian Republic, enjoy an autonomy in the administration of

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<sup>25</sup> On the economic conditions in Abkhazia both before the revolution and in the early Soviet period, see A. A. Abshilava, *Istorii Promyshlennosti Abkhaszskoi ASSR*, Sukhumi: Abkhazskii institut iazika, literatury i istorii im. D. I. Gulia, 1969.

<sup>26</sup> For a Georgian account of the episode, see Avtandil Menteshashvili, 'An Assessment of the 1920 Uprising in South Ossetia', in *Some National and Ethnic Problems in Georgia*, Tbilisi, 1992. A larger work is the same author's *Iz Istorii Vzaimootnosbeniy Gruzinskogo, Abkhaszskogo i Osetinskogo Narodov (1918-1920 gg.)*, Tbilisi 1990.

their affairs.”<sup>27</sup> Whereas no mention was made of Ossetia, the two areas later enjoying the status of Autonomous Republics, Ajaria and Abkhazia, were recognized already by the Menshevik government. Archival material also shows that even as they counteracted protagonists of separatism, especially pro-Turkish landlords and pro-Soviet Bolsheviks in Abkhazia, the Menshevik government consistently viewed Abkhazia as a part of Georgia but enjoying autonomy within it, and did vest powers in Abkhaz representatives – though it picked the ones it viewed as reliable and loyal to Tbilisi.<sup>28</sup> Zaqatala, however, became a part of Azerbaijan after the Sovietization of the Caucasus.

#### **6.4. Soviet Georgia**

The collapse of the first Georgian republic and its integration into the Soviet Union led to the creation of what is usually termed the ‘Second Georgian Republic’, that is, Soviet Georgia, which came into being under tumultuous circumstances, and was central to the conflict between Lenin and Stalin, where the Georgian Stalin found himself on the side of the centralizers that Lenin accused of ‘Great Russian chauvinism’, and Lenin defended the Georgian leaders trying to safeguard Georgia’s sovereignty, who were accused of nationalism. Georgia was from the beginning, and remained, an outlier within the Soviet Union. It relatively soon developed one of the highest levels of education, a very large intelligentsia, a high standard of living in the later parts of Soviet rule from widespread poverty in Western Georgia at the time of the revolution, and in many ways refused to submit itself totally to Soviet rule. Georgia was one of the few areas of the union that Moscow never really completely controlled, and was often able to get away with its dodging of Moscow’s rules. From the 1920s through the 1980s, Georgia retained a deep sense of independence from the Soviet leadership, which it was often unable to express. It was hence no coincidence that Georgia, together with the Baltic republics, was where the earliest and the strongest secessionist movements in the union emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Sovietization, however, changed the elite relationships between the minorities and Georgia. Whereas the Abkhazian nobility had still been somewhat linked to Georgia before the revolution, the new, Communist leadership was linked to Moscow and not to Georgia. In South Ossetia, which hadn’t had any nobility of its own, the Communist elite was, just like in Abkhazia, oriented mainly toward Moscow. This was natural, given the historical link between Ossetia and Russia. Among North Caucasian peoples, the Ossetians were the only Christians, and were consistently an ally of Moscow’s during the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is no coincidence that the colonization of Georgia in the early 1800s took place via the Ossetian corridor in the central Caucasus.

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<sup>27</sup> Constantin Kandelaki, *The Georgian Question before the Free World (Acts-Documents-Evidence)*, Paris 1953.

<sup>28</sup> Avtandil Menteshashvili, ‘Georgian-Abkhaz Relations in 1918-1921’, in Menteshashvili, *Some National and Ethnic Problems in Georgia*, Tbilisi, n.d., cites at length material containing Menshevik

#### 6.4.1. The Creation of the Soviet Union and the Transcaucasian Federation

The integration of Georgia into the emerging Soviet Union began very quickly. A Transcaucasian Federation was imposed from Moscow, against the wishes of many communists from the region itself. In March 1922, a Federal Union of Soviet Socialist Republics of Transcaucasia was formed. As far as Georgia was concerned, three autonomous units were created on its territory. In May 1921, Abkhazia was created as a formally independent Soviet Republic in federation with Georgia, but was formally incorporated into the Georgian Republic in 1931 as an Autonomous Republic. Ajaria was formed as an Autonomous Republic in June 1921, whereas South Ossetia received a status as an Autonomous *Oblast* much later, in April 1922.<sup>29</sup>

In the same year, Stalin suggested that the three South Caucasian Republics be joined to the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR) as Autonomous Republics. Whereas Azerbaijani and Armenian Bolsheviks on the whole supported this idea, Georgians leaders were firmly against it. While supporting economic integration, they underlined the need of preserving Georgia's sovereignty.<sup>30</sup> In spite of this, Stalin's plan would likely have been realized had it not been for the opposition by Lenin. Opposing Stalin's plan of integrating all areas under Russia, Lenin instead proposed the formation of a union of the then six existing Soviet republics on an equal basis. Georgian leaders wanted to enter the emerging Soviet Union as a signatory in its own right, however the Central Committee in Moscow had decided that Transcaucasia would be a single constituent republic. As the rift between Lenin and Stalin grew, the latter engineered the creation of the Transcaucasian Federated Soviet Socialist Republic (ZSFSR) which joined the Soviet Union in December 1922.

Lenin's illness and Stalin's ascent toward full power in the party, together with the sidelining of Trotsky throughout 1923, led to the marginalization of the decentralist forces within the Georgian Communist party. In particular, Stalin systematically sought to liquidate Menshevik power. As noted above, the Mensheviks had been the dominant political force in Georgia, and although its leadership was in exile, the Menshevik party still enjoyed large support in Georgia and therefore posed a threat to full Bolshevik control of the Caucasus. In his offensive against the Mensheviks and the autonomist Bolsheviks in Georgia, Stalin among other accused Georgian Communists of a chauvinistic attitude towards minorities, hence turning the argument of a Great Russian chauvinism fielded against him back to the Georgians, and claiming to represent true internationalist values. Georgian 'moderate' Bolsheviks like Pilipe Makharadze, on the

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discourse on Abkhazia. Conclusions on the intentions and practices of the Mensheviks are those of the author.

<sup>29</sup> See V.N. Merkviladze, *Sozdanie i Ukreplenie Sovetskoi Gosudarstvennosti v Gruzii 1921-1936*, Tbilisi 1969.

<sup>30</sup> Suny, p. 215.

other hand, were aware of the widespread opposition in Georgia to the Bolsheviks, and tried to reach out a hand to Mensheviks.

By mid-1923, anti-Bolshevik forces had congregated into an underground movement known as the *damkom*, the secret Committee for the Independence of Georgia (*damoukideblobis komiteti*). Supported by Jordania in exile, the *damkom* organized a rebellion in 1924. Although the Mensheviks knew the rebellion could not be successful without support from other Caucasian peoples, a rebellion began in western Georgia on 6 August 1924. The revolt remained localized, did not spread to the large cities, and did not attract large masses. As it collapsed, the repression was of the standard Soviet scale: Four thousand people were killed and countless others sent to labor camps in northern Russia.

Soviet government certainly eliminated opposition in the most ruthless ways, but it also brought tangible dividends to Georgia, both economically and politically. As Suny has noted, economic reconstruction of Georgia proceeded relatively quickly, both in agriculture and industry. Georgia benefited from the emphasis on industrialization that the Soviet government implemented. Moreover, in the cultural field, the 1920s were the time of *Korenizatsiia*, which enabled many Georgians to rise in the Soviet institutions. It helped the Georgians to Georgianize Tbilisi, but also the Ossetians to 'Ossetianize' Tskhinvali, which had not been a primarily Ossetians settlement before. By the late 1920s, the Communist party had grown into an institution with a broad social base, extending its legitimacy in society. Georgians could now receive education in their native language to an extent much larger than in Czarist times. Publishing and schooling in Georgian were also greatly promoted, contributing to appeasing popular opposition to the Communist regime.

*Korenizatsiia* affected minority populations as well and not only Georgians. Though Georgians came to hold most important posts in the republic, probably being over-represented compared to the minorities, the same could be said about the holders of autonomous regions (Abkhaz, Ossetians and Ajars) in their own territories. As far as education was concerned, schools were created for Armenian, Azerbaijani, Abkhaz and Ossetian populations, and of course in Russian. Primary education was made compulsory in 1930, and through the early 1930s the near entirety of the population was made literate. 1929 nevertheless brought the *velikii perelom*, the height of the forced collectivization of agriculture to the Caucasus and to Georgia, where the rate of collectivization jumped from under 4 percent to over 60 percent in six months. While the adverse effects were by no means as dramatic as in Ukraine or in Kazakhstan, the consequences for peasants arbitrarily qualified as 'kulaks' were often severe. The local population's feeling about collectivization is clear by any analysis of the statistics of the time. The Kakheti region, for example, had only very slowly implemented collectivization. When orders from the Georgian Central Committee criticized this, the rate of collectivization jumped from 12 to 80 percent. When, several months later, peasants were again allowed to leave the *kolkhozes*, the rate plummeted instantly to 10 percent. It is important to note that efforts

at collectivization often proceeded slowly in minority areas.<sup>31</sup> Especially Turkic and Armenian-populated areas in the south lagged behind, whereas South Ossetia showed a relatively high level of collectivization (92%). By 1937, at the end of the second five-year plan, Georgia still lagged far behind even Armenia and Azerbaijan in collectivization. Whereas the two neighboring republics had rates of 86-88 percent, Georgia's was under 77 percent – very much because of Beria's more lenient treatment of Georgia.

#### 6.4.2. Stalinism in Georgia

Throughout the Soviet Union, the 1930s were marked by the bloody purges of the late 1930s. For Georgia, the decade was marked by the ascent of one politician that came to control the republic but also to help it sustain some autonomy from Moscow: Lavrentii Beria became the head of the CPG in 1931, head of the ZSFSR party committee in 1932, and was elevated to head the NKVD, the feared precursor to the KGB, in 1938. Though that meant his moving to Moscow, Beria supervised the South Caucasus even then, and was one of a small number of leading politicians at the central level (his main rivals Zhdanov and Malenkov also did) who maintained a clear territorial power base. Georgia suffered less from the onslaught on the Church, the nobility, and the collectivization, than many areas in the Soviet Union.. Beria's steep career was made possible to a great extent by his leading role in the Stalinist personality cult. Stalin's Georgian origins may have made the republic a logical ground for the personality cult compared with any other region of the union, but it was Beria's well-planned policy of championing the veneration of the leader that brought the cult to new heights in Georgia.<sup>32</sup>

Coinciding with the onset of the great terror in 1936-38, the adoption of a new constitution of the USSR in 1936 led to the demise of the ZSFSR, whereby the three South Caucasian republics became individual members of the Soviet Union in their own right. This move reduced Beria's direct control to the Georgian SSR alone, though his dominant influence in the other two republics remained. Beria initially seemed intent on limiting the extent of the great purges in the Caucasus, but his own position was endangered for a short time in 1937, though he managed to reassert his power by purging four thousand people from the party bureaucracy. The entire old Communist elite of Georgia was liquidated, and most leading figures were executed.

During the second world war, Georgia suffered greatly. Georgia provided over five hundred thousand soldiers out of a population of roughly 3,5 million. In fact, its

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<sup>31</sup> Suny, p. 250.

<sup>32</sup> For a further treatment of Beria's career, see Charles H. Fairbanks, Jr., 'National Cadres as a Force in the Soviet System: The Evidence of Beria's Career, 1949-53', in Jeremy Azrael, ed., *Soviet Nationality Policies and Practices*, New York: Praeger, 1978. For an in-depth treatment, see Amy W. Knight, *Beria: Stalin's First Lieutenant*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. Also, Sergo Beria, *Beria, My Father: Inside Stalin's Kremlin*, London: Duckworth, 2001.

population decreased by over three hundred thousand during the war. This human disaster took over a decade to overcome, much like in other parts of the Soviet Union. However, Beria's control over Georgia remained until he fell out of favor with Stalin in 1951. Stalin's direct intervention in Georgian affairs then, including the appointment of a new first secretary, curtailed Beria's powers. It also led to the demise of many of Beria's appointees, especially fellow Mingrelians, whereas followers of the new party chief Mgeladze, who had served in Abkhazia prior to his appointment, were favored.<sup>33</sup>

### **6.4.3. Destalinization in Georgia**

Stalin's death in 1953 led to important changes for Georgia. Khrushchev's rise and Beria's subsequent fall opened the way for the destalinization of the union. Whereas this may have been interpreted positively in many areas of the Soviet Union, this was not the case in Georgia. The demise of a Beria and even more so the denigration of Stalin were interpreted by the large majority of Georgians not as a step toward civility in the top hierarchy of the Soviet state, but as an attack on Georgians. Stalin's crimes were not known to the people, who felt pride – and to a substantial extent still today feel pride – that a Georgian could rise to be the leader of the Communist world, and indeed one of the most powerful men in twentieth century history. In June 1953, Beria was arrested and executed, after which a new first secretary was put in place in the Georgian Communist Party. Vasily Mzhavanadze, a close ally of Krushchev's, assumed the position in September. This was followed by the replacement of first secretaries in the party organizations of Abkhazia, Ajaria, and Tbilisi itself.<sup>34</sup>

Krushchev's secret speech at the twentieth congress of the CPSU in February 1956 was in all likelihood the event that prompted the large anti-Soviet demonstrations in Tbilisi and other Georgian cities in early March 1956. These demonstrations coincided with the commemoration of the third anniversary of Stalin's death, which the authorities, unlike the two earlier years, had not commemorated. Demonstrators demanded that Stalin be rehabilitated, and specifically asked Molotov to defend Stalin's name. Barricades were raised, buses and cars overturned, in one of the extremely few instances of civil unrest in the USSR of this time. By March 9, the building of the Communist Party's central committee in Tbilisi was under siege, and as demonstrators tried to enter government buildings, the army intervened brutally, leading to the killing of hundreds of people.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Suny, p. 288.

<sup>34</sup> Jürgen Gerber, *Georgien:: Nationale Opposition und Kommunistische Herrschaft seit 1956*, Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 1997, p. 35; Suny, *Georgian Nation*, p. 301.

<sup>35</sup> See Mark Kipnis, "The Georgian National Movement: Problems and Trends", in *Crossroads—Trends and Issues in Contemporary Society*, vol. 1, Autumn 1978, p. 202-203. See also eyewitness account, "We shall not allow criticism of Stalin" available at <http://revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv5n2/georgia.htm>.

The March massacre widened rifts within the Georgian Communist Party, as several high officials expressed solidarity with the people. But the events also formed evidence of Georgia's deviance from other parts of the Soviet Union. In the Stalin era and even more so in the aftermath of the 1956 riots, Georgia retained its separate identity, steadfastly refusing at a popular level to integrate with the rest of the union. In many ways, 1956 was a turning point, after which Georgian loyalty to the Soviet Union was gravely compromised. Small nationalist organizations started emerging at that point; most later leaders, including Zviad Gamsakhurdia, were among the activists in the 1956 riots and after. Indeed, Georgia was to a larger extent than other republics, with the possible exception of the Baltics, a reluctant member of the union. And whereas most social indicators in other Soviet Republics showed of increasing integration, the opposite was true in Georgia, where the Georgian nation's consolidation intensified. A key indicator of this was the extraordinary loyalty to the Georgian language that consecutive censuses showed. From 1956 to 1989, all censuses showed over 98% of Georgians stating Georgian as their mother tongue. By contrast, most other ethnic groups showed a decrease of the titular language and a gradual increase of Russian as mother tongue. The geographic mobility of Georgians was also very low. In 1989, over 95% of Georgians in the USSR lived in their home republic, a figure rivaled by no titular nationality of a union republic. In comparison to other ethnic groups, Georgians also intermarried less, and increasingly less. In 1969, 93,5% of Georgians were married to Georgians, whereas ten years later the figure had increased to 96,3%.<sup>36</sup>

In terms of political participation, it has often been mentioned that Georgians were over-represented in the party leadership posts, in the administration, and even down to factory and Kolkhoz directors. Whereas Georgians formed less than 70% of the population of the republic, almost 85% of Kolkhoz directors were Georgians in 1984.<sup>37</sup> However, the case of Georgia was no exception. Even within the autonomous regions in Georgia, the dominance of the titular nationality could be observed. Hence in 1985, the breakdown of the local secretaries of the South Ossetian obkom of the Communist party showed that 80% of 1<sup>st</sup> secretaries, 60% of 2<sup>nd</sup> secretaries, and 75% of ordinary secretaries were Ossetians – although Ossetians formed no more than 65% of the population of the Autonomous region. The Abkhaz were even more over-represented in the local levels of their communist party. Although Abkhaz were no more than 17% of the population of the Abkhaz ASSR, a full 50% of the first secretaries of the local raikom divisions were ethnic Abkhaz.

Hence all titular nationalities enjoyed specific privileges in terms of access to education and political office. By contrast, minorities that lacked autonomy fared worse. Armenians, for example, formed almost 10% of the population of Georgia, but only 3,6% of

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<sup>36</sup> Gerber, *Georgien*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>37</sup> Gerber, *Georgian*, p. 43.

university students in the 1970s. This can partly be explained by the attraction of studying in Yerevan in Armenian compared to studying in Tbilisi in Georgian or Russian. Likewise the predominantly agrarian Azeri population remained outside the higher educational system and bureaucratic careers in Georgia. The trend was clear: Russians, Armenians or Azeris in Georgia, if interested in higher education and party careers, sought to pursue these aims not in Georgia but in their respective titular republics. It is difficult to determine to what degree this was conditioned by discrimination and denial of opportunities in Georgia, and to what degree it was a result of higher incentives to move to the titular republics of these minority populations. Without taking these incentive structures into account, Suny takes the stand that 'higher education in Georgia had become the prerogative of Georgians' and that 'Georgian control of the local party and republican institutions ... resulted ... in officially sanctioned discrimination against minorities within the republic'.<sup>38</sup> The low figures of minority enrolment in higher education (in 1979, a record 92% of university students were Georgian) should also be seen in the context of two mitigating factors: firstly, language may have played an important role. Whereas most university education took place in Georgian, command of Georgian among minority populations was extremely low. The second language minorities would learn was typically Russian, the language of inter-ethnic communication in the Soviet Union, which meant only the curriculum available in Russian would be truly accessible to the minorities. For minority populations, the first preference would logically be to study in their mother tongue; the second preference to study in Russian, and Georgian would logically be a distant third. For Azeris or Armenians, the vicinity of Baku and Yerevan meant that preferable options of higher education were present, explaining to a certain extent why the minority enrolment figures were so low. That does not prove that there was no discrimination involved, but does point out that discrimination cannot be proven through statistics only.

The reforms in the immediate post-Stalin era also brought new efforts led by the center to improve minorities' conditions. Media broadcasts and newspapers in minority languages were improved, new schools in Armenian, Abkhaz and Ossetian were opened, and a department of Abkhaz language was opened in the Sukhumi branch of the Georgian academy of sciences.<sup>39</sup>

Mzhavanadze stayed in power until 1972, eight years after Krushchev's demise. During his 19-year tenure, like in the tenure of Beria before him and long tenures in other republics such as Aliyev's in Azerbaijan or Rashidov's in Uzbekistan, strong patronage networks were developed and clientelism prevailed. Officially, Georgia did poorly. Its growth rate was among the lowest in the union. However, the levels of private savings in Georgia were roughly double of the Soviet average; the rates of car and house ownership

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Suny, *Modern Georgia*, p. 304.

<sup>39</sup> Suny, *Modern Georgia*, p. 302.

were also the highest in the union. Effectively, this meant that Georgia was resisting incorporation into the Soviet economic system and preserved a pseudo-capitalist economy to a larger extent than any other Soviet republic.<sup>40</sup> This situation attracted increasing attention and criticism from Russia, undermining Mzhavanadze's power base and eventually leading to his replacement by Eduard Shevardnadze. Shevardnadze had until then been the minister of internal affairs of the Georgian republic, and came to power with a clear mandate from Moscow to fight corruption. Within days of his arrival to power, he showed that he meant business: the first victims of his anti-corruption campaign were arrested, and soon, even the second secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, Churkin, was dismissed on corruption charges. A total of 25,000 people are estimated to have been arrested by 1977. Shevardnadze managed to turn Georgia around, improving the official economic figures considerably, a success which (together with Andropov's patronage) certainly helped his elevation to candidate membership of the Politburo in 1978, and to full membership and the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR in 1985.

## 6.5. The Georgian National Revival

Shevardnadze's ascent to power also coincided with the formation of the first dissident organizations in Georgia. Actually, fringe nationalist organizations were formed at the time of the 1956 riots, though little is known of their activities. The most well-known is a group called the *Gorgasliani*, known because two of its members later gained prominence in the national movement. Named after the founder of Tbilisi, king Vakhtang Gorgosali, the *Gorgasliani* sought to spread accurate information regarding the annexation of 1921 and the repressions of the 1930s. The group included two young men, Merab Kostava and Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the son of Konstantin Gamsakhurdia, one of Georgia's most renowned literary figures.<sup>41</sup> Already in 1957, the KGB broke up the *Gorgasliani*, though most of them were released within several months due to their young age. It seems that the 1956 riots ended much of the rather particularistic attachment and loyalty to the Communist regime in Georgia, which had mainly been through the persons of Stalin and Beria.

### 6.5.1. The Emergence of Georgian Nationalist Movements

Later, the national movement seems to have re-organized in the 1960s, led by an illegal group of students in the technical university of Tbilisi.<sup>42</sup> As this group developed, Gamsakhurdia and his associates reacted to the destruction of Georgian architectural

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<sup>40</sup> Gregory Grossman, "The "Second Economy" of the USSR", *Problems of Communism*, vol. 26 no. 5, 1977.

<sup>41</sup> See Gerber, *Georgien*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Avtandil Imnadze, Tbilisi, October 1998.

monuments and the theft of religious treasures; the latter case evolved into a scandal which found its way up into the highest offices in Tbilisi. In 1974 Gamsakhurdia and his sympathizers formed a Human Rights protection group, which became a Helsinki Watch group after the signing of the Helsinki accords in 1975.<sup>43</sup> Gamsakhurdia took an 'irreconcilable' stance, refusing to compromise on Georgia's independence. He also argued that conflict with minorities needed to be avoided, since such conflict would obstruct the road to independence.<sup>44</sup> The emerging Georgian nationalist intelligentsia was heavily anti-Russian, and had a relatively strong religious component.

Such organized movements of dissent were rare in the Soviet Union of the time. In early 1977, KGB repression hit most Russian dissident groups and in April the suppression moved to Georgia, with the arrests of Gamsakhurdia and Kostava. Such measures did not succeed in curbing the movement. New figures emerged in support of the two jailed leaders, and several underground (Samizdat) publications were created, among them the 'Georgian Chronicle'. In the midst of the changes in the Soviet constitution in the late 1970s, the Georgian Soviet government made public plans to amend the Georgian constitution, in order to remove a clause which defined Georgian as the sole state language, replacing it with a clause giving equal status to Russian and other languages in the republic. This move was highly unpopular.<sup>45</sup> In April 1978, during the discussions on reform of the constitution of the republic, an estimated five thousand people, mainly university students, took to the streets. The Shevardnadze government decided to reject any changes to the disputed clause, hence giving in to popular pressure. In Suny's words, this was a 'highly unusual concession to an open expression of opposition to state policy, a clear indication of the uneasiness and caution of government policy toward the new nationalism'.<sup>46</sup> Shevardnadze managed to comply with popular opinion without being punished or reprimanded by the center, probably due to the economic success of Georgia under his rule: Shevardnadze was awarded the title of 'hero of socialist labour' in 1981. The increasing popular base of the student movement may have been caused by an increase in the rural youth with higher education but little connection to the Communist Party or Nomenklatura.<sup>47</sup> As Georgia was during this period acquiring the position as the republic with the highest level of per capita higher education, the larger numbers of students formed a fertile ground for anti-Communist feelings.

In April 1979, Gamsakhurdia was pardoned after having repented his views, admitting his 'errors of judgment' on nation-wide television. Kostava, however, refused to

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<sup>43</sup> See discussion in Suny, *Georgian Nation*, p. 309.

<sup>44</sup> See Ghia Nodia, "The Ethnic Policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia", in Bruno Coppetiers, (ed.), *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, Brussels: VUBPress, 1996, p. 77.

<sup>45</sup> On this period, see Kipnis, "The Georgian National Movement", pp. 208-211.

<sup>46</sup> Suny, *Georgian Nation*, pp. 309.

<sup>47</sup> I am grateful to Prof. Charles H. Fairbanks for pointing this out to me.

surrender, and therefore remained the untarnished leader of Georgian dissidents until his release in 1987 and his death under mysterious circumstances in a car crash in 1989. Gamsakhurdia, on the other hand, had to face an uphill battle to restore his credibility. The national movement nevertheless progressed in spite of all obstacles, and seemed to gather strength every time one of its leaders was arrested. Though the government was paying increasing attention to nationalism among the student population, large anti-Soviet demonstrations took place in 1983 to commemorate the bicentennial of the treaty of Giorgievsk that had formed the first step of Georgia's annexation to the Russian empire. A number of leaders of the national movement were arrested at this point, including Tamar Chkheidze, Irakli Tsereteli, and Gia Chanturia.<sup>48</sup>

### 6.5.2. Minority Issues in the 1970s and 1980s

Up to this point, inter-ethnic issues had decidedly remained in the background, and not formed a major contentious issue in Georgian politics or in the rhetoric of the national movement. The soviet leadership had been opposed to all forms of nationalism. At the Union level, this meant opposition both to "Great Russian chauvinism" and minority nationalism; likewise, in Georgia, both Georgian and minority nationalism were attacked by the Communist leadership. In 1977, Shevardnadze stated that "The history of our party knows no "good" nationalists. These do not exist by nature. All of them, Georgian as well as Abkhaz, Ossetian, Armenian, and other nationalists are cut from the same wood..."<sup>49</sup> Yet at the popular level, tensions existed, and Abkhazia was the main area of contention. Already in 1957, Abkhaz officials made a request for Abkhazia to be transferred to the RSFSR's control, a demand that was refused by the center. Ten years later, the tensions flared up again, after a Georgian author had resuscitated historiography that argued the Abkhaz were not indigenous to Abkhazia, and the Georgian Communist Party had refused to distance itself from these arguments, which dated back to the Beria years in the 1930s.

The 1978 constitutional amendments presented an opportunity for the Abkhaz elite to try to rectify what they saw as a historical injustice committed against them in 1931, when Abkhazia was reduced to the status of an Autonomous Republic within Georgia. The Abkhaz felt their status as a full union republic had been unjustly removed by Stalin, and tended to accuse Stalin of favoring his Georgian co-ethnics in this matter. Furthermore, the Abkhaz complained of ethnic Georgians migrating to Abkhazia, corresponding, in their view, to an artificial alteration of the demographic structure of Abkhazia. In 1886, 42% of the population of Abkhazia (then called the Sukhumi region) was Abkhaz. Still in 1926, Abkhaz were 27%, with almost 56,000 people; Georgians formed 33% with 67,000.

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<sup>48</sup> Gerber, *Georgien*, p. 71.

<sup>49</sup> Shevardnadze, at the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party, September 1977. Quoted in Gerber, *Georgien*, p. 68.

The dramatic changes occurred between 1926 and the 1959 census, when the Abkhaz only formed 15% of the population with 62,000 people, whereas Georgians had increased from 67,000 to over 158,000. The influx of other ethnic groups, especially Armenians, also had a strong impact; in 1959, there were more Armenians (64,000) than Abkhaz in Abkhazia, though their number grew at a slower rate in subsequent decades, restoring the Abkhaz to a second place in their own republic. It is interesting to note that the Abkhaz population increased only by 10% in the 33 years between 1926 and 1959, a rate much slower than in the 1959-89 period, when it increased by 52%. These figures are not totally reliable since all over the Soviet Union, censuses were not always carried out in a neutral manner, incorporating political elements in the determination of national belonging and other census questions. However, the data does permit the tentative conclusion that Abkhazia suffered greatly from the times of purges, terror and war that characterized the period between the census of 1926 and that of 1959. According to Abkhaz history-writing, Beria started an anti-Abkhaz drive in 1937, which included the forcible migration of thousands of Mingrelians into Abkhazia's Gali region;<sup>50</sup> the imposition of a Georgian-based alphabet for the Abkhaz language; the closure of Abkhaz-language schools and the opening of numerous Georgian schools; and ethnic Georgians taking over the administration. They further argue that only with the death of Stalin and the fall of Beria was this campaign reversed, a Cyrillic alphabet introduced for the Abkhaz language, power returned to ethnic Abkhaz, and Abkhaz-language schools re-opened. There are no reasons to doubt that these claims have a certain validity. The Stalin era, during which Beria was mostly in full control of the South Caucasus, was a time of brutal and repressive rule by a few individuals that wreaked havoc over the entire Caucasus. The alphabet changes and the transfers of authority are facts that give credence to a certain anti-Abkhaz policy during the Stalin era.

However, if an evaluation of the development in Abkhazia alone gives credence to some of the claims voiced by Abkhaz nationalists, a comparison with the ethnic kin of the Abkhaz in the Russian North Caucasus would seem to lend a certain credence to the Georgian claims that Abkhazia suffered less than did North Caucasian minorities under Russian rule. The Georgian claim that Georgia protected the Abkhaz from the excesses of the Soviet government may be somewhat exaggerated, but it is a fact that the Abkhaz were spared from the wholesale deportation of North Caucasian minorities during the second world war. As Gerber notes,

compared to the nations of the North Caucasus, whose autonomous status within the RSFSR were of a purely formal nature, the Abkhaz had incomparably larger opportunities to keep their language and culture. The Abkhaz, like the Ossetians, could doubtlessly profit from the well-built educational institutions in Georgia.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See Darrell Slider, "Crisis and Response in Soviet Nationality Policy: The Case of Abkhazia", in *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 4 no. 4, 1985, pp. 51-68, here at p. 52.

<sup>51</sup> See Gerber, *Georgien*, p. 128.

The numbers show that Abkhazia was always multi-ethnic. In fact, only the regions in the north of Abkhazia were homogeneously Abkhaz, whereas the southern Gali region on the border with Georgia proper was heavily Georgian-dominated. It should also be noted that the overwhelming majority of the people listed as Georgians living in Abkhazia were Mingrelians, just like in the neighboring province of Samegrelo.

Abortive unrest had emerged in 1957 and 1967, but the constitutional amendments of 1977 led 130 Abkhaz intellectuals to draft a letter to the central authorities that iterated Abkhaz grievances and, among other, asked for Abkhazia to be restored to the status of union republic, and barring that, to be transferred to Russia in the same way that Crimea had been transferred to Ukraine in 1954.<sup>52</sup> A commission from Moscow arrived to assess the situation in Abkhazia, and endorsed several of the claims made in the 'Abkhazian letter'. A university was opened in Sukhumi, and other concessions were made. The Abkhaz still had difficulties competing for academic positions, given the mainly peasant base of Abkhaz society, compared to the somewhat more urban and generally more highly educated Georgians.

The ethnic Abkhaz control over the authorities of the Autonomous Republic was strengthened, leading to tensions with the Georgian plurality population, which felt that excessive privileges were being given to the Abkhaz. From this time onward, the Abkhaz established a strong control over the republican administration, controlling over two thirds of government posts and obkom department heads. Hard-line Abkhaz nationalists thought Abkhazia's autonomy was still largely fictitious, and unrest erupted in Sukhumi in October 1978, that led to martial law and the imposition of troops.<sup>53</sup> Nationalist demonstrations in Tbilisi in 1981 among other raised the issue of the rights of Georgians in Abkhazia.<sup>54</sup> It is hence clear that tensions between Georgians and Abkhaz had existed in the entire post-Stalin era. With regard to other minorities, however, very little political action was observed. This was true also for South Ossetia, where the first armed conflict would emerge in 1989.

### 6.5.3. Perestroika and the Growth of Nationalism

The succession of Gorbachev to the ailing Andropov and Chernenko, and Shevardnadze's appointment as foreign minister in Moscow, change the setting in Georgia somewhat. He was succeeded by Jambar Patiashvili, a less than charismatic and relatively insecure leader who failed to follow the reform wind that started blowing in Moscow. As two observers note,

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<sup>52</sup> See Stephen Jones, "Border Disputes and Disputed Borders in the Soviet Federal System", in *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 15 no. 1, Spring 1987, p. 56.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 56-57

<sup>54</sup> Gerber, *Georgien*, pp. 70-71.

The effects of Perestroika were at first slow to reach Georgia, dripping through the filter of conservative party opposition until popular opinion, encouraged by awareness of what was happening elsewhere in the Soviet Union, began to put pressure on the leadership for faster change.<sup>55</sup>

Faced with a mushrooming national movement, Patiashvili's instinctive reaction was to resist its demands as long as he could. But the opening of the political climate at the center could not fail to affect Georgia, and the increasing opportunities to create popular associations that emerged by 1987 were quickly capitalized on by Georgia's existing political activists. Though many organizations that were formed had an environmental or cultural cover, a great number were clearly nationalist in nature and worked on promoting Georgia's self-determination and against its links with Moscow. A number of dissident leaders were released from prison in 1987, adding impetus and leadership to the nationalist movement.

The popular movement nevertheless grew in strength, and adopted a strongly nationalist character. A startling example occurred when Shevardnadze, still Soviet foreign minister, invited U.S. Secretary of State James Baker to his apartment in Moscow in May 1989. Baker was reportedly astonished to find Shevardnadze's wife to be a fervent Georgian nationalist, who declared that 'Georgia must be free'. Admittedly, this took place just after the April 1989 army crackdown in Tbilisi when emotions were running high, but still testifies to the widespread character of the nationalist feeling.<sup>56</sup>

An initial focus of attention of the emerging national movement was a 'Caucasian Railway' project, which attracted heavy opposition because of its environmental consequences as well as the planned destruction of historical monuments on its path. To the demonstrators, the railway also posed a danger of a national character, because it would create a direct rail link to Russia, tying Georgia even further to Russia and possibly leading to immigration of non-Georgians to the republic.<sup>57</sup> This project actually resulted in the first media debate in a true sense in Georgia, and hence the first expression of Glasnost.<sup>58</sup> As Zurab Zhvania, later the speaker of the Georgian parliament remarked, it was 'the question which connected the already ripened desire for broad changes.'<sup>59</sup>

The internal bickering among the nationalists was a major characteristic of the Georgian political sphere and has remained so. Undoubtedly, this has been related to what

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<sup>55</sup> Stephen Jones and Robert Parsons, "Georgia and the Georgians", in Graham Smith (ed.) *The Nationalities Question in the Post-Soviet States*, New York: Longman, 1996.

<sup>56</sup> See Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the Cold War*, Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1993, p. 62.

<sup>57</sup> See Jonathan Aves, *Paths to National Independence in Georgia, 1987-1990*, London: School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, 1991, p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> See Stephen Jones, "The Caucasian Mountain Railway Project: A Victory for Glasnost", *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 8 no. 2, 1989, pp. 47-59.

<sup>59</sup> Jones, "The Caucasian Mountain Railway Project..." quoting *Akhalgazrda Ivereli*, 26 June 1991.

Ghia Nodia terms ‘the triumph of the radical ethos’ in Georgian politics.<sup>60</sup> As Nodia notes, the weakness of moderate groups left the field open to radicals whose main concern was an anti-Soviet feeling that was closely related, in most cases, with an identification of Soviet rule with Russian domination.

As time passed, tension in the atmosphere intensified, as two radical groupings diverted from the first organization formed, the *Iliia Chavchavadze Society*. One was the National Democratic Party (NDP) led by Gia Chanturia, which had been in clandestine existence since Chanturia’s time in prison in the early 1980s, and connected to the party with the same name that existed during the 1918-21 interlude; and the *Society of St. Iliia the Righteous*, led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Irakli Tsereteli.<sup>61</sup> These two movements led the way by their overt commitment to an independent Georgia.

The increased popularity of the radical movements became obvious as over 200,000 people demonstrated in Tbilisi in November 1988 against amendments to the USSR’s constitution which would have curtailed Georgia’s internal sovereignty.<sup>62</sup> In this time, the Georgian communist party successively lost its legitimacy and authority in Georgian society. Meanwhile, intellectuals were beginning to reassess the ‘official’ history of Georgia and were increasingly critical towards it, publishing articles criticizing and revising the official standpoint. In particular, the issue of the independent Georgian republic of 1918-21 began to be debated.

The Communist party tried to counter the radicals by setting up a semi-official movement, the Rustaveli society, which was moderately nationalist and supportive of the reformist policies that the Georgian government was implementing. Yet the government was still keeping its monopoly over politics. At the elections to the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies held in March 1989, a higher proportion of seats compared to other republics were contested by a sole candidate and the voter turnout was publicized at an unlikely but very Soviet.<sup>63</sup> This body hence lacked legitimacy. Yet there was still no alternative, the nationalist groups were internally divided personally and ideologically to form a cohesive movement, and though the Communist government had cause to worry, its power was still relatively intact. Yet the government had by now understood that it needed to move to assuage some of the demands of the nationalists. In November 1988, a law was passed that strengthened the position of the Georgian language in the republic, including in minority areas, at the expense of both minority languages and Russian.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ghia Nodia, ‘Georgia’s Identity Crisis’, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 6 no. 1, 1995, p. 108.

<sup>61</sup> See Suzanne Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations: The Caucasus and Post-Soviet Disorder*, London: Zed, 1994, p. 95; Aves, *Paths to National Independence in Georgia*, p. 12.

<sup>62</sup> Aves, *Paths to National Independence in Georgia*, p. 14.

<sup>63</sup> Jones and Parsons, “Georgia and the Georgians”, p. 300.

<sup>64</sup> Elizabeth Fuller, “Draft ‘State Program’ on Georgian Language Published”, *Radio Liberty Research Report*, 559/88, 12 December 1988.

As the Georgian nationalist movement gathered speed through 1989, the minorities in the republic started to react. In part, they were affected, to various degrees, by the general wind of political freedom and nationalist agitation that swept through the Soviet Union. But some of this reaction was also based on a genuine fear of what the success of Georgian nationalism would mean to the minorities, who were directly threatened by some of the more extreme Georgian nationalist movements. At this time, Georgia's independence very much seemed utopian, and the collapse of the Soviet Union was foreseen by close to no one. Yet in a process that has been called Matrioshka nationalism, the center-periphery relations at the union level, in this case between Moscow and Tbilisi, were mirrored by new developments between the regional centers and the ethnic minorities in the republics. The Georgian nationalist movement's ascent to power in Georgia was received with unease by all minorities in the republic, and eventually affected Tbilisi's relationship with its Abkhaz, Ossetian, Armenian, Azeri, Russian, and even Ajarian minority groups in ways that ranged from quiet discontent to full-scale war and eventually the truncation of Georgian territory. Abkhazia, once again, was the issue that would trigger the beginning of the chaotic developments that led to the independence of Georgia, but also to chaos, defeat, and the dismemberment of the country.

#### **6.5.4. The Trauma of April 9 and the Radicalization of the Population**

As described in detail in chapter seven, a leading group of Abkhaz intellectuals sent a petition to Moscow that demanded Abkhazia be raised to the status of a Union Republic. As a first overt sign of separatism, the Ossetian national front *Ademon Nykhas* officially supported Abkhazia's claim, undoubtedly to be able to follow suit.<sup>65</sup> In protest, Georgian radical groups organized demonstrations in Tbilisi that may have been prompted by events in Abkhazia, but soon developed into massive anti-Soviet marches for Georgia's independence.<sup>66</sup> Factories went on strike, and people from all over Georgia poured into the capital. With Shevardnadze and Gorbachev in Great Britain, the Georgian Communist leadership demanded permission from Moscow to use special forces to dissolve the demonstrations.<sup>67</sup> On 9 April, airborne and interior troops dissolved the demonstrations, using shovels instead of gunfire in an ultimately futile effort to conceal their carnage. The bloody intervention left 19 dead, 16 of which were women, and dozens more severely wounded. Important nationalist leaders like Chanturia and Gamsakhurdia were arrested.

If the intention of the crackdown was to stymie the strengthening nationalist movement, the results were highly counter-productive. The little legitimacy the

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<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Fuller, 'The South Ossetian Campaign for Unification', *Report on the USSR*, 8 December 1989.

<sup>66</sup> Vivid accounts of the April 9 events are found in Peter Nasmyth, *Georgia: Mountains of Poetry*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998.

<sup>67</sup> Jones and Parsons, 'Georgia and the Georgians', p. 300-301.

communist party had left in Georgia suddenly disappeared, and Party head Patiashvili was removed shortly after the events. His successor, Givi Gumbaridze, tried to adapt to the reigning political atmosphere by adopting some of the nationalist rhetoric and moving closer to the position of the oppositional forces. Within a few months, the communist party itself called for national sovereignty, Georgian citizenship, supremacy of Georgian law over union law, and worked for the settlement of Georgians in minority areas as well as the changes of non-Georgian place names into Georgian.<sup>68</sup>

By early 1990, the Georgian opposition was divided, and some groups participating in the official political sphere after the Party line had moved closer to their demands, showing that the current power-holders could be influenced. However, other, more radical groups refused to do so. Several radical nationalist groups tried to alter the situation by unilaterally holding elections to a 'National Congress' that was supposed to lead the country to independence. Yet this body had no legal status, and others, including Gamsakhurdia, instead focused on forcing early elections to the constitutional organ, the republican Supreme Soviet. Well aware that April 9 had ruined the standing of the Party in Georgian society, Party leader Gumbaridze tried to stall by postponing the enacting of a new legal basis for multi-party elections. Yet massive political pressure from the opposition, hunger strikes, and a nation-wide railroad strike forced through an election code that also fulfilled Gamsakhurdia's aims of prohibiting the participation of regional parties. The elections were held as planned on October 28, in a tense nationalist environment with the most prominent figure, Gamsakhurdia, campaigning with a heavy focus on the defense of Georgians in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Gamsakhurdia's alliance, the Round Table of National Liberation (*Erovnul-Ganmatavisuplebeli Modzraobis Mrgvali Magida*) won a landslide election, capturing over 53% of votes and 155 of 250 seats in the parliament, over double that of the Communists' 61.<sup>69</sup> With the exception of the Communist party, all parties now represented in the parliament shared their commitment to market economy, democracy, and rule of law; but also an equally universal commitment to Georgian state independence, strengthening of the Georgian language, and bans on immigration to Georgia. Even the Communist party, remarkably, now adhered to the concept of Georgian independence.

Gamsakhurdia was elected Speaker of the Parliament, and the parliament began working on dismantling the Soviet structure of Georgia and carrying it towards independence. The republic was now simply the 'Republic of Georgia', omitting all references to 'socialism' or 'Soviet'. The heads of the Republican KGB were fired, and while not immediately antagonizing Moscow by proclaiming independence, Georgia moved rapidly away from Moscow's orbit. The Soviet military forces in Georgia were

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<sup>68</sup> Jones and Parsons, "Georgia and the Georgians", p. 301.

<sup>69</sup> Gerber, *Georgien*, p. 210-211.

declared to be ‘occupying forces’, and Georgia prohibited its citizens from participating in the March 1991 All-Union referendum on a new Union Treaty proposed by Gorbachev.

### 6.5.5. ‘Georgia for Georgians’: The Question of Minorities

Figures on the ethnic break-up of Georgia are mainly derived from the last Soviet census, which was undertaken in 1989. Since then, however, migration flows and differing growth rates may have altered the demographic reality somewhat. Accordingly, the number of ethnic Russians in Georgia has reduced sharply ever since the anti-Soviet nationalist movement of the late 1980s. Moreover, substantial numbers of Greeks have migrated to Greece. In general, the whole South Caucasus has seen a drastic outflow of residents in the 1990s, given the economic hardships and political conflict of the region. As concerns natural growth rates, only the Azeri population is likely to have grown more rapidly than other groups: Gachechiladze notes that the average household size for ethnic Azeris is 4.9 people, whereas it is 4.1 for Georgians and 3.0 for Slavic households.<sup>70</sup> The number of Azeris in Georgia quadrupled between 1926 and 1989, whereas the population of Georgia only doubled. The growth rate of the Azeris is at present three times larger than that of the ethnic Georgians. In parallel to their increase in absolute numbers, the share of Azeri population in the region of Georgia they live in, Kvemo Kartli, is growing rapidly.<sup>71</sup>

**Table 6.1: The Demography of Georgia, 1989**  
(According to 1989 Census of the USSR)

Ethnic Group	Percentage of Total Population
Georgians (Kartvelians)	70.1
Armenians	8.1
Russians	6.3
Azeris	5.7
Ossetians	3.0
Greeks	1.9
Abkhaz	1.8
Ukrainians	0.9
Others	2.2

As the Gamsakhurdia government came to power, the switch in official nationality policy affected center-periphery relations directly. Resentment grew among Ajars, Armenians, Azeris, and especially Ossetians in South Ossetia, where isolated instances of

<sup>70</sup> Gachechiladze, *The New Georgia*, p. 53.

<sup>71</sup> Gachechiladze, *The New Georgia*, p. 92.

violence had begun to emerge in the spring and Summer of 1989. Language laws instituted by Tbilisi in the Fall of 1989 would make Georgian the sole state language in the republic; the South Ossetian parliament began to vigorously oppose this law. When it failed to achieve a compromise with Tbilisi, the South Ossetian Oblast Soviet adopted a resolution in the end of September 1989 that adopted Ossetian as the state language of the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast.<sup>72</sup> Inter-ethnic clashes spread in and around South Ossetia that left several dead. To defend the Georgian population there, Gamsakhurdia and his followers, supported by Communist party head Gumbaridze, organized a march on Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, that was joined by over ten thousand people but stopped by Soviet Interior Ministry Forces before it reached the border. Ademon Nykhas then petitioned to Moscow to be joined with North Ossetia. It stated that:

It seems to us politically and economically absurd that within the framework of a democratic state the small Ossetian people should be divided into two administrative units; and we demand that the question of the unification of North and South Ossetia be examined at the CPSU Central Committee Plenum on nationality questions.<sup>73</sup>

Low-intensity clashes went on until January 1990, when order was restored, and focus among Georgian nationalists returned to the issue of control over Tbilisi and the Georgian republican institutions.

Georgian nationalists also voiced concern of the rapidly increasing numbers of the Muslim population, especially the Azeris. The censuses of 1979 and 1989 showed a rapid increase in the Azeri population of Georgia, and an increasing domination of the Kvemo Kartli district that was by the 1980s becoming solidly Azeri. Some Georgian nationalists voiced fears of the ‘Islamization’ or ‘Tatarization’ of Georgia – using the outdated term ‘Tatar’ for all Muslims of the Caucasus that is seen as derogatory by Azeris – and one intellectual even claimed that by 2050, if current trends continued, Muslims would form half of Georgia’s population.<sup>74</sup> Some of the most radical Georgian nationalists in 1989 took action against the Azeri ‘threat’, aiming to force Azeris to leave and return to their ‘homeland’, nearby Azerbaijan. In Bolnisi, some groups tried to prevent the sale of bread to Azeris, whereas Azeri doctors in hospitals in some areas of Marneuli and Bolnisi were sacked from their posts. According to Azeri sources, Georgian nationalists also started detonating small explosions in Azeri settlements to induce fear, again in Bolnisi town. As an answer to these pressures, spontaneously emerged groups coalesced and demanded autonomy in order to protect their rights. In some villages, Azeris created self-defense

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<sup>72</sup> Elizabeth Fuller, “The South Ossetian Campaign for Unification”, in *Report on the USSR*, no. 49, 1989, pp. 17-20.

<sup>73</sup> *Literaturnuli Sakartvelo*, 20 October 1989; Fuller, “The South Ossetian Campaign for Unification”p. 19.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Süleyman Süleymanov, editor-in-chief of the *Gürçüstan* newspaper, (published in Azeri language in Tbilisi), February 2002.

units, basically armed only with hunting rifles. No reaction came from Georgian authorities, and in September and October the largest outflow of Azeris took place, when an estimated 800 families left Bolnisi for Azerbaijan. Azeri sources estimate that a total of two thousand families left Georgia for Azerbaijan in 1989-91. Yet unlike in South Ossetia, the tensions never escalated to armed clashes.<sup>75</sup>

Even before the election that brought Gamsakhurdia to power, the question of Ajaria's autonomy had been raised. Gamsakhurdia and his associates suggested that Ajars, being Georgians, had no reason nor a desire for autonomy from Tbilisi and that a referendum on the abolition of Ajaria's autonomy would be undertaken. In fact, while publicly vowing to respect the autonomy of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Gamsakhurdia advocated the lifting of Ajaria's autonomy.<sup>76</sup> Gamsakhurdia later distanced himself from his earlier position, arguing that the local population's wishes should determine the region's status. The electoral results in Ajaria in October 1990, where the Communist party won over 65% of the vote in stark contrast to the rest of Georgia where Gamsakhurdia's Round Table Alliance was victorious, likely influenced Gamsakhurdia, who never acted on his earlier stated intention of conducting a referendum. Whereas Ajaria has been spared unrest ever since, demonstrations took place in Batumi in April 1991 for the preservation of Ajar autonomy and against the past anti-Islamic practices imposed in the region. Incorrect rumors that Ajaria's autonomy had been or was being abolished as Georgia declared its independence may have contributed to this.<sup>77</sup>

The tumultuous developments in Tbilisi that brought Gamsakhurdia to power were arguably indirectly triggered by events in Abkhazia. In fact, the March 1989 demonstrations in Tbilisi that led to the April 9 massacre had begun as an answer to an Abkhaz petition filed to the Soviet leadership in March. And in the aftermath of April 9, the situation in Abkhazia indeed worsened. In June, arguing that the Georgian communist party had distanced itself from Leninist principles and that Menshevik ideology had returned, the Abkhaz Communist Party obkom petitioned to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR to be removed from the ranks of the Georgian Communist Party and become directly submitted to Moscow. For all practical purposes, the Communist party in Abkhazia ceased to function as a division along ethnic lines took place, and the party was incapable of handling any concrete issues.<sup>78</sup> Ethnic tensions had spread to the University in Sukhumi (created in 1979), and the leadership in Tbilisi decided to split the university along ethnic lines, by opening a branch of the Tbilisi State

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<sup>75</sup> Interview with Süleymanov.

<sup>76</sup> Elizabeth Fuller, "Zviad Gamsakhurdia Proposes Abolition of Adzhar Autonomy", in *Report on the USSR*, 30 November 1990.

<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Fuller, "Georgia's Adzhar Crisis", in *Report on the USSR*, 9 August 1991.

<sup>78</sup> See Gerber, *Georgien*, p. 141, quoting a report by the secretary of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party, Chkheidze, July 1989.

University in Sukhumi for the ethnic Georgian students. In spite of loud Abkhaz protests of the illegality of the decision, and objections emanating from as high as the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, the opening of the branch was foreseen; this led to riots in Sukhumi that led to the death of 18 people and several hundred wounded, riots that were only suppressed through the imposition of troops.<sup>79</sup> Abkhazia was also the seat in August 1989 for the founding conference of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, which would play a crucial role in the 1992-93 war in Abkhazia. This illustrates how Abkhazia played an independent role from Tbilisi already in this period. However, in spite of the bloodshed, the situation calmed down by late 1989, perhaps because the South Ossetian situation was heating up. Other areas were also restive: clashes or unrest with ethnic undertones were reported in Akhalkalaki and Akhaltsikhe among Armenians; and in Marneuli among Azeris during the Summer of 1989.<sup>80</sup>

When the elections to the Georgian Supreme Soviet were being planned, the inclusion of the provision prohibiting regional parties from participating was heavily criticized.<sup>81</sup> Minority groups saw it as a disenfranchisement of their rights, since the major political forces at the center were Georgian nationalists, and even the Communist party was moving closer to the nationalists. In this atmosphere, the Supreme Soviet of the Abkhaz ASSR adopted a resolution unilaterally raising the status of Abkhazia to that of a Union Republic. This resolution, in practice implying secession from Georgia, had a doubtful legality, given that it was unable to muster a quorum in the Soviet. Given that the ethnic Georgian representatives boycotted the session, the resolution failed to gain the support of two thirds of the legislature that were required. Needless to say, the Georgian Supreme Soviet immediately declared the resolution null and void. According to article 78 of the Soviet constitution, the territory and borders of a Union Republic could not be changed without the consent of that Republic's authorities. Yet forces in Georgia remained preoccupied with the power struggle in Tbilisi, and the de iure secession of Abkhazia did not lead to a Georgian reaction similar to the March on Tskhinvali some months earlier.

Instead, focus remained on South Ossetia. Shortly before the October 1990 elections to the Georgian Supreme Soviet, the South Ossetian Oblast Soviet unilaterally upgraded its status to that of an 'Independent Soviet Democratic Republic'. This decision was heavily influenced by Ademon Nykhas, which had explicitly been prohibited from running in the elections to the Georgian Supreme Soviet. This naturally accentuated the sense of disenfranchisement felt by Ossetians with regard to the recently promulgated Georgian electoral law. As the case had been with Abkhazia a month earlier, the Georgian Supreme

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<sup>79</sup> *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, vol. 41 no. 29, 1989, pp. 14-16.

<sup>80</sup> Gerber, *Georgien*, p. 142.

<sup>81</sup> The law stated that only parties and alliances whose activities extended on the entire territory of the republic of Georgia were allowed to participate in the elections. See *Zakon Gruzinskoi Sovetskoy Sotsialisticheskoi Respubliki o Vyborakh Verchoynogo Sovieta Gruzii* (Law of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic on Elections to the Supreme Soviet of Georgia), Tbilisi, 1990.

Soviet declared the decision null and void, but its preoccupation with the upcoming election distracted Tbilisi from the South Ossetian question. Both South Ossetia and Abkhazia boycotted the elections to the Georgian Supreme Soviet, thereby aggravating the Georgian feeling that the minority populations were in Moscow's service, trying to undermine Georgia's sovereignty in every way. The prohibition on Ossetian and Abkhaz political formations from participating in the election may have been a factor in the decision to boycott; however, Aves claims the intention of Ademon Nykhas and Aidgylara had been to boycott from the beginning, in order to stress their distancing from the Georgian political sphere.<sup>82</sup> In fact, Gerber notes that the interests of the Abkhaz (and, by the same token, South Ossetian) elite and the Soviet leadership coincided: both saw the independence of Georgia as a direct existential threat to their interests. Moscow saw the independence of any of its component republics as a threat to the Union's survival; likewise, the Abkhaz and South Ossetians saw the prospect of remaining within an independent, nationalist Georgia as a direct threat to their national rights, both political and cultural.

The South Ossetian question grew worse as elections were held on December 9 to the Supreme Soviet of what was now the 'Independent Soviet Socialist Republic' of South Ossetia. On December 11, 1990, the newly elected Soviet voted to subordinate itself not to Tbilisi but to Moscow. The same day, the Georgian Parliament abolished the autonomy of the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast.<sup>83</sup> Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric now increased, calling Ossetians newcomers to Georgia from their homeland in North Ossetia, and therefore having no right to autonomy in Georgia. He occasionally even talked about the wholesale expulsion of Ossetians from Georgia. A blockade of Tskhinvali was completed by Georgian paramilitary forces, which would last throughout winter. The road connecting South Ossetia to North Ossetia and the rest of Russia was blown up, and electricity and gas supplies were cut. Georgian paramilitary forces were recruited mainly among ethnic Georgian inhabitants of South Ossetia, and were opposed by hastily organized Ossetian 'self-defense' forces.<sup>84</sup> Soviet troops in Ossetia were deployed to separate the two sides and to broker a cease-fire; however, Soviet troops also took part in the fighting on the side of the Ossetian formations, leading to accusations that Gorbachev was trying to use the Ossetian question as a lever on Georgia to remain within the Union.<sup>85</sup> The fighting and economic hardships ensuing from the blockade led to flows of Georgian refugees out of South Ossetia, and of Ossetian refugees, mainly from the rest of

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<sup>82</sup> Aves, *Paths to National Independence*, p. 46.

<sup>83</sup> Elizabeth Fuller, 'Georgian Parliament Votes to Abolish Ossetian Autonomy', *Report on the USSR*, 21 December 1990, p. 8.

<sup>84</sup> Alexei Zverev, 'Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-94', p. 44.

<sup>85</sup> See Stuart Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001, pp. 112-113.

Georgia, to North Ossetia.<sup>86</sup> The situation grew worse in Spring and Summer 1991, with Georgian paramilitaries shelling Tskhinvali with artillery fire.

## 6.6. Independence and Civil War

Georgia's transition to independence was catalyzed by the March 1991 All-Union referendum on the preservation of the Soviet Union. The recently elected Gamsakhurdia government in Georgia was one of the six republics to refuse to participate in the referendum.<sup>87</sup> However, Abkhazia and South Ossetia both did participate in this referendum. Given the ethnic polarization and the Georgian government's boycott, the results were predictable: 99% of voters in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia voted in favor of the preservation of the Soviet Union.

Gamsakhurdia's riposte to the all-union referendum was instead to organize a referendum on the restoration of Georgia's independence, as proclaimed on May 26, 1918. The date set for the referendum was also symptomatic: it was held on April 9, 1991. The referendum was met by a boycott in parts of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, that is, especially the parts where few Georgians lived. But the total number of votes in favor remained massive: 98% of voters expressed themselves in favor of Georgia's independence.

### 6.6.1. The Rise and Fall of Gamsakhurdia's Republic

Results in southern Georgia also testify to the fact that the voters in favor of independence were not exclusively ethnic Georgians; 86% of eligible voters in Marneuli, where over 80% of the population is Azerbaijani, voted for independence; in Akhalkalaki, where over 90% of the population is Armenian, 52% voted for independence.<sup>88</sup> The Soviet habit of voting in the affirmative to any question put to the people may have influenced this outcome, as well as Gamsakhurdia's threat that minorities that voted against independence would be deprived on citizenship in independent Georgia.<sup>89</sup> Yet it seems that whereas the Azeri community supported Georgia's independence in spite of Azerbaijan's continued loyalty to Moscow, the Armenian community was still lukewarm in its attitude to independence although Armenia had also refused to hold the all-union referendum. This clearly points to a higher level of hostility toward Georgian rule among Armenian areas than in Azeri areas. Economic factors may also have contributed to this:

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<sup>86</sup> Julian Birch, 'Ethnic Cleansing in the Caucasus', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 1 no. 4, 1995. Between 40,000 and 55,000 Ossetians from Georgia proper are thought to have left for North Ossetia. *Moscow News*, 19 November 1992.

<sup>87</sup> Armenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Moldova also refused to participate.

<sup>88</sup> Gerber, *Georgien*, p. 215.

<sup>89</sup> Elizabeth Fuller, 'How Wholehearted Is Support in Georgia for Independence', *Report on the USSR*, vol. 3 no. 23, 7 June 1991.

whereas both Javakheti Armenians and Azeris are isolated culturally and socially from the Georgian population, the economic isolation of the Javakheti Armenians is in stark contrast to the economic integration of the Azeri population into Georgia, especially in agricultural terms.<sup>90</sup>

In a bid to assert control over the various provinces of Georgia, Gamsakhurdia introduced a system of centrally appointed Prefects, that would be the arm of the central executive power all over Georgia. This measure was resisted in several minority areas. In South Ossetia, the scheme for obvious reasons could not be properly implemented, whereas in parts of Abkhazia and Javakheti, locals refused to accept the proposed Prefect. In Akhalkalaki, local Armenians staged demonstrations that physically prevented three consecutive centrally appointed Prefects from reaching their office buildings, because they were ethnic Georgians. An Armenian organization called *Javakbk* had emerged in 1988, and was instrumental in organizing the deployment of a unit of Javakheti Armenians to the conflict in Mountainous Karabakh in Azerbaijan, showing a certain level of ethnic mobilization among Armenians there. Javakbk lobbied for the creation of an Armenian autonomous region within Georgia, and organized the protests against the centrally proposed prefects. It was also instrumental in organizing a 'Provisional Council of Representatives' to govern the region in the constitutional vacuum that emerged due to the stand-off with Tbilisi. Elections were held in February 1991 to this Council, which created a Presidium of seven members (one of whom was ethnic Georgian) as a working body. During this time, local Armenians prevented the Georgian National Guard from entering Javakheti. The area remained effectively outside the control of Tbilisi for virtually the entire tenure of Gamsakhurdia. In November 1991, a Prefect proposed by Tbilisi was finally accepted, and the Council dissolved itself.<sup>91</sup>

While conflict escalated to war in South Ossetia, the situation in Abkhazia was calm but tense; the conflict between Sukhumi and Tbilisi was confined to the political realm. The Abkhaz parliament tried to implement a constitutional reform that would have introduced a parliamentary system of government with two chambers – one with 50 directly elected representatives and a 'chamber of nationalities' where Abkhaz, Georgians, Russians, Armenians and Greeks would have been equally represented. This was somewhat surprising since it would have lowered the numerical representation of the Abkhaz, though the Abkhaz nevertheless would retain a veto right in the Chamber of Nationalities. The Georgian parliament refused to accept the draft law, and instead a law was adopted that provided for a unicameral consociational system which gave the Abkhaz a quota of 28, Georgians 26, and 'others' 11 seats, and required a two-thirds majority for 'important' decisions. That technically gave both Georgians and Abkhaz a veto right in the chamber, but this provision would instead deadlock the Abkhaz parliament soon

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<sup>90</sup> Gachechiladze, *The New Georgia*, pp. 117-136.

<sup>91</sup> See Voitsekh Guretski, 'The Question of Javakheti', *Caucasian Regional Studies*, vol. 3 no. 1, 1998.

afterwards, as the polarization between the Georgian and Abkhaz components increased. Yet, the Georgian and Abkhaz leaderships managed to keep a working relationship throughout Gamsakhurdia's rule, during the civil unrest in Georgia at the end of 1991, and up until the arrival of Shevardnadze in March 1992.

Shortly after the declaration of independence, Presidential elections were held in May in which Gamsakhurdia was elected over unknown candidates with a landslide of over 86% of votes. Georgia's independence nevertheless remained unrecognized until mid-1992, after Gamsakhurdia's fall. During Gamsakhurdia's rule, the erratic character of the leader became an increasing problem. Gamsakhurdia obviously equated Georgia with himself, thereby branding most anyone disagreeing with him as a traitor to the country. Moreover, his controversial statements alienated not only ethnic minorities and political opposition but also foreign states. His criticism of U.S. President Bush's attempts to prevent the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and his pro-Armenian comments on Mountainous Karabakh alienated the United States and Azerbaijan, the latter a neighbor that provided Georgia with oil. Gamsakhurdia earned the name of a dictator more through his words and his attitude than through deeds. He did ban the Communist Party after August 1991, and he ordered an opposition demonstration to be broken up by police in September. The main problem lay not in Gamsakhurdia's factual actions but in his erratic mindset that in practice translated into political incompetence. As Stephen Jones has put it,

Gamsakhurdia's other characteristics were a sense of paranoia, a conspiratorial frame of mind, virulent anti-communism, and a tendency to self-glorification. ... Gamsakhurdia viewed himself as the last in a long line of Georgian national heroes, all of whom, in his words, have embodied sacrifices on the altar of the fatherland. The struggle for Gamsakhurdia was between 'good and evil'. ... Comparing himself to de Gaulle, Gamsakhurdia argued that a strong presidency corresponded to the 'historical laws and characteristics' of the Georgian people.<sup>92</sup>

After the Moscow coup of August 1991, the polarization between Gamsakhurdia and his opposition deepened. Gamsakhurdia did not immediately condemn the coup, as he apparently tried to negotiate with the coup-makers to avoid a feared Soviet military intervention to assert control over Georgia.<sup>93</sup> Gamsakhurdia then decided to dissolve the National Guard, the embryonic army that had been created out of several paramilitary forces, and to integrate it into the Interior Ministry. The Commander of the National Guard, Tengiz Kitovani (incidentally, a former sculptor), condemned the decision and left Tbilisi together with a substantial amount of National Guard troops.

The opposition by now included many of Gamsakhurdia's former associates, such as Kitovani and Tengiz Sigua, the former prime minister, and Gamsakhurdia's position

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<sup>92</sup> See Jones, 'Georgia: the Trauma of Statehood', p. 522.

<sup>93</sup> Gerber, *Georgien*, p. 224.

became increasingly isolated, which further increased his paranoia. Violent riots broke out between government troops and the armed opposition forces in central Tbilisi on September 2, leading to over twenty wounded. This intra-Georgian feuding and the shedding of blood on the streets of the capital shocked most Georgians deeply. Unfortunately, the situation grew worse, as the political struggle decisively moved into the streets, specifically the Rustaveli boulevard, the main street of Tbilisi. Government supporters gathered on one end, inflated by hundreds of people brought into the city from Gamsakhurdia's native power base, Mingrelia. The opposition, for its part, had gathered only several hundred meters away. After a brief respite in November, the situation again worsened as no compromise could be struck between the two sides. On December 22, the stalemate was broken by Kitovani's National Guard forces and a paramilitary group known as the *Mkbedrioni* (Horsemen) loyal to Jaba Ioseliani, a shady figure and a former bank robber, mafia boss, as well as theater critic. A brief but ugly war erupted in central Tbilisi, until the insurgents controlled most of the city, and Gamsakhurdia was hiding inside the parliament with his most loyal followers. After two weeks, Gamsakhurdia was allowed to flee Tbilisi on January 6, 1992, first by car to Armenia, after which he was granted asylum by the Chechen President Jokhar Dudayev, and lived in Grozny periodically since then until his return to Georgia in 1993.

### **6.6.2 Shevardnadze's Republic**

While Tbilisi was on fire, the Soviet Union ceased to exist, putting the minority peoples of Georgia in state of confusion. There was no USSR, but there was practically no Georgia either. And the kind of Georgia that would emerge from the power struggle in Tbilisi was not known. Georgia was now ruled by a state council led by Sigua, Kitovani, and Ioseliani. In practice, this meant a disastrous breakdown of law and order in Georgia, the utter failure of Georgia's attempts to liberate itself from Moscow's rule and create a functioning, independent and democratic state, and the predominance of paramilitary forces that to a large degree consisted of simple criminals prone to looting and pillaging. This state of affairs prevented Georgia from being granted membership in the United Nations together with other former Soviet states, and led to western countries withholding recognition of a government that had military taken over power from an elected President.

Ironically, the meltdown of the Georgian government provided an opportunity to restore peace in South Ossetia. Most forces that had been involved in the fighting on the Georgian side had been involved in the fighting in Tbilisi, leading to a de-escalation of tensions. The mess in Tbilisi nevertheless encouraged the Ossetian leadership to hold a referendum on January 19, in which 90% of the population voted to join the Russian Federation. This reiteration of the intention to secede from Georgia did not provoke an immediate reaction, given that the main paramilitary leaders in Tbilisi were in the process of assuming power over the country. Forces loyal to Gamsakhurdia had also retreated to

their native power base in Mingrelia, concentrating paramilitary activity to the northwest of the country. In order to bolster their credibility, the ruling Military Council renamed itself the State Council, and invited Eduard Shevardnadze to return to Georgia to be its chairman. Shevardnadze's arrival to power was thought to improve the chances of arriving at a compromise with the minorities and rebuilding the Georgian state. Indeed, initial steps were positive, as Shevardnadze traveled to Tskhinvali and to Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia. A cease-fire agreement was reached in May, but Shevardnadze's failure to control the paramilitary forces were already apparent.<sup>94</sup> In late April, artillery shelling of Tskhinvali had resumed, and a busload of Ossetian refugees were massacred later in May. The renewed tensions brought the involvement of North Caucasian volunteers that gathered in North Ossetia to support the South Ossetian forces; the central Russian government was also increasingly openly supporting Tskhinvali, threatening Shevardnadze with war; significant amounts of Russian military forces amassed in North Ossetia, where a battalion of volunteers organized by the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus was already present.<sup>95</sup> With the threat of an imminent escalation of the conflict with potentially disastrous consequences for Georgia, a final cease-fire agreement was signed in Sochi on June 22 by Shevardnadze and Yeltsin, in the presence of the leaders of North and South Ossetia. This agreement froze the military situation on the ground as it was, with Ossetians and Georgians controlling roughly half of the territory of the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast each. Importantly, the Ossetian-controlled areas are not geographically contiguous. Peacekeeping forces led by Russian military but including Georgian and Ossetian elements were introduced on July 14. The conflict in south Ossetia remains unresolved by early 2002, although a certain return of refugees and resumption of economic links has occurred – the latter mainly in the form of smuggling of goods between Georgia and Russia, with South Ossetia functioning as a free economic zone outside any government control. An estimated 700 people died in the conflict.

### 6.6.3. The War in Abkhazia

As mentioned earlier, the Abkhaz and Georgian leadership had managed in late 1991 to agree, though with difficulty, on a consociational scheme for the Abkhaz parliament. And indeed, Abkhazia had been surprisingly calm during the rule of Gamsakhurdia; the fact that the latter, who by late 1991 had shed most the little will to compromise he possessed, agreed to a scheme that granted the Abkhaz heavy over-representation, adds to the peculiarity of the situation. Some observers have drawn the conclusion that there was a shady 'deal' between Gamsakhurdia and the Abkhaz leadership; Gamsakhurdia's

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<sup>94</sup> Charles H. Fairbanks, Jr., 'The Post-Communist Wars', *Journal of Democracy*, October 1995.

<sup>95</sup> Julian Birch, 'Ossetia: A Caucasian Bosnia in Microcosm', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 14 no. 1, 1995, p. 46. On the Confederation, see Dodge Billingsley, 'Confederates of the Caucasus', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, February 1997.

spectacular but ill-fated return to Georgia in 1993 took place through Abkhazia, which has compounded these speculations.

Events nevertheless turned for the worse as the Soviet Union collapsed, the Gamsakhurdia government fell, and Abkhazia's position increasingly fell into a constitutional limbo. The new parliament never got a chance to function properly and was soon deeply divided along ethnic lines. Abkhazia was now led by Vladislav Ardzinba, a historian, former member of the USSR congress of people's deputies, and member of the right-wing groups in Moscow that were responsible for the August 1991 coup. Having been a close associate of Congress Chairman Lukyanov, Ardzinba had been the polar opposite to Shevardnadze in Union politics. Shevardnadze had been among the most liberal proponents of Perestroika, whereas Ardzinba had been a member of the most reactionary forces in Moscow.

Ardzinba soon moved to assert control over Soviet military units in Abkhazia, though Russia in practice retained control over them. Instead, Ardzinba created a National Guard that was mono-ethnically Abkhaz. Further, a practice of replacing ethnic Georgians in leading positions with Abkhaz was initiated. This was partly in response to the practice of ethnic Georgian representatives to consult with Tbilisi, thereby appearing in the Abkhaz eyes to represent not the local Georgian population but the government in Tbilisi.<sup>96</sup> But compromise was still being sought, and delegations shuttled between Tbilisi and Sukhumi to try to achieve a compromise on the relationship between Abkhazia and Georgia. Ardzinba proposed a draft treaty in June that would have safeguarded Georgia's territorial integrity but restructured the relationship in a confederative way. As Georgia's State Council rejected this proposal and talks led nowhere, tensions increased.<sup>97</sup>

In July, the Abkhaz parliament, though lacking its ethnic Georgian component, adopted a resolution to restore the rather anachronistic 1925 constitution. This document described the 'Abkhaz Soviet Socialist Republic' as independent but 'United with the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic on the basis of a special Union Treaty'.<sup>98</sup> Meanwhile, Ardzinba's rhetoric mounted, as he claimed in late July that 'Abkhazia is strong enough to fight Georgia',<sup>99</sup> a somewhat absurd statement given the disparity in size and military power between the two. The legality of the resolution adopting the constitution was also highly doubtful, given that the necessary quorum of two thirds was not present in the absence of the ethnic Georgian representatives. Two weeks later, loosely organized Georgian forces under Kitovani entered Abkhazia and drove straight for Sukhumi. The Abkhaz leadership retreated to Gudauta in the North of Abkhazia, where a Russian

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<sup>96</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 117.

<sup>97</sup> BBC Monitoring Service, 18 June 1992.

<sup>98</sup> Gueorgui Otyrba, 'War in Abkhazia: the Regional Significance of the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict', in Roman Szporluk, ed., *The International Relations of Eurasia vol. 1*, Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 1994.

<sup>99</sup> 'Georgia: Abkhazia "Strong enough to fight Georgia"', *BBC Monitoring Service*, 30 July 1992.

military base is located. Kitovani's forces took Sukhumi on August 18 in a bout of killing and looting characteristic of the undisciplined militias, and then moved north along the Black Sea coast.

Shevardnadze seemed to have been caught unaware by Kitovani's invasion, but failed to force him to withdraw. Meanwhile, the Abkhaz prepared a counter-offensive. As they retreated toward the Russian border, they were met by Chechen and Circassian volunteer units representing the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, whose capital was Sukhumi.<sup>100</sup> By late September, their force had further swelled, and when the Abkhaz counter-attacked on October 1, they were equipped with T-72 tanks, Grad rocket launchers, heavy artillery, unidentified naval vessels, and air support, including Sukhoi fighter planes that bombed Sukhumi.<sup>101</sup> Evidence of Russian military support for Abkhazia increased after Georgian forces had shelled a Russian military laboratory at Eshera.<sup>102</sup> As the Abkhaz counter-offensive gathered strength in spite of several abortive cease-fires, Russian involvement grew as acknowledged by Russian experts: 'Moscow was clearly held responsible for what was accurately described as a purposeful and purposefully one-sided military intervention on behalf of Abkhazian separation. ... Russian planes bombed Sukhumi in February 1993, [and] a Russian army unit participated in an Abkhazian attack on Sukhumi a month later.'<sup>103</sup> By July 1993, only Sukhumi and the southwestern part of Abkhazia remained in Georgian hands when a Russian-brokered cease-fire came into effect. The agreement provided for withdrawal of both sides forces from the conflict area. Georgian forces were moved by ship to Poti further South; and the Abkhaz arms were handed over to Russian forces in Abkhazia. At this point, Zviad Gamsakhurdia spectacularly returned from exile to Mingrelia, claiming to be Georgia's legal President. Over a third of the Georgian forces deserted to support him, and the Abkhaz took this opportunity to resume their offensive. On September 26, Abkhaz-led forces entered Sukhumi, forcing Shevardnadze to flee the city by air, narrowly escaping an Abkhaz missile. The front in Abkhazia collapsed, and Abkhaz forces captured the entire territory of Abkhazia with the exception of parts of the mountainous Kodori gorge in the borderland between Abkhazia and Svaneti. An estimated 200,000 Georgians were evicted from the Gali region and other parts of Abkhazia by the advancing Abkhaz forces. The rebellion in Mingrelia grew, threatening to plunge Georgia into total chaos. Shevardnadze

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<sup>100</sup> Reuters, 14 August 1992, 18 August 1992, 19 August 1992.

<sup>101</sup> For a detailed treatment of the war see Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, pp. 170-174.

<sup>102</sup> Viacheslav Chirikba, 'The Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict and its Aftermath', in Mehmet Tütüncü, ed., *Caucasus: War and Peace*, Haarlem: SOTA, 1998.

<sup>103</sup> Evgeniy M. Kozhokin, 'Georgia-Abkhazia', in Jeremy Azrael and Emil Payin, eds., *U.S. and Russian Policy-Making with Respect to the Use of Force*, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1996. In March 1993, Georgian artillery shot down a Sukhoi-27 aircraft carrying Soviet Air Force identification marks over the boundary between Abkhazia and Georgia, whose deceased pilot was positively identified as a major on active duty in the Russian Air Force. For a detailed treatment of Russian intervention in the war in Abkhazia, See Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, pp.344-353.

acquiesced to Russian demands of joining the Commonwealth of Independent States, and accepted the presence of Russian troops on its territory and to have its border with Turkey patrolled by Russian troops. In exchange, Russian forces now moved to quell the 'Zviadist' (as Gamsakhurdia's forces were called) insurgency in less than two weeks. Gamsakhurdia himself died in mysterious circumstances in a remote area of western Georgia around New Year's eve.

By early 1994, Georgia's independence had been a complete disaster, with two ethnic wars and two civil wars decimating the country. It had failed to retain its factual independence, and seemed to have returned to Russian domination. It now controlled only half of South Ossetia and had completely lost control over Abkhazia, including over half of the country's coastline. It had a large refugee population which gradually became a hotbed of nationalism. Shevardnadze was now left with the arduous task of putting Georgia back together.

### **6.7. Picking Up the Pieces**

Shevardnadze's position was highly vulnerable in the aftermath of the war in Abkhazia. Though it was obvious that the defeat had been caused to large extent by external intervention, it remained a fact that Georgia had lost control of two separate parts of its territory under Shevardnadze's rule. His popularity was extremely low in western Georgia, parts of which were loyal to Gamsakhurdia; he had to handle a Georgia whose international standing had been heavily damaged by Gamsakhurdia's rule, the military coup of December 1991, and later by the warlords in Shevardnadze's own government. Georgia's economy was in shambles, its crucial tourist industry having been decimated by war, and its very independence being threatened by obvious Russian imperial ambitions.

However, Shevardnadze moved quickly to consolidate his control of the country and to attract western interests to Georgia. He announced elections for parliament and the presidency, which he subsequently won with ease, had a new constitution adopted, and used his fame in western Europe and the United States to attract desperately needed investments and aid. With increasing attention to Caspian oil resources and the unresolved conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Georgia became the only feasible route for pipelines carrying Azerbaijani oil westward. Shevardnadze capitalized on this, and joined Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev in skillfully promoting the importance of the South Caucasus and their own countries in Eurasian geopolitics. By 1997, Shevardnadze's government has managed to restore normality to Georgia. Negotiations with the Ossetian and Abkhaz separatists did not approach a solution, but the rest of Georgia stabilized, some economic development occurred, reforms in the political sphere took place, and Georgia became the first Caucasian state to be admitted to the Council of Europe in 1998. Shevardnadze could now focus on undoing the concessions he had been forced to grant Russia in 1993. By 1998, the five-year agreement on border guards

expired, and in spite of heavy Russian pressure, Shevardnadze refused to renew it. Hence Georgia regained control of its border with Turkey. At the November 1999 Istanbul summit of the OSCE, Georgia gained strong western backing for its demand for Russian forces to be withdrawn, and Moscow had to accept the closure before July 2001 of the military bases in Vaziani (outside Tbilisi) and Gudauta in Abkhazia as well as to start negotiations on the closure of the bases in Akhalkalaki (in Javakheti) and Batumi (in Ajaria). However, Russia is demanding to extend its rights there for 15 years.

But the situation again began to deteriorate in the late 1990s. The Russian economic crisis of 1998 affected Georgia deeply, and it was forced to devalue its currency by over 20%. The economic situation failed to recover after this blow. State finances also failed to improve. Corruption grew into a problem of incalculable proportions, and actually brought down the Georgian government in late 2001. Georgia also failed to improve its energy system, and remained heavily dependent on Russia for gas supplies, used to produce electricity. As a result of the inability of Georgia to pay for the gas, it exposed itself to politically motivated Russian cuts in energy supplies, as occurred in the winter of 2000-2001.<sup>104</sup>

The security situation also remained fragile. Shevardnadze narrowly escaped two assassination attempts in 1995 and 1998, and security services claim to have thwarted several other attempts on his life. The regional issues also kept a high place on the Georgian state's agenda. The questions of Ajaria and Javakheti have remained important throughout, whereas the problem on the Pankisi gorge bordering Chechnya gained salience only after the beginning of the second Chechen war in 1999. The Ajar leader Aslan Abashidze staunchly protected the autonomy of Abkhazia, and for many practical purposes kept his enclave separated from Georgia. In part due to the support both of the Russian military base and of Turkey which is its main trading partner, Ajaria has maintained stability and a certain prosperity, though at the expense of political freedoms. The situation in the Pankisi gorge, in the mountains bordering Chechnya, have become a contentious issue in Georgian-Russian relations and yet another destabilizing factor in the country. An exodus of several thousand Chechen refugees to the area took place in late 1999 and early 2000, and the Russian government claims a significant number of Chechen militants ('terrorists' in Russian parlance) Georgia denied the allegations, but its control over the gorge rapidly dwindled. Moscow at several occasions has demanded to send Russian troops there, though Georgia refused. Instead, an OSCE observer mission was dispatched to Pankisi, which failed to find any evidence of Russia's alleged 'Chechen and Arab militants'. However, a confusing incident took place in the Fall of 2001, when a group of up to 300 Chechens, under the purported leadership of Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelayev, apparently moved from Pankisi to the Kodori gorge in

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<sup>104</sup> Zeyno Baran, 'Georgia Under Worst Pressure Since Independence', *Georgia Update*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 10 January 2001.

Abkhazia, where it engaged Abkhaz detachments. To the Georgian government's embarrassment, it seemed to be as genuinely confused as anyone else on what forces had been where and for what reason. The incident nevertheless formed a pretext for Moscow to bomb several villages in the Pankisi and Kodori gorges, on Georgia's territory, in late 2001.

The main minority issue has nevertheless remained the Armenians of Javakheti. Reports of tensions, minor skirmishes, and the like have kept emanating from Javakheti throughout the 1990s. The area is, as mentioned, the home to a Russian military base, which in the lack of any Georgian investments there is the main source of employment for the local Armenians, estimated at 200,000 people. Armenian Diaspora groups in Russia and the United States have recently begun raising the question of Javakheti's status, although no overt support for the demands to grant it autonomy have been voiced by the Armenian government.

Georgia's tumultuous history and especially the painful and bloody events that transpired during the early 1990s raise many questions to the scholar of ethnopolitical conflict. Why is it that ethnic wars erupted in South Ossetia and Abkhazia after gradual escalations of tensions, but not in Javakheti, Ajaria, or the Azeri-populated areas of Kvemo Kartli? How can one explain that seemingly comparable minorities, that to that all drew the attention of the centralizing efforts of the Georgian state, experienced so different outcomes? In order to answer this question, a return to the factors of ethnopolitical conflict employed earlier in this study is called for. In the next chapter, a deeper analysis of how the ten factors viewed in chapter 5 applied to the five cases in Georgia is undertaken.

# 7

## Explaining Ethnopolitical Conflict

Georgia's five minorities exhibit a wide variance in conflict behavior in the period under study. Armed conflict erupted in two areas, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both of which were autonomous. Both Javakheti and Ajaria, one autonomous and one non-autonomous area, have experienced relatively high levels of tension with the central government, resisted the sometimes assertive, sometimes timid centralizing efforts of Tbilisi; Ajaria has safeguarded its self-rule, whereas the Javakheti Armenians have made half-hearted and abortive attempts at obtaining self-rule in a climate of muted tensions. Occurrences of communal violence have been scarce in both, although Javakheti Armenians have had repeated standoffs with Georgian military forces. As a contrast to these cases, the heavily Azeri-populated areas of Kvemo Kartli have been mainly silent throughout the period, in spite of relatively strong pressures in the late 1980s. In order to explain these variances in outcome, the ten factors outlined in chapters one and two, and briefly examined in chapter five over the entire South Caucasus, are investigated in further detail here.

### 7.1. Abkhazia: the Impossible Happening

Abkhazia was an unlikely separatist region in the late 1980s – and an even more unlikely candidate to *de facto* secession. Only 17% of Abkhazia's population was ethnic Abkhaz (1,8% of Georgia's population) whereas almost half of the population throughout the post-World War II period was consistently composed of ethnic Georgians. Yet in spite of this demographic situation, Abkhazia became the scene of a grave ethnic conflict that deeply impacted, and to this day still impacts, the building of Georgia's statehood.

#### 7.1.1. Cultural Differences

Georgians and Abkhaz have elements of identity that both unite and divide them. In terms of language, both Georgian and Abkhaz are Caucasian languages. However, Georgian is a South Caucasian language, whereas Abkhaz is Northwest Caucasian, related to Circassian languages (Abaza, Shapsug, Cherkess, Kabardin). The two languages are not mutually understandable, and the language issue formed an important part of the Abkhaz grievances against Georgians: the claim that a 'georgianization' of the Abkhaz through imposition of a Georgian-based alphabet for the Abkhaz language and of Georgian-language schools took place in the Stalin era. Yet the long coexistence between Abkhaz and Georgians and the common 'Caucasian' identity that these indigenous Caucasian

peoples undoubtedly share implies that numerous customs, tales and traditions are common to the two groups. In terms of religion, the picture is also mixed. Whereas the Orthodox church is a strong element of the Georgian identity, religion is a considerably weaker marker of Abkhaz identity. The Abkhaz are in fact religiously divided between Muslims and Christians, a division that dates back to the expulsion of the majority of Muslim Abkhaz together with large numbers of Circassian peoples in 1864. According to estimates, Abkhazia today is approximately 60-70% Christian and 30-40% Muslim. However, much like with the Ossetians, Pagan beliefs that predated Christianity or Islam remain deep-rooted under the veneer of Monotheism – producing what Derluguian calls an ‘easy-going religious syncretism’ in Abkhazia.<sup>1</sup> Hence religious differences as such are not a marked issue between Georgians and Abkhaz. Although the Abkhaz and Georgians have distinct and relatively strong ethnic-based identities, cultural differences between the two were not a major factor in the conflict.

### **7.1.2. National Conception**

The national conception of both Abkhaz and Georgians are predominantly exclusive and ethnic-based. An Abkhaz can hardly be seen as a Georgian, neither can a Georgian in Abkhazia pass as a member of the Abkhaz community. However, the Georgian government, including all but fringe groups among the nationalist forces, recognized the Abkhaz as indigenous in Abkhazia and most also accept their right to some form of self-rule. Hence within the national conception of Georgia, the concept of Abkhazia’s separate identity is recognized and accepted. Georgian deputy Prime Minister Alexander Kavadze once stated that the Abkhaz, unlike Armenians, Greeks, and Azeris, ‘have no other native land but Abkhazia’, and that Georgia must hence ‘do everything to ensure their rights’.<sup>2</sup> This said, the policies of the Georgian government have at times fostered fear among the Abkhaz for their cultural as well as political autonomy, and indeed even for their physical survival. Hence the language laws imposed first at the urge of the nationalist movement in 1988-89 and the stance and the policies of the Gamsakhurdia government itself once elected was not well-received in Abkhazia, with many Abkhaz intellectuals fearing the return of ‘georgianization’ policies. The exclusive character of the national conceptions of the two ethnic groups was a factor increasing the perceived distance between the two communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Georgi Derluguian, ‘The Forgotten Abkhazia: Anatomy of Post-Socialist Ethnic War’, PONARS Policy Memo no. 163, November 2000. [www.fas.harvard.edu/~ponars/POLICY%20MEMOS/Derluguian163.html](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~ponars/POLICY%20MEMOS/Derluguian163.html).

<sup>2</sup> *Moscow News*, 13 September 1992.

### 7.1.3. Past Conflict and Myths

Conflict between Abkhaz and Georgians, as seen in chapter seven, is not a phenomenon of the 1990s. Quite to the contrary, the Abkhaz issue was prominent during the First Georgian Republic, when events took place that are understood and portrayed in highly divergent ways by Abkhaz and by Georgians. Georgians see the events in Abkhazia in the light of their attempts, in the hostile and chaotic environment of 1918, to create a democratic state in which minorities would be granted rights and the Abkhaz were already granted autonomy. ‘Ungrateful’ elements among the Abkhaz instead sided with the Bolsheviks, betraying the good faith of the Georgians, and let themselves be manipulated by the Russians. On May 26, 1919, *Sakartvelos Respublika* wrote that ‘in Abkhazia a group of individuals, driven by their personal considerations and discontent over the basic reforms, turned for help to a foreign country while agitating the people for an uprising’.<sup>3</sup> The Menshevik government was accordingly forced to intervene in order to restore order and uphold Georgia’s territorial integrity against Bolshevik encroachments; however, Abkhazia retained its autonomy and was allowed to rule its own affairs even during this time. Predictably, the Abkhaz version of the episode is different: Abkhazia was never legally part of Georgia in the first place, and hence Menshevik Georgia’s claim to Abkhazia was without basis. Yet Georgia intervened brutally and quelled the popular movement in Abkhazia, with a view to install a puppet regime.

Similarly, grudges are held among the Abkhaz regarding the submission of Abkhazia to Georgia in 1931. The Abkhaz hold that Abkhazia was constituted as an independent Soviet Socialist Republic in 1921, which was on an equal footing with Georgia, and tied to it in a treaty relationship, and point to the 1925 constitution of Abkhazia as evidence. Only through the intervention of powerful Georgians like Stalin and Beria in the 1930s, they argue, was Abkhazia forced under Georgian rule in 1931, after which Abkhazia was subjected to a forcible policy of ‘georgianization’ that only ended with Stalin’s death and the fall of Beria. Georgians retaliate that Abkhazia may have been formally accorded independent status in 1921 but that this did not imply separation from Georgia. In fact the Soviet leadership in all documentation envisaged three republics in the South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, whereas Abkhazia was never mentioned at par with any of these. Likewise, Stalin’s September 1921 assertion that ‘Abkhazia is an autonomous part of independent Georgia’ is brought up by Georgians to show that there was never any intention of putting Abkhazia at par with other Union Republics. Georgians also recall that it was customary during the civil war to form smaller territories as ‘Soviet Socialist Republics’, which were later incorporated into bigger units. For example, Nakhchivan was first declared an SSR, then turned into an autonomous district of Azerbaijan, and finally an ASSR. Other examples include the Kuban Black Sea and

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<sup>3</sup> Cited in Avtandil Menteshashvili, ‘Georgian-Abkhaz Relations in 1918-1921’, in *Some National and Ethnic Problems in Georgia*, Tbilisi, 1992.

Stavropol SSRs and several in Central Asia that were subsequently dissolved. As for allegations of ‘georgianization’, Georgians have gone so far as to claim that Abkhazia’s falling under Georgian and not Russian jurisdiction in fact saved Abkhaz culture from annihilation. Though not all Georgians go to such extents, they often do argue that Georgian rule in Abkhazia was incomparably more tolerant than Russian rule in the North Caucasus.

As should be clear from the above, the interpretations of past conflict among Abkhaz and Georgians are full of mutual incriminations and suspicion. In the case of the Abkhaz, moreover, the demographic situation and Caucasian history combined created a fear of annihilation that was relatively strong even before the actual ethnic conflict emerged.<sup>4</sup> The Abkhaz had been subjected to earlier deportations in 1864 and 1877 by Czarist Russia, contributing to their low numbers. In a Georgia of five million people, the Abkhaz were a very small minority indeed, numbering only 105,000. Moreover, the fate of other related nations, especially the Ubykh, were clearly present in the minds of the Abkhaz.<sup>5</sup> The Ubykh, a once-strong Circassian nation closely related to the Abkhaz and inhabiting the areas of the Black Sea coast just northwest of Abkhazia around present-day Sochi, were deported in their totality in the great nineteenth-century deportations that also affected the Abkhaz. Moving to the Ottoman Empire, they were gradually assimilated into a Turkish identity, and the last speaker of the Ubykh language died in 1992. The fate of the Ubykh has intensified Abkhaz fears of physical or cultural annihilation, that were already present in large part due to their weak demography. Indeed, the population of the Abkhaz nation in its entirety is comparable to a small European or American town – creating a fertile ground for a credible threat of actual annihilation of the nation. In sum, the factor of past conflict and especially the mythification of past conflict and the myths and fears arising therefrom, have been significant in the case of Abkhazia.

#### **7.1.4. Rough Terrain**

Abkhazia is often described as a paradise on earth, very much because of its subtropical climate near the coastline and the presence of high mountains in the northern and eastern parts of Abkhazia. Much of Abkhazia’s territory is covered with thick forests and inaccessible mountains. The roughness of Abkhazia’s terrain was a factor in Russia’s conquest of the South Caucasus in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. While advancing southward, there were three possible routes to cross the majestic Caucasus mountains: the eastern route along the plains of the Caspian sea coast; the central route

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<sup>4</sup> On the role of psychology in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, see Manana Gabashvili, ‘K Psikologicheskomu Analizu Konflikta Na Primere Vooruzhennogo Konflikta v Abkhazii’, in Georgi Gogsadze et. al., *Etnopoliticheskie Konflikty v Zakavkaze: Ikh Istoki I Puti Resheniia*, College Park, MD: University of Maryland CIDCM, 1997, pp. 146-153.

<sup>5</sup> See Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 96 for a discussion of Abkhaz fears.

from Vladikavkaz across the Daryal gorge (the 'Georgian Military Highway') straight down via Shida Kartli to Tbilisi; and the western route through Abkhazia along the Black Sea coast. Because of its inaccessibility, the Russian forces in the early nineteenth century did not employ the route through Abkhazia, focusing on the two other routes. Again in 1921, Bolshevik Russia's encroachment into Georgia did involve both Abkhazia and Ossetia, but the final Red Army invasion came from the East, advancing toward Georgia only after having subdued Azerbaijan.<sup>6</sup>

À priori, its geographical and topographical features would make Abkhazia an ideal area for guerrilla warfare, and this reality may indeed have influenced the belief of the Abkhaz leadership in the Summer of 1992 that it was 'strong enough to fight Georgia'. It is difficult to determine if this was indeed the case, but very little in the prelude to the 1992-93 war suggested that the Abkhaz were reasoning along these lines. Indeed, it seems that the Abkhaz had not taken the possibility of a Georgian invasion into serious consideration. Abkhazian leader Vladislav Ardzinba was reportedly taken by total surprise when informed of Kitovani's invasion.<sup>7</sup> The further development of the Abkhaz war, though not overly relevant to the *expectations* of the usefulness of guerrilla warfare, would also question the importance of rough terrain. In fact, offensive military operations dominated the fighting, both when Georgian forces pushed North in August 1992 and when the Abkhaz later counter-attacked throughout 1993. It may be said, however, that the military edge between the two parties was dictated by outside factors rather than by either their respective original strengths or their use of terrain. Abkhazia does exhibit rough terrain, but there is no conclusive evidence that terrain played an important part in the political decisions on either side. The Abkhaz did not expect the war; neither were the very disorganized forces under Kitovani repelled by the rough terrain of Abkhazia when they took the decision to invade Abkhazia in August 1992.

### 7.1.5. Relative Demography

As has been noted at several instances in this study, the case of Abkhazia is distinguished by its demographic conditions. As explained in chapter two, the likelihood of conflict is normally thought to be higher in areas where the minority ethnic group predominates demographically. The presence of large communities of other ethnic groups, in particular that of the central state's majority population, are likely to lower the possibilities for ethnic entrepreneurs among the minority population to revolt. The dangers are higher; the likelihood of opposition from the central government is higher, and the possibilities of achieving independence are compromised in the absence of ethnic cleansing. Should these factors have a direct bearing on ethnopolitical conflict, Abkhazia would have been a

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<sup>6</sup> See Firuz Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia (1917-1921)*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1951, pp. 294-328.

<sup>7</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 120.

textbook case of a minority population *without* significant risk of conflict. Georgians were over twice as numerous as the Abkhaz in Abkhazia; even Armenians were almost as numerous as the Abkhaz – actually slightly outnumbering the titular nation in 1979.

However, it is possible to turn this argument on its head and argue that precisely *because* of their demographic position, the Abkhaz were predisposed to rebellion. Their demographic situation, and the conviction that Georgia was actively and purposefully trying to alter the demography of the republic, strengthened the fears of annihilation of the Abkhaz and may have deepened their frustration and incentives to change their political situation. If this is the case, it would challenge the theoretical assumption that minorities that predominate demographically in their areas of habitation are the most likely to see ethnopolitical action and conflict. One could actually make a logical case that the high and low ends of demographic domination are likely to see ethnopolitical activism, whereas the middle range, where the minority population neither predominates nor is demographically threatened, are less likely to experience ethnic mobilization and conflict.

#### **7.1.6. Ethnic Kin**

The Abkhaz demographic weakness was early on offset, at least partly, by the close cooperation that the Abkhaz leadership developed with kin peoples across the Caucasus mountains. In 1989, Sukhumi was the meeting place for the first Congress of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus. Grouping together the Circassian peoples related to the Abkhaz, and the Chechens, Ingush, Ossetians, as well as several Dagestani peoples, the Confederation was a powerful idea in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the fate of the Soviet Union and its successor states was uncertain. The Confederation aimed to restore the North Caucasian ‘Mountain Republic’ that had briefly existed in 1917-1920, and it enjoyed a significant level of support among the local population at this time when national feelings were running high. Sukhumi was declared the capital of the Confederation, and the sense of solidarity felt by activists from the North Caucasus with Abkhazia was remarkable. In this sense, ethnic kin was a potent factor in giving the Abkhaz a sense that they were supported by ethnic kin across the border in the North Caucasus. To a lesser extent and more so during and after the war, the Abkhaz and North Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey also proved to be an asset. A number of Turkish citizens of Abkhaz origin came to fight in Abkhazia and yet others came to conduct business after the war, but before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, national kinship sentiments had not awakened in Turkey and hence played no real role in the emergence of the conflict. Ethnic kin in the North Caucasus did, though, as was made abundantly clear by the support that the Abkhaz received from North Caucasian

volunteers, whose participation in the actual fighting against Georgian forces was of crucial importance to the outcome of the war.<sup>8</sup>

### 7.1.7. Economic Viability

Both Georgia and Abkhazia were relatively privileged parts of the Soviet Union in economic terms. As described in chapter seven, Georgia had a large shadow economy that grew to impressive proportions in the 1970s, in fact challenging the prevailing Socialist economic order in the republic. Georgia was the republic of the Soviet Union where indicators of wealth such as private savings and automobile ownership were the highest.<sup>9</sup> Abkhazia, for its part, was together with Crimea the pearl of the ‘Soviet Rivera’. This meant that industry was weak in Abkhazia compared to the rest of Georgia, with the population mainly employed in agriculture and services. As Kaufman notes, economic considerations played little part in the Abkhaz conflict.<sup>10</sup> Yet in terms of economic viability, the Abkhaz government could clearly view Abkhazia as a self-sufficient economic unit outside Georgia. Especially given its tourist industry that mainly attracted Russians – including many high Russian military officers who regularly vacationed in Abkhazia – the republic could expect to survive economically. Even aside from the tourist industry, Abkhazia is basically self-sufficient in food and produces electricity through hydro-electric power plants. Even after the conflict, electricity flow is better in Abkhazia than in many parts of Georgia. Whereas economic viability was present in Abkhazia, it is doubtful whether economic considerations influenced the course of events to any significant extent. As Kaufman notes, both sides were more concerned with ‘symbolic nationalist concerns than economic ones.’<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, economic problems or economic dependence on Tbilisi were not present, implying that no economic factors were there to *impede* the Abkhaz secessionist moves.

### 7.1.8. Radical Leadership

The emergence and strengthening of Abkhaz separatism was led by what can be termed an alliance between intelligentsia groups and the dominant ethnic Abkhaz components of the official structures of the republic. In December 1977, the petition sent to the central government demanding improvements in Abkhazia’s status was drafted by an informal groups of Abkhaz intellectuals. The same letter was submitted to the authorities of the ASSR, where it found support from the ethnic Abkhaz leaders. Moscow’s intervention, though acquiescing to some of the Abkhaz demands, refused to change the status of Abkhazia, but later replaced the incumbent head of the Abkhaz Party Valerian Kobakhia

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<sup>8</sup> See Dodge Billingsley, ‘Confederates of the Caucasus’, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, February 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Revaz Gachechiladze, *The New Georgia: Space, Society, Politics*, pp. 117-136.

<sup>10</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 99.

<sup>11</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 99

through the first deputy chairman of the Council of Minister, Boris Adleiba, a person closer to the separatists. The boost to Abkhaz autonomy in 1978 (discussed in further detail below) greatly contributed to the joint efforts of the official representatives and the intelligentsia, as the Abkhaz were now in a dominant position in the ASSR and may have felt less constrained by Tbilisi, and more supported by Moscow. In apparent collusion between the Abkhaz Nomenklatura and the separatist intelligentsia, a large demonstration was organized in May 1978, something rather unseen in the Brezhnev era – and followed by incidents of unrest and ethnic violence that were not dealt with in the repressive Soviet manner.

In November 1988, the Abkhaz nationalist group *Aydgylara* (Unity) was established under the leadership of the writer Alexei Gogua. Aydgylara based its program on loyalty to Moscow and championing Abkhaz ethnic rights. When Aydgylara organized the demonstration on the sacred field in the village Lykhny in March 1989<sup>12</sup> (that produced the counter-demonstration in Tbilisi in April that in turn led to the April 9 crackdown), Adleiba rapidly returned from Moscow to take part in the event together with other high Abkhaz officials. The ‘Lykhny declaration’ of March 18 again took up the issue of Abkhazia’s ‘illegal’ incorporation into Georgia and demanded the return to the status of 1921. Adleiba, however, was dismissed and replaced by Vladimir Khishba, formerly Georgian deputy minister of Forestry.<sup>13</sup>

Vladislav Ardzinba had been the director of the Abkhaz Institute of Language, Literature and History from 1987 until 1989, when he was elected a Deputy to the USSR Supreme Soviet from Gudauta, one of the most homogeneously Abkhaz areas in Abkhazia. From there, he was involved closely with national issues, including Abkhazia. On December 4, 1990, Ardzinba was elected Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia. Ardzinba then consolidated his power relatively quickly, and went back on promises of increasing the representation of Georgians he had made before being elected; since then, Ardzinba tried to rule Abkhazia relatively single-handedly while keeping a dialogue with Tbilisi on the reform of the electoral law, which eventually led to the agreement of Summer 1991 of a code that granted the Abkhaz wide over-representation. When the elections to the Supreme Soviet took place, Ardzinba formed a Presidium that consisted of three Abkhaz (including himself), three Georgians, two Russians and one Armenian. As ethnic polarization was intense at this point, the members were forced to take sides: one of the Russian members sided with the Georgians, whereas the other Russian and the Armenian member sided with the Abkhaz. Ardzinba had successfully built a coalition that guaranteed the Abkhaz control over the republic. An ethnic Abkhaz

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<sup>12</sup> The field at Lykhny is sacred in pre-monotheistic Abkhaz beliefs, a place where Abkhaz connect spiritually with their ancestors.

<sup>13</sup> Vakhtang Kholbaia et. Al., *Labyrinth of Abkhazia*, (trans. Nana Japaridze-Chkoidze), Tbilisi 1999.

elite that had developed during decades of Soviet rule provided a solid radical leadership for the nationalist movement in the late 1980s.

### 7.1.9. External Support

As the conflict in Abkhazia turned into war with the August 1992 invasion of Kitovani's forces, the Abkhaz forces received two forms of substantial backing from the North. Direct support came from volunteer units organized by the Abkhaz' ethnic kin in the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, primarily composed of Chechens and Circassians. This military support was crucial to the war effort, given the numerical inferiority and military inexperience of the Abkhaz forces. Of equal importance was the blatant (though officially denied) military support of Russian military units, which proved decisive as all types of weaponry was provided for the Abkhaz/North Caucasian forces, including air support and naval vessels; detachments of Russian forces very likely also took part in the actual fighting itself.<sup>14</sup>

Whereas the level of support of Russian military units for the Abkhaz is well established, an important question is whether the Abkhaz anticipated external support in the event of a military conflict with Tbilisi. If external support arrived spontaneously and unexpectedly after Abkhazia was attacked, that would mean that this factor played no part in the political consideration leading to the *de facto* declaration of independence in 1992. If, however, the Abkhaz were aware that external support would be forthcoming, that may have influenced their decision to bid for independence in mid-1992. Indeed, if the Abkhaz leadership was intent on pursuing separation from Georgia, it had had an excellent opportunity to realize that ambition only six months earlier: when the civil war in Tbilisi between Gamsakhurdia and his opponents flared, Abkhazia could have declared independence, all the more so because the dissolution of the Soviet Union took place at the exact same time. This would have given Abkhazia time to prepare its defenses, and the fact that the Zviadists had a power base in Mingrelia – between Abkhazia in Tbilisi – also meant that the forces loyal to the military council would have had difficulty dealing with an independent Abkhazia. Instead, the Abkhaz leadership waited until the Military Council had consolidated power, the Zviadists reduced to size, and the South Ossetian conflict suspended, freeing Tbilisi's hands. This, with the benefit of hindsight, was a particularly bad moment to declare independence. Moreover, there was no direct event in Tbilisi or provocation from the Georgian side that could have prompted the decision of the type that had been the case in South Ossetia. As such, the Abkhaz decision remains a mystery.

The leadership of Abkhazia, however, had always been well-connected in the Soviet bureaucracy and hierarchy. As the Soviet Union was ruled to a great extent based on

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<sup>14</sup> See discussion in chapter 6; Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, pp. 347-353; Thomas Goltz, 'Letter from Eurasia: The Hidden Russian Hand', *Foreign Policy*, no. 92, Fall 1993

personal, not institutional ties, and this being particularly true in the Caucasus, the fact that substantial parts of the high echelons of Soviet power vacationed in Abkhazia provided Abkhazia's ruling circles with a direct connection to the Union-level leadership, similar to the way that Mikhail Gorbachev's work in the Stavropol region and Mineralnye Vody put him in touch with high visiting officials and served as a springboard for his career. When Stalin tried to curtail Beria's control over Georgia in 1951 (beginning with the so-called Mingrelian affair), the leadership of the republic was affected by March 1952: Beria's protégé Charkviani was replaced with the head of the Kutaisi oblast, Akaki Mgeladze, who had only been elected to full membership in the Georgian Communist Party's Central Committee four months earlier. Before his appointment in Kutaisi, Mgeladze had been first secretary of the Abkhazian Communist Party from 1943 to 1952. While in this position, Mgeladze had had the opportunity to meet Stalin when the dictator was visiting his vacation resort on the Black Sea coast. This personal connection was likely of high importance in Mgeladze's steep ascent to power in Georgia. It is also known that many high (ethnic Russian) officers in the military were among the Soviet officials that had *dachas* in Abkhazia; this can explain their attachment to the region and their apprehension for the prospect of Abkhazia belonging to a foreign country, that is, Georgia.

Ardzinba had worked for many years under Yevgeniy Primakov, then head of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow, and later Russian foreign and Prime Minister. Moreover, while a deputy to the USSR Supreme Soviet, Ardzinba was close to Anatoly Lukyanov, the parliamentary chairman who has been called the ideologue of the August 1991 coup.<sup>15</sup> This connection proved crucial for the Abkhaz nationalist movement. Much like Georgia in the mid-1990s has benefited from the connection with, and appreciation prevalent in the west for its President, Shevardnadze, Abkhazia in 1991-92 benefited from the close connection that its leadership had with hardliner circles in Moscow, which emboldened it to seek secession from Georgia. A potential challenge to this interpretation is that the hardliner circles lost the power struggle in Moscow after the failure of the August 1991 coup; indeed, Boris Yeltsin's reformer wing was perhaps the polar opposite of the faction to which Ardzinba had his allegiances. After all, Lukyanov was in prison between late 1991 and 1994. However, a closer look at Russian policy shows the inconsistencies of the actions of different branches of power in Moscow. In fact, it has been observed that Yeltsin at first sought to play the role of an honest broker in the conflict. However, the Russian military, including high-ranking officers in the Ministry of Defense, had a different agenda than the President and actively implemented this agenda. The military sought to restore Moscow's control over the Caucasus in general and Georgia in particular, especially the strategically located Abkhazia. In late 1992, Yeltsin was still, apparently truthfully, seeking peace, while units of his military forces were

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<sup>15</sup> *The Guardian*, 23 August 1991; *Moscow Times*, 21 August 2001.

supporting the Abkhaz. The conflicting policies of Russia were obvious in September 1993, when Yeltsin condemned Abkhazia for breaking the cease-fire and occupying Sukhumi – while Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev on the same day claimed that only the ‘immediate withdrawal’ of all Georgian forces from Abkhazia could bring an end to the conflict.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, during 1993 the conservative forces’ control over Russian foreign policy grew more assertive.<sup>17</sup> What this shows is that although the political leaders of the conservative front in Russia had been sidelined in August 1991, the representatives of similar thinking in the military were very active indeed. The close connections between Ardzinba’s Abkhaz leadership and the rapid Russian response from October 1992 onward form strong circumstantial evidence that Ardzinba had received assurances of military backing for Abkhazian independence. However, Kitovani’s invasion took everyone – including Ardzinba, probably the Russian military leadership, and possibly even Shevardnadze himself – by surprise, explaining why no military support was present to oppose the invasion.<sup>18</sup> The presence of such ‘guarantees’ would also shed light on the background to Ardzinba’s July 1992 statement that Abkhazia was ‘strong enough to fight Georgia’; but also his statement on August 14, 2001, the day of Kitovani’s invasion where he stated that ‘the world knows in which situation Abkhazia has been placed ... we are assured of its moral and material assistance ... in fact I am convinced that we have appropriate support’.<sup>19</sup> Viewed in proper context, Ardzinba’s confidence at a moment when his disorganized forces were being routed by Kitovani’s equally disorganized, but more numerous troops, displayed an awareness that external support was indeed going to be forthcoming. The step is not far to assume that this awareness had been available to Ardzinba only several weeks earlier when the decision to secede was taken. In sum, it is external support played a crucial role in the escalation to conflict in Abkhazia.

#### 7.1.10. The Role of Autonomy

Several factors conducive to ethnic conflict existed in Abkhazia, such as a sustained level of tension between the two communities, and mythified and divergent interpretations of history; moreover, their national conceptions were mutually exclusive, and Abkhazia between 1989 and 1992 developed close links to ethnic kin in the North Caucasus and secured external support for its bid for independence from Georgia, under the leadership of a radical nationalist leadership. This reality hence implies that both incentives and

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Russia calls on Georgia not to Fight Abkhazians’, *International Herald Tribune*, 21 September 1993

<sup>17</sup> Mohiaddin Mesbahi, ‘Russian Foreign Policy and Security in Central Asia and the Caucasus’, *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 12 no. 2, 1993, pp. 181-215.

<sup>18</sup> Another version often mentioned in Georgia is that the Russians, while supporting the Abkhaz, also instigated Kitovani’s invasion in order to trigger a conflict, by providing weapons, and perhaps promising Kitovani – who was strongly opposed to the bringing in of Shevardnadze five months earlier – support for his leadership in Georgia after a successful operation.

<sup>19</sup> *Chronicle of and Undeclared War*, Moscow 1992, cited in Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow*, Oxford, Gothic Image Publications, 1994, p. 118.

capacity for conflict were present in the case of Abkhazia. How did the presence of the institution of territorial autonomy interplay with this?

There is little doubt that autonomy helped sustain the separate *group identity* of the Abkhaz. Especially considering their insignificant numbers, which according to a Russian official in the early twentieth century meant that the ‘Abkhaz language is not written and has no literature, and is destined to extinction. Which language is going to replace it? Obviously, it should be Russian rather than Georgian.’<sup>20</sup> Indeed, sandwiched between Georgia and Russia, the Abkhaz people would in the absence of autonomy have been susceptible to linguistic Russification like the North Caucasian peoples to its North, or to ‘georgianization’ like the Mingrelians or Svans to their South and East. Whereas Mingrelians and Svans are linguistically related to Georgians, their languages are not mutually understandable with Georgian. These peoples lacked autonomy, and were gradually georgianized throughout the Soviet period as uniformity of language (based on an eastern Georgian dialect) was stressed through the system of education, print media, and radio and television broadcasts. While these peoples maintain strong regional identities, their integration with mainstream Georgian society has increased. The Abkhaz, on the other hand, were able for most of the Soviet era – depending, as all other parts of the union, on the nationality policy at the center – to preserve the Abkhaz language, and to inculcate through the educational system a national history often highly divergent from that which Georgian schoolchildren were taught. The availability of newspapers and broadcasting in the Abkhaz language, also enhanced through the institution of autonomy, helped sustain the distinct identity of the Abkhaz.

**Table 7.1. Ethnic Affiliation of *raikom* Secretaries in the Abkhaz ASSR<sup>21</sup>**

	1965	1975	1985
1 <sup>st</sup> Secretaries, Abkhaz %	42,9	50	50
1 <sup>st</sup> Secretaries, Georgian %	57,1	50	37,5
2 <sup>nd</sup> Secretaries, Abkhaz %	28,6	12,5	12,5
2 <sup>nd</sup> Secretaries, Georgian %	57,1	62,5	75
Secretaries, Abkhaz %	28,6	12,5	50
Secretaries, Georgian %	42,9	50	12,5

The significance of the state institutions of the Abkhaz ASSR for the purposes of Abkhaz ethnic mobilization can hardly be overstated. Faced with a daunting demographic inferiority in their homeland, the Abkhaz were throughout the post-Stalin period able to

<sup>20</sup> Z. B. Anchabadze, *Ocherki etnicheskoi istorii abkhazskogo naroda*, Sukhumi 1970, p. 96

<sup>21</sup> Jurgen Gerber, *Georgien*, Table 15, p. 292. Totals for a given year may not amount to 100 given that members of other nationalities, especially Russians, held office in some areas.

increase their already disproportionate representation in the ruling organs of the ASSR. Table 7.1 shows that the Abkhaz, in spite of forming around a sixth of the population of Abkhazia, controlled almost half of the secretarial positions in the *raikoms*, and significantly, dominated in the positions of first secretary.

This is an illustration to the affirmative action policy that the Soviet structure of autonomy implied for small titular populations like the Abkhaz. As the table shows, the Abkhaz were particularly favored after the concessions of 1978, which practically enabled ethnic Abkhaz to secure control over the republican administration and the economic institutions of the ASSR.<sup>22</sup> In addition to the *raikoms*, 67 percent of government ministers and 71% of *Obkom* department heads were ethnic Abkhaz.<sup>23</sup>

This control over the institutions of the republic and the affirmative action that strongly favored the Abkhaz and gave them political outlets and career opportunities created an Abkhaz political elite that would have been unlikely to emerge had Abkhazia not enjoyed an autonomous status. Without such leadership, there would not have been any outlet for the grievances of the Abkhaz, grievances that were themselves repeatedly formulated, expressed and entertained by the elite – with the use not least of the media outlets controlled by the Abkhaz government. Autonomy also enabled the Abkhaz elite under Ardzinba to create mono-ethnic defense units and to arm them by appropriating the assets of the Soviet military on the soil of Abkhazia (a decree that was implemented only to a limited extent); and to pass laws concerning the state symbols and status of Abkhazia. Laws on the flag and symbols of Abkhazia were passed in early 1992, and the 1925 constitution was adopted in July, sparking the conflict. The opposition of the ethnic Georgian section of the parliament may have made the decisions legally tenuous or even invalid, but this did not matter in practice: there existed a decision-making body that not only decreed but also *implemented* the imposition of a state flag, the enactment of a constitution, and the creation of an army. The institutions of the autonomy were also crucial in providing the Abkhaz population with a leadership. At every time since 1978 that the Soviet center replaced a party head, the structure was in place to ensure the survival and often even the strengthening of the separatist movement. In terms of external support, Ardzinba's position in Moscow may have been strong, but unless he had had the autonomous structures of Abkhazia to return to and lead, he would have faced larger difficulties in creating a nationalist movement with popular support. He could feasibly have gone back to create a national movement at the grassroots level; yet

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<sup>22</sup> See also Kholbaia et. al., *Labyrinth of Abkhazia*, chapter one.

<sup>23</sup> Darrel Slider, 'Democratization in Georgia', in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, eds., *Conflict, Cleavage and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 170. Of 12 ministers and 8 department heads, 13 were Abkhaz and 6 Georgians in the late 1980s. Of regional prosecutors, five were Abkhaz and three Georgian; eight of fifteen deputies from Abkhazia to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR were ethnic Abkhaz. See Kholbaia et. Al., *Labyrinth of Abkhazia*, Chapter one.

Abkhazia's autonomy presented the would-be nationalist leader with an excellent and ready-made power base that included decision-making bodies, links to outside support and to financial resources, as well as to media outlets for propagating the message to the people. Autonomy hence undoubtedly played a crucial role in the development of an assertive Abkhaz nationalist movement that mounted a credible and ultimately successful secessionist challenge to the Georgian central government. The role played by autonomy itself in protecting and promoting the ethnic identity of the Abkhaz, and in providing institutions for a secessionist movement, were important in and by themselves; yet the empirical record also shows how the institution of autonomy was intimately linked with other factors that played an important role in the emergence of conflict, specifically external support and radical leadership.

## **7.2. South Ossetia: the Power of a Parliament**

The South Ossetian conflict, perhaps because it was considerably less severe than either the Abkhaz or Mountainous Karabakh conflicts, has been relatively neglected in the literature. However, it remains one of the main impediments to the consolidation of Georgian statehood, while it is geographically considerably closer to Georgia's heartland than Abkhazia. Like Abkhazia, South Ossetia was an unlikely candidate for secession. Unlike the Abkhaz, the Ossetians were in a majority position in their autonomous region, but their absolute numbers were extremely small, numbering less than 70,000 inside South Ossetia. Yet South Ossetia emerged as the first serious challenger to Georgia's sovereignty in the Perestroika period. In fact, the situation in Ossetia escalated parallel to, and in direct response to the development of the Georgian national movement – it is in fact arguably the conflict in the Caucasus that most closely approximates the 'security dilemma'. Georgians and Ossetians perceived each other's national claims as a direct threat to their own nation. Ossetians saw remaining in Georgia as threatening their survival, whereas Georgians saw Ossetia as a tool of Moscow in undermining Georgian sovereignty and aspirations to independence. This led them both to take actions intended to 'protect' their respective interests – that served to escalate the conflict. How did such a severe conflict escalate so quickly in an area that had been quiet and devoid of ethnic tensions in the Soviet era?

### **7.2.1. Cultural Differences**

Ossetians claim descent from the Alans, an Iranian people themselves apparently descending from Scythian-Sarmatian tribes that had occupied eastern parts of the Roman empire but settled in the Caucasus in the fifth century, where they created a sizable state in the North Caucasus and present-day Southern Russia. Their language is Iranian, not comprehensible to but related with Farsi. However, unlike most Iranian peoples, Ossetians are predominantly Orthodox Christians. In North Ossetia, a substantial minority (the Digor Ossetians), estimated at 25-30%, is Sunni Muslim; however, the

Ossetians South of the Great Caucasus range are Orthodox Christians. But similarly to the Abkhaz, the Ossetians retain strong influences from pre-Christian and pre-Islamic religious beliefs.<sup>24</sup> South Ossetians hence share the same religion with the Georgians, but belong to a different ethno-linguistic group.

### 7.2.2. National Conception

The Ossetians are like the Abkhaz or Armenians not included in the predominant Georgian national conception. However, especially compared to the Abkhaz, the strength of the ethnic Ossetian identity was relatively weak, and did not find much political expression either in North or South Ossetia during the Soviet times. The rate of inter-marriages between between Ossetians and Georgians, especially among Ossetians living outside the former South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast, were relatively high; the most famous alleged child of an Ossetian-Georgian family was Stalin. In spite of this, Georgian views on Ossetian rights in Georgia are considerably more circumscribed than regarding the Abkhaz. While most Georgians see the Abkhaz as an indigenous people and therefore traditionally had a higher degree of toleration or acceptance of Abkhazia's autonomous status, this is not the case in South Ossetia. It is significant that Ossetia's autonomy was abolished, while Abkhazia's never was; many Georgians view Ossetians as recent migrants with a homeland in the North Caucasus, and therefore not entitled to any territorial autonomy in Georgia. Georgian nationalists in the late 1980s very much had Ossetians in mind when defining minorities in Georgia as 'guests' on Georgian soil, thereby displaying clearly their conception of Ossetians as being outside the Georgian nation. As for the Ossetians, few inside South Ossetia adopted a Georgian identity, and the overwhelming majority within the autonomous region sustained a distinct Ossetian identity. The proclamation of 'native' and 'non-native' peoples in Georgia, where Georgians considered themselves and the Abkhaz native, but described the Ossetians as non-native, was particularly alienating for the Ossetians.<sup>25</sup>

### 7.2.3. Past Conflict and Myths

The level of conflict between Georgians and Ossetians had been low before the first world war and remained low during the Soviet era, especially compared with Abkhazia.<sup>26</sup> Historical interpretations nevertheless collide drastically in essential matters, including the Ossetians' history on present-day Georgia. Georgian sources claim the Ossetians migrated

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<sup>24</sup> See Sebastian Smith, *Allah's Mountains*, I.B. Tauris, pp. 81-82.

<sup>25</sup> Albert Kabisov, 'Konflikt v Iuzhnoi Osetii i tsennost opyta Alanskoi Avtonomii dlia razresheniia konfliktov v Zakavkaze', in Georgi Gogsadze et. al., *Etnopoliticheskie Konflikty v Zakavkaze: Ikh Istoki I Puti Resheniia*, College Park, MD: University of Maryland CIDCM, 1997, p. 155.

<sup>26</sup> For historical overviews of Ossetia during the revolutionary period, see Pavel V. Doguzov, *Revolutsionnoe Dvizhenie v Iugo-Osetii*, Moscow 1960; Sof'ia Grigor'evna Bekoeva, *Iugo-Osetiia v period pervoi Russkoi revoliutsii*, Vladikavkaz 1956.

to the South of the Caucasus mountains in the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and settling in what Georgians refer to as Shida Kartli;<sup>27</sup> Ossetians, on the other hand, claim they have been living on both sides of the mountain range for up to over a thousand years.<sup>28</sup> The fact that Shida Kartli is seen as the Heart of Georgian statehood, and that Tskhinvali lies within two hours drive by car from Tbilisi, is seen in Georgia as a Russian-created encroachment on the central territory of the Georgian nation. The establishment of autonomous South Ossetia is seen in this light. Moreover, Georgians claim that during industrialization in Georgia after the establishment of the Soviet Union, numerous Ossetians began migrating southward from the mountains. To support their argument, they cite the fact that Tskhinvali itself had no more than a thousand Ossetians in 1926, whereas this number had increased to 40,000 by 1989.<sup>29</sup> Ossetians, naturally, have a different interpretation. They argue that Ossetians, both North and South without any distinction, joined Russia voluntarily in 1774, 27 years before Georgia was annexed in 1801. Hence when Georgia became independent from Russia in 1918, there was accordingly no reason for South Ossetia to be included in Georgia since the Ossetians had joined Russia separately and earlier than Georgia. For Ossetians in Georgia, the separation of Georgia from Russia – either in the shape of Imperial Russia in 1917 or the Soviet Union in 1991 – meant the political division of what they saw as Ossetian lands between two different countries. It is therefore not surprising that the periods of Georgian attempts to secure independence have also been accompanied by Ossetian attempts to secure their connection with their ethnic kin in the North.

Ossetia was thus one of the most problematic regions during the First Georgian Republic. Ossetian historiography claims that South Ossetia was annexed by Menshevik Georgia in 1918.<sup>30</sup> An uprising took place in the winter of 1918, and a larger rebellion probably instigated by Bolsheviks in 1920. Ossetians tried to establish a Soviet republic in early 1920, but were faced by Georgian troops sent to prevent what would effectively amount to the secession of South Ossetia. Despite assurances of respecting Georgia's territorial integrity in a May 7, 1920 treaty, Soviet Russia demanded Georgia call back its troops from Ossetia since 'Ossetia must have that rule which it wished to have'.<sup>31</sup> The

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<sup>27</sup> Avtandil Menteshashvili, *Iz Istorii Vzaimootnosheniy Gruzinskogo, Abkhazskogo i Osetinskogo Narodov (1918-1920 gg.)*, Tbilisi 1990.

<sup>28</sup> See N.V. Siukayev, *Dve Tragedii Yuzhnaya Osetiya*, Vladikavkaz, 1994; see also overview in Nikola Cvetkovski, *The Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict*, Aalborg University, 1999, p. 44.

<sup>29</sup> Georgii Gogzadze, 'Glavnye Asspekty Mezhetnicheskikh Otnoshenii v Gruzii', in Georgi Gogzadze et. al., *Etnopoliticheskie Konflikty v Zakavkaze: Ikh Istoki I Puti Resheniia*, College Park, MD: University of Maryland CIDCM, 1997, p. 128.

<sup>30</sup> See 'Respublika Iuzhnaia Osetiia – Kratkaia Spravka o Respublike Iuzhnaia Osetiia, Ob Istorii I Kulture eio Naroda' (<http://www.geocities.com/Vienna/Strasse/5262/South.html>).

<sup>31</sup> Quote in note by G. Chicherin to the Georgian government, May 17, 1920, in Avtandil Menteshashvili, 'An Assessment of the 1920 Uprising in South Ossetia', *Some National and Ethnic Problems in Georgia*, Tbilisi 1992. ([susauri.tripod.com/politic/Ossetia.htm](http://susauri.tripod.com/politic/Ossetia.htm))

Bolshevik forces in South Ossetia then in late May declared having overturned Menshevik rule and appealed for support from the Soviet Russian authorities. However, probably because Soviet Russia was not yet ready for a full-scale conflict with Georgia, instead trying to focus at this point on conquering Baku and Azerbaijan, kept its formal recognition of Georgia's territorial integrity, and declined to assist the South Ossetian uprising – hence precipitating a Georgian crackdown.<sup>32</sup>

The level of conflict was hence considerable in the 1918-1920 period. Yet the level of mythification of past conflict and claims based on present grievances remained considerably lower in the Ossetian case compared to the Abkhaz case, where they were constantly on the agenda during much of the Soviet period. Ossetian sources nevertheless claim that Georgia pursued a policy of assimilation in South Ossetia and that its autonomy was illusory. It is reasonably clear from Soviet census data that numerous Ossetians, but then primarily those living outside the South Ossetian autonomous region, adopted Georgian as their native language during the post-war period, and that the level of inter-marriage between Georgians and Ossetians was high. This must be seen as a sign that inter-ethnic relations between Georgians and Ossetians were not plagued by high levels of suspicion or conflict. In sum, significant past conflict existed in South Ossetia, which was nevertheless not coupled with high levels of mythification.

#### **7.2.4. Rough Terrain**

The lands populated by Ossetians lie across the Great Caucasian mountain range, in fact straddling the mountain passes between the western and eastern sections of that range. As such, the southern areas of North Ossetia and the northern areas of South Ossetia are very mountainous and inaccessible. However, the southernmost portion of South Ossetia including its capital Tskhinvali is located in the foothills of the mountains. However, South Ossetia is by any standard a mountainous area. As in the case of Abkhazia, it is difficult to determine whether the rough terrain of South Ossetia actually influenced the calculations of the Ossetian elite. It would in retrospect seem that these considerations played a small part in comparison to the expectation of external support discussed below.

#### **7.2.5. Relative Demography**

South Ossetia had a very small population in absolute numbers, only passing the 100,000-mark by the time of the 1989 census. However, the Ossetians were in a clear demographic majority position of almost 70% of the autonomous Oblast's population. This implied that unlike the Abkhaz, the Ossetians did not have to resort to strong affirmative action policies in order to control the institutions of South Ossetia. This demographic dominance increased the Ossetians' prospects of gaining political union with North

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<sup>32</sup> Menteshashvili, 'An Assessment of the 1920 Uprising in South Ossetia', and Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia*.

Ossetia in spite of their low absolute numbers. It also meant that ethnic Ossetians controlled the day-to-day affairs of South Ossetia without resorting to the extreme affirmative action employed in Abkhazia.

#### **7.2.6. Ethnic Kin**

Ossetian leaders in South Ossetia benefited from their ethnic link to North Ossetia in numerous ways. This closeness increased with the completion of the rail tunnel between North and South Ossetia in 1988. Prior to that, the main road link between North and South Ossetia passed outside South Ossetia's territory, through Kazbegi and the Daryal Gorge to its immediate East.

North Ossetia provided South Ossetia with a valuable ally within the Russian Federation. North Ossetia, and especially its Nomenklatura that was well-connected in Moscow, consistently served as a lobbying factor for Russian support for the South Ossetian cause in its conflict with the Georgian authorities.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the existence of ethnic kin in the North contributed to offsetting the demographic weakness of South Ossetia. This became clear in 1992 when an escalation of the conflict took place, volunteer forces assembled in North Ossetia, composed mainly of ethnic Ossetians from the North and to a lesser extent of other North Caucasian volunteers.<sup>34</sup> The promise of support from the North in terms of real fighting personnel was certainly a factor that increased the Ossetian capacity to sustain the conflict with the much more numerous Georgians.

#### **7.2.7. Economic Viability**

In contrast to Abkhazia, South Ossetia had no tourist attraction, and did not have much economic activity in the Soviet times. It had little industry, some mining activities in the northwest of the autonomous Oblast, but remained a mainly agricultural area even though climatic and topographic conditions made agriculture difficult. Basically, South Ossetia was one of the more disadvantaged areas in Georgia, comparable to mountain regions like Khevsureti or Racha, or for that matter Javakheti. It subsisted through the 'marginal allocation of industrial resources from Moscow'.<sup>35</sup> South Ossetia's viability was hence low, though it should be noted that South Ossetia strove for unification with economically rather wealthy North Ossetia, and not independence. This factor counterbalanced the lack of economic viability in South Ossetia proper. Of course, the conflict's development has enabled South Ossetia to function as a major smuggling conduit between Russia and the

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<sup>33</sup> Julian Birch, 'Ossetia: A Caucasian Bosnia in Microcosm', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 14 no. 1, 1995.

<sup>34</sup> See Dodge Billingsley, 'Confederates of the Caucasus', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, February 1997.

<sup>35</sup> Ketevan Tsikhelashvili, 'The Case Studies of Abkhazia and South Ossetia', draft chapter, European Center for Minority Issues, 30 September 2001, p. 38. ([http://www.ecmi.de/cps/download/Abkhazia\\_SouthOssetia.pdf](http://www.ecmi.de/cps/download/Abkhazia_SouthOssetia.pdf))

South Caucasus that benefits corrupt Russian, Ossetian, and Georgian customs or law enforcement officials while it leaves the local population with little benefits. This can however hardly be considered a factor of economic viability, especially not in the pre-conflict period.

### 7.2.8. Radical Leadership

The Ademon Nykhas (Popular Shrine) movement was formed in early 1988, under the leadership of its main ideologue, Alan Chochiev, a hitherto relatively unnoticed lecturer in History at the Tskhinvali Pedagogical Institute. Interestingly, Ademon Nykhas' first noticeable public appearance was not related directly with the status of South Ossetia, but with Abkhazia: Chochiev addressed an open letter in support of the Abkhaz movement for separation from Georgia in March 1989, following the Lykhny mass meeting. In his letter, reprinted in *Literaturuli Sakartvelo* on May 5, 1989, Chochiev on behalf of Ademon Nykhas expressed his worries that Abkhazia's legal demands for sovereignty be ignored, and his hopes that a 'just solution to the Abkhaz Question will set a precedent for de facto parity between so-called Union and autonomous formations'. He vowed that the entire Ossetian people supported the Abkhaz, including the South Ossetian autonomous oblast's leadership.<sup>36</sup> Clearly, Chochiev envisaged that the Abkhaz case would set a precedent for South Ossetia. However, Chochiev's views were apparently not shared by all Ossetians at this time. Many Ossetians rushed to stress their loyalty to Georgia and to emphasize the historical friendship of Georgians and Ossetians. Moreover, the South Ossetian Oblast Soviet Plenum unanimously condemned Chochiev's letter, and the Oblast Procurator even initiated legal action against him.<sup>37</sup> The issue was magnified in the Georgian media, and some Georgian observers blame Gamsakhurdia and the Georgian nationalist media for 'launching' Chochiev's career in Ossetia. Indeed, as Chochiev did not enjoy the support of the local Ossetian authorities at this time, his access to the media was certainly limited; hence the claim that most Ossetians learnt about Chochiev and his group from reading the Georgian press may not be unfounded.<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, animosities at the grassroots level were emerging. During the celebration of the First Georgian Republic's independence day on May 18, 1989, a group of Georgians in South Ossetia had their Georgian flags snatched and desecrated. Clashes between bands of ethnic Georgians and Ossetians erupted.<sup>39</sup> Other incidents of ethnic violence in South Ossetia were reported in the Summer. However, as Fuller notes, very

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<sup>36</sup> See Elizabeth Fuller, 'Georgian Parliament Votes to Abolish Ossetian Autonomy', *Report on the USSR*, 21 December 1990; Fuller, 'The South Ossetian Campaign for Unification', *Report on the USSR*, 8 December 1989.

<sup>37</sup> Fuller, 'The South Ossetian Campaign for Unification', p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Irakli Machavariani, Special Representative of the President of Georgia to the negotiations in the South Ossetian conflict, Tbilisi, February 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Cvetkovski, *The Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict*, p. 46.

little of this is known as it was not reported in the media.<sup>40</sup> Rumors circulated throughout Summer and Fall of 1989 about unrest and about groups of Ossetians traveling to Abkhazia to support the Abkhaz. The *Zarya Vostoka* newspaper reported a state of 'psychosis' in South Ossetia.<sup>41</sup> During Summer, Ademon Nykhas begun campaigning for the unification of South Ossetia with North Ossetia, and this reached a point where the official leadership had to respond. In July, Oblast Committee First Secretary Anatolii Chekhoev told a Tskhinvali crowd that 'Ademon Nykhas' demands for unification of North and South Ossetia [are] groundless'.<sup>42</sup>

The situation was aggravated in August by the publication of the Georgian language program envisaging the strengthening the position of the Georgian language all over Georgia. This program sparked ethnopolitical mobilization in South Ossetia. Ademon Nykhas now managed to organize strikes in Tskhinvali and in the mines in Kvaisi, showing its increased popular standing.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, the Oblast Soviet now for the first time leaned toward nationalism. On September 5, its official newspaper *Sovetskaia Osetiia* published the draft of a law on the Ossetian language that would give equal status to the Ossetian, Georgian, and Russian languages within the Autonomous Oblast. Ademon Nykhas was now consolidating its position in the legislature, attracting an increasing number of members to its radical position. In particular, Chochiev managed to attract the cooperation of Toroz Kolumbekov, a member of the local Soviet.<sup>44</sup> In early September, Ademon Nykhas, apparently with the support of some members of the Oblast Soviet, issued an appeal for the unification of North and South Ossetia to the central authorities in Moscow.<sup>45</sup> Members of the Oblast Soviet now seriously got involved in the 'war of laws' by appealing for the status of South Ossetia to be raised to that of an Autonomous Republic.<sup>46</sup> The Georgian Supreme Soviet proclaimed the declaration null and void, and raised the stakes by removing Chekhoev from his position on November 12.<sup>47</sup> Two weeks later, Gamsakhurdia, with the obvious support of Communist Party Head Gumbaridze (who supplied transportation) rallied thousands of Georgians into buses to travel to Tskhinvali and hold a rally there.<sup>48</sup> The crowd was stopped by armed Ossetians and Ministry of Interior troops, without which the situation may have deteriorated into severe

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<sup>40</sup> Fuller, 'The South Ossetian Campaign for Unification', p. 18.

<sup>41</sup> *Zarya Vostoka*, 23 July 1989.

<sup>42</sup> *Komunisti*, 23 July 1989, quoted in Fuller, 'The South Ossetian Campaign for Unification', p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> *Zarya Vostoka*, 29 October 1989; Fuller, 'The South Ossetian Campaign for Unification', p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Machavariani.

<sup>45</sup> See chapter six; Fuller, 'The South Ossetian Campaign for Unification', p. 18; Cvetkovski, *The Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict*, p. 46.

<sup>46</sup> See 'Respublika Iuzhnaia Osetiia – Kratkaia Spravka o Respublike Iuzhnaia Osetiia, Ob Istorii i Kulture eio Naroda'.

<sup>47</sup> Cvetkovski, *The Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict*, p. 47.

<sup>48</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 108. Regarding Gumbaridze's support, Interview with Machavariani.

riots. Several people were wounded in the clashes, and both parties accused each other of atrocities.<sup>49</sup> This event radicalized the Ossetian population further, as clashes at a local level between Georgian and Ossetian bands intensified. Though the situation calmed somewhat, political activism in South Ossetia continued. In June, Ademon Nykhas organized a mass meeting in Tskhinvali to force the Oblast Soviet to debate the issue of unification with North Ossetia. The autonomous leadership did not immediately respond; however, in August, the Georgian law prohibiting regional parties from participating in elections was announced, whose consequence was to practically disenfranchise Ademon Nykhas.<sup>50</sup> This seems to have gradually tipped the balance finally in favor of the radicals within the Oblast Soviet. On 20 September, it passed a decree on sovereignty, proclaimed South Ossetia an Independent Soviet Democratic Republic, and applied to the USSR Supreme Soviet to be recognized as a subject of the USSR in its own right.<sup>51</sup> This, of course, amounted to secession from Georgia. The Georgian Supreme Soviet predictably annulled the declaration as unconstitutional the same day, but did not act on the matter; Tbilisi was focused on the upcoming elections that eventually brought Gamsakhurdia to power on October 28, which were boycotted in South Ossetia. Matters instead heated up when South Ossetia decided to hold parliamentary elections of its own on December 9. These were held in spite of Georgian warnings, and Ossetians claim 72% of the population participated. Interestingly, the new parliament chose Toroz Kulumbekov as its chairman the next day.<sup>52</sup> This showed that Ademon Nykhas now controlled the political atmosphere in South Ossetia. In a session of the Georgian parliament on December 11, South Ossetia's autonomy was abolished and the region is since then in official Georgian parlance referred to as the 'Tskhinvali and Java regions'.

It is clear from the narrative above that radical leadership was present from a very early in South Ossetia. Ademon Nykhas was at first excluded from the ruling institutions of the autonomous region, but constantly tried to gain public support and lobby the Oblast Soviet to follow its radical course of action. Ademon Nykhas specifically made use of Georgian nationalism (which it occasionally provoked, for example by making an incendiary show of support for Abkhazia) and the anti-Ossetian rhetoric of Gamsakhurdia and his likes to increase its stature within the republic. Clearly, the radical leadership provided by Ademon Nykhas was a significant factor in the escalation of conflict in South Ossetia.

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<sup>49</sup> Fuller, 'Georgian Parliament Votes to Abolish Ossetian Autonomy', p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> See Cvetkovski, *The Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict*, p. 47.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.; Fuller, 'Georgian Parliament Votes to Abolish Ossetian Autonomy', p. 9; Gogsadze, p. 130; *Zarya Vostoka*, 22 September 1990.

<sup>52</sup> Birleşik Kafkasya Derneği, *Kafkasya Kronolojisi*. (<http://www.bkd.org.tr/tarih/kronoloji5.htm>)

### 7.2.9. External Support

The Ossetian side during various stages of the conflict received support from Moscow—first in the shape of the Soviet authorities, but later in the shape of the Russian government, especially the hardliner-dominated Russian parliament. The most blatant Russian support for the Ossetian side was during the upsurge in fighting in May–June 1992, when parliamentary chairman Ruslan Khasbulatov and vice-President Aleksandr Rutskoi spoke in terms that referred to South Ossetia as a part of Russia. Khasbulatov, referring to South Ossetia, at one occasion stated that ‘Russia is prepared to take urgent measures to defend *its citizens* from criminal attempts on their lives’ (emphasis added).<sup>53</sup> Later, he claimed that Russia might ‘find itself forced to annex South Ossetia’.<sup>54</sup> However, earlier stages in the conflict also showed a strong collusion between Ossetian authorities with Moscow. Georgian sources claim that Moscow’s hand was visible behind the Ossetian actions, as Gorbachev is rumored to have told Gamsakhurdia in 1990 that Georgia ‘will have problems with the autonomies’ if it proceeded on its course toward independence, which Georgians view as a thinly veiled threat that Moscow would use the autonomous territories against Georgian aspirations to independence. However, until the conflict broke out seriously in 1991 and escalated in 1992. Although Russian support for South Ossetia under Yeltsin was apparent, it is less clear that promises of support from Soviet authorities existed before Georgia moved toward independence. However, it is reasonably clear that promises of support from *Vladikavkaz* may have been present. North Ossetian volunteers were important elements in the Ossetian ‘self-defense forces’ since 1990.<sup>55</sup> External support clearly contributed to the escalation of the South Ossetian conflict. When Georgia moved toward independence, South Ossetia clearly believed it could stay with, and would be welcomed by, the Soviet Union. Still in April 1991, when Georgia voted for independence, the total dissolution of the USSR was not at all expected. Though little evidence is available, Ossetian actions point to a conviction that the Soviet troops deployed as peacekeepers would protect South Ossetia against Georgian aggression. Only, the collapse of the USSR led to the unexpected withdrawal of these troops in late 1991, triggering a more direct conflict between the parties and removing this protection from the Ossetian side.

### 7.2.10. The Role of Autonomy

As in the case of Abkhazia, South Ossetia displayed several factors conducive to ethnic conflict, including the existence of substantial past conflict, external kin, external support,

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<sup>53</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, 16 June 1992.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Shevardnadze Says Russia Aids Rebels’, *Washington Post*, 20 June 1992.

<sup>55</sup> S. Neil MacFarlane et. al., *Armed Conflict in Georgia: A Case Study in Humanitarian Action and Peacekeeping*, Occasional Paper no. 21, Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, 1996, p. 8.

and perhaps most notably radical leadership. However the salience of these factors did not become apparent until the conflict was under way. It emerged not because of a gradual escalation of ethnic tensions at a mass level as in the case of Mountainous Karabakh or even in Abkhazia, where ethnic rioting occurred in 1989, long before the conflict actually broke out. In fact, some of the earliest unrest in South Ossetia took place in 1988 when a typhoid epidemic broke out. The popular protests were addressed not at Tbilisi but at the local South Ossetian Communist authorities.<sup>56</sup> The conflict escalated not mainly because of the low-scale ethnic violence in South Ossetia, but much more importantly due to the war of declarations and laws which was waged by the parliaments of Georgia and South Ossetia. The radical leaderships on both sides also played a crucial part in pushing the relationship between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali into a security dilemma.

It is instructive to assess the strategy of Ademon Nykhas. As the discussion above illustrates, Ademon Nykhas concentrated much of its efforts on influencing the South Ossetian Oblast Soviet in a radical direction. Whereas the Soviet was explicitly opposed to the radical goals of Ademon Nykhas in early 1989, a combination of its lobbying of the Soviet's deputies, Georgian nationalists' provocation, and increasing popular support for the radicals gradually changed the policies of the Ossetian parliament. By September 1989, the local parliament was an active participant in the standoff with Tbilisi by unilaterally raising its status to that of an Autonomous Republic. It was not yet on the radical course espoused by Ademon Nykhas, but after Gamsakhurdia's March on Tskhinvali that was itself sparked by this change in status, the balance tipped in favor of the radicals.

The role of the Oblast Soviet in the escalation of the conflict is crucial. It was the existence of state-like institutions like a parliament, but also the presence of state-controlled media and an entrenched Soviet Nomenklatura and intelligentsia in South Ossetia that made the conflict possible. Chochiev, much like Ardzinba in Abkhazia, was a Historian. His profession was to teach Ossetians about their separate culture and history, thereby entertaining and promoting their sense of separate ethnic identity. Meanwhile, the leadership of the autonomous Oblast that was at first a loyal Soviet bureaucracy was gradually won over to a radical nationalist agenda. As soon as that happened, the radicals possessed institutions with a constitutional base and a certain sense of legitimacy to take and implement their agenda, and tools to propagandize its policy among the population. Once the conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi grew, the existence of autonomous institutions in South Ossetia with radical leaderships were ideal levers for Moscow to undermine the Georgian nationalist movement and its efforts to leave the Soviet Union.

With a population base of a small town, South Ossetia gradually came to act like a state. Its institutions provided a self-conscious elite, and a ready-made toolbox under control of ethnic Ossetians to wage a battle of separation from Georgia. Without

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<sup>56</sup> Nikola Cvetkovski, *The Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict*, p. 46.

autonomous institutions, it is extremely unlikely that a credible secessionist movement could have emerged in South Ossetia.

### **7.3. Javakheti Armenians: A Narrow Escape?**

On paper, the Armenian community in Javakheti is a clear candidate for ethno-political activism given its substantial size, history of uneasy relations with Georgia, and the closeness of ethnic kin. This makes it all the more surprising that it has been ignored in much of the literature. The Minorities at Risk project of the University of Maryland at College Park, for example, does not include the Armenians in Georgia as a minority at risk although it does include the Abkhaz, Ajars, Azeris, Greeks, Ossetians and Russians of Georgia – even mysteriously referring to the occurrence of an ethnic conflict with the Russian minority.<sup>57</sup> In his recent seminal work *Modern Hatreds*, Stuart Kaufman discusses the Abkhaz and South Ossetian conflicts at length, but mentions only Ajars and the Azeris as ‘the wars avoided’.<sup>58</sup> Yet the Javakheti issue has during the 1990s clearly been perceived as the most dangerous potential ethnic conflict in Georgia. Most Georgian observers summarily dismiss the risks of ethnic conflict in Ajaria or Kvemo Kartli, but treat the Javakheti issue with caution. As was shown in chapter six, Javakheti’s propensity for conflict according to the indicators used in this study was nearly equivalent to that of Abkhazia or South Ossetia, and far ahead of any other case of non-conflict, including Ajaria and the Azeris of Kvemo Kartli. As was shown in chapter seven, in spite of a fair deal of tension with Tbilisi, a high level of ‘weaponization’ of the population, and the actual organization of fighting units that served in Karabakh, the Javakheti Armenians did not develop an assertive nationalist movement between 1987 and 2000. How was conflict avoided in Javakheti given the ethno-political mobilization of the Javakheti Armenians in a context of tense ethnic relations between the center and minorities all over Georgia?

#### **7.3.1. Cultural Differences**

Georgians and Armenians speak languages that belong to different language families altogether. This has historically complicated interaction among Georgians and Armenians, who have since the beginning of Russian power in the South Caucasus, but especially during the Soviet era, conducted their contacts in Russian. Whereas this is a factor separating the two, Georgians and Armenians share the Christian faith, forming two relatively significant Christian peoples in an otherwise compactly Muslim part of the world. In fact, the Georgian and Armenian areas are surrounded by Muslims in all directions, something that has had a far larger resonance in Armenia than in Georgia. This said, the Armenian church is Monophysite whereas the Georgian Church has been Orthodox since the seventh century. The theological difference between the two may

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<sup>57</sup> Note.

<sup>58</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 123.

seem cosmetic to a secular observer: the Diophysite or Orthodox, and Monophysite churches split because of a disagreement regarding the identity of Jesus Christ. Whereas Orthodox belief holds that Christ has both a divine and a human personality, Monophysite thought claims Christ's only identity is the divine one. Yet the difference is as cultural as it is theological, as linguistic differences have on the whole overlapped with religious ones. Hence the terms in Georgian for an Armenian and for a Georgian-speaking Monophysite are the same. The crucial role that the respective churches played in the building and protection of the Armenian and Georgian national identities only strengthened this confluence of ethnicity and religion.

Culturally, Georgians and Armenians share elements of Caucasian, Eastern Christian, and lately Soviet culture. Yet differences in identity are marked, with Armenians generally identifying more closely with the Middle East, whereas Georgia sees itself as decidedly European, while sharing more commonalities with the mountain peoples to their North. On the whole, the cultural differences between Armenians and Georgians are not extremely large, though they are not insignificant either.

### 7.3.2 National Conception

The national conception of both Georgians and Armenians are predominantly ethnic. Georgian nationalists view Armenians as 'guests' in Georgia, a thesis advocated during Gamsakhurdia's tenure.<sup>59</sup> They especially resent the Russian role in the settlement of Armenians (originally from eastern Turkey) to the Javakheti area in 1828-1830.<sup>60</sup> Armenians, however, have lived in Georgia for centuries, and historically, relations between the two groups have been cordial, though as mentioned in chapter seven, there has been a certain resentment among Georgians for the industrial and urban qualities of the Armenians while Georgians long remained a peasant nation. Tbilisi Armenians nevertheless form a very different community from Javakheti Armenians. The urban community of Tbilisi Armenians played an important role in the city's life for centuries, most of them learnt Georgian and some Armenians, though few, even assimilated into a Georgian identity, including the georgianization of their names.<sup>61</sup> On the whole, however, the two communities remain segregated even outside Javakheti. As Hin has shown, Georgians and Armenians are doubtful of personal relations with members of the other community.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> David Darchiashvili, 'Ethnic Relations as a Security Factor in Southern Georgia', *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, no. 1, 2000.

<sup>60</sup> See eg. Lia Melikishvili, *Latent Conflict in Polyethnic Society*, Tbilisi: CIPDD, 1999, p. 21

<sup>61</sup> Interviews, Tbilisi and Akhaltsikhe, August 2000.

<sup>62</sup> Judith Hin, 'Ethnic and Civic Identity in Georgia: A Comparison between the Main Population Groups: Georgians and Armenians', Paper Presented at the Annual Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, New York, 15-17 April 1999. Slightly over half of Hin's Armenian respondents in various ethnically mixed areas in Georgia were positive toward having Georgian

The Javakheti Armenians, on the other hand, form a rural, largely peasant, and settler community. Javakheti Armenians have lived in relative isolation in the mountainous areas of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda, their integration with Georgia has been too weak to raise the issue of their inclusion into Georgian society. They are recognized as Georgian citizens, but hardly as 'Georgians'.

### **7.3.3 Past Conflict and Myths**

Javakheti first came up as a bone of contention in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, when the independent Georgian and Armenian republics were being created. The declarations of independence of the three South Caucasian states in May 1918 had not been followed by border delimitations, since the abortive Ottoman Caucasian offensive in the early Fall of 1918 forced the governments to postpone such issues. The Ottoman forces evacuated the lands under their control in early December. In late October, however, Georgia had invited the representatives of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the Mountain Republic of the North Caucasus to a conference in Tbilisi to solve all border disputes. Faced with the prospect of a multilateral resolution of borders where it feared Georgia and the Muslim republics would form a united front against it, Armenia refused to attend, expressing its wish to resolve its boundary with Georgia in a bilateral way. As the Ottoman forces retreated before any negotiations were even held, Georgian and Armenian forces rushed into areas of Javakheti and Borchalo. Georgian forces were able to occupy several disputed areas before the Armenians, but the Armenian government responded militarily, inciting a rebellion in Borchalo. This brought the two republics to armed clashes in mid-December, as Armenia expected support from Britain and France to which it had shown loyalty during the war, whereas Georgia had been on Germany's side. However, the British intervention in late December asked Armenia to withdraw its troops from the areas in Borchalo it had occupied. The Armenian and Georgian governments took the case to arbitration at the February 1919 Berne conference of the second international. Arbitrators decided a plebiscite would determine the affiliation of Borchalo and Akhalkalaki, but Armenia refused to accept that unless Georgia withdrew its forces prior to the plebiscite. The issue was never solved and the republics soon perished to Bolshevism, but it gravely damaged Georgian-Armenian relations. Tens of thousands of Armenians were exiled from Georgia after the events. As Kazemzadeh concludes, 'the Armeno-Georgian war inflicted great injury on the cause of the

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friends; only a quarter were positive toward having a Georgian partner while 41% explicitly disliked the idea. As for Georgians, 45% were positive toward having Armenian friends, while only 9% supported the idea of having an Armenian partner, and an entire 85% explicitly disliked the idea.

Transcaucasia republics. The old hostility of the Georgians toward the Armenians flared up and reached an intensity unparalleled before'.<sup>63</sup>

This said, the Armenian-Georgian conflict of the time must be considered a relatively minor armed conflict in view of the wars that ravaged the Caucasus during this period. The Ottoman invasion had exacted a high human and material toll on the Armenians, and much deeper atrocities were later inflicted on each other by Armenians and Azerbaijanis. As for the Georgians, the Bolshevik invasion was a much greater source of resentment compared to what was perceived as an Armenian aggression. Hence the conflict between Armenians and Georgians of 1918-19 has not been mythified to an extent comparable to the Armenian-Azerbaijani or Georgian-Abkhaz relationship, though the confrontation is by no means forgotten. Georgian suspicion and prejudice toward Armenians may have been nurtured by the conflict, but the occurrence of past conflict was never capitalized upon by nationalist politicians on either side.

#### 7.3.4. Rough terrain

Whereas neighboring Meskheta - the western half of the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti - is largely fertile slopes and forest-covered hills, Javakheti is situated on an elevated mountain plateau surrounded by extinct volcanoes. Akhalkalaki, the central city of Javakheti, is at an altitude of 5,000 feet. Several localities in the Ninotsminda district are at over 6,000 feet. The terrain of Javakheti is rough indeed, and few roads and railways connect the region with the rest of Georgia. The main road from Tbilisi to Akhalkalaki goes in a long circle north and west from Tbilisi around Javakheti, passing through Borjomi, before going into the region from the west, whereas the road connecting Akhalkalaki and Tbilisi directly is in such a bad condition that it is trafficable only by four-wheel drive vehicles, and then not during the cold portion of the year, and often gets washed away by torrential rains and landslides. The fact that Javakheti lies close to the border with Turkey and was therefore as restricted zone during the Soviet era has also contributed to the poor quality of infrastructure there. The inaccessibility and isolation of Javakheti has also enabled it to remain isolated economically and socially from Georgia. Even after a decade of Georgian independence, the Georgian currency, the Lari, is only accepted reluctantly here, and the Russian Rouble is de facto the functioning currency in the region. The isolated character of the region also enabled the local Armenians to set up fighting units that participated in the conflict in Mountainous Karabakh as early as in March 1988. The link between Javakheti and Karabakh also brought large number of weapons to the region, and unofficial estimates claim that there are firearms in every house in Javakheti.<sup>64</sup> The

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<sup>63</sup> Firuz Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia, 1917-1921*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1951, pp. 174-183. (This quote at p. 182.)

<sup>64</sup> Voitsek Guretski, 'The Question of Javakheti', *Caucasian Regional Studies*, vol. 3 no. 1, 1998.

isolated character of the region, due to its physical geography, has contributed to these factors that have effectively pulled Javakheti out of Georgia's orbit.

### **7.3.5. Relative Demography**

The population of the Javakheti region is around 110,000 people. In 1989, the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda regions together had a population of just over 106,000. However, Meskheti (the districts of Akhaltsikhe, Adigeni, Aspindza, and Borjomi) has a population of 120,000, making the population of the province of Samtskhe-Javakheti ca. 220,000-250,000 people today, taking into account variations due to possible population growth as well as emigration. Moreover, uncertainty about the accuracy of the Soviet census has led to speculations regarding the real numbers; up to 175,000 Armenians may be living in Samtskhe-Javakheti. Of the two areas, Javakheti is overwhelmingly Armenian, forming the most homogenous minority-populated area in Georgia. At least 90% of the population is Armenian, and according to Armenian sources over 95%. In Meskheti, the situation is different. Though no clear figures exist, very few Armenians live in the Borjomi district, whereas Akhaltsikhe, Adigeni and Aspindza are mixed. A rough estimate would suggest slightly over a third of Meskheti's population is Armenian, implying that perhaps half of combined Samtskhe-Javakheti's population is Armenian.<sup>65</sup> Javakheti, however, has long been and remains a basically mono-ethnic Armenian society: The similarities to Mountainous Karabakh are striking: a comparable number of Armenians live in mountainous areas just across the border from Armenia and dominate their areas demographically. If anything, Javakheti is more homogeneously Armenian than Karabakh, where Armenians formed ca. 75% of the population; whereas more Armenians lived in Samtskhe-Javakheti as a whole than in Mountainous Karabakh.

### **7.3.6. Ethnic Kin**

The issue of ethnic kin in the case of Javakheti is relatively straightforward: Armenia is just across the border, not even separated by a thin stretch of land as were the Armenians of Mountainous Karabakh. Some of Javakheti (Ninotsminda) and all of Meskheti borders Turkey and not Armenia, but the Akhalkalaki region, the largest Armenian concentration, borders Armenia, and is connected by road to Armenia. Most visitors to Javakheti in the 1990s note that the region is economically more closely tied to Armenia than to Georgia, and that a substantial amount of Armenian Drams are in circulation there and in any case universally accepted, whereas the Georgian Lari is clearly not the exclusive legal tender that it is supposed to be on Georgian territory. The Armenian population of Javakheti has also looked South for cultural and educational matters. Many Armenians from Javakheti study in Armenian high schools and universities; and in accordance with an agreement between Georgia and Armenia, the Javakheti Armenian-language schools use textbooks

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<sup>65</sup> This estimate was widely corroborated by officials and locals in Akhaltsikhe in 2000.

provided from the republic of Armenia. The Javakheti Armenians' ties to Armenia are hence strong.

### 7.3.7. Economic Viability

On the economic front, however, Javakheti lacks any major resources and industries. Armenian sources claim it is the least developed part of Georgia, though areas of Guria, Imereti, South Ossetia, and Svaneti could easily compete for that title. Most industries that existed in Javakheti have now been turned into so-called LAOs (Large Abandoned Objects), the conditions of the roads and the infrastructure in Javakheti are disastrous. One of the region's main industries has been the production of building stone, which is exported through Russia via military convoys.<sup>66</sup> Very little of foreign investment in Georgia has gone to Javakheti, instead being focused on larger cities such as Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Rustavi, and parts of Kakheti. In other words, Javakheti's economic situation is less than favorable. Its separate viability from Georgia may be low; but it must be noted that for economic purposes, its affiliation with Georgia is hardly noticeable, as the central government's economic influence in Javakheti is close to nil. In sum, Javakheti's economic viability has been low for a long time and remains so. The poor status of the region's economy is best illustrated by the fact that one of the most recurrent arguments for opposing the withdrawal of the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki is the crucial role the base plays for the economic and social welfare of Javakheti. The base is the largest employer in the region, as well as the main provider of healthcare services for the local population, though the hospital tied to the base has now been transferred to the Georgian government. The possible withdrawal of the base, it is feared, would lead to the loss of livelihood and social welfare of the population of Akhalkalaki. This has assured a strong sense of attachment between locals and the Russian base, and as a corollary a significantly warmer view of Russia than is the case in other parts of Georgia.

### 7.3.8. Radical Leadership

From early 1988, that is roughly at the time that Ademon Nykhas and Aydgylara emerged, a similar movement emerged in Javakheti, named *Javakhk*, the Armenian name for the region. Javakhk's stated goals focused on the preservation of Armenian cultural heritage in local schools, and in political terms, the achievement of autonomy for Javakheti or union with Armenia.<sup>67</sup> Javakhk's leadership is relatively low-key and does not include former Soviet bureaucrats comparable to a Vladislav Ardzinba. The movement emerged among the local Armenian community in Javakheti, and not from a Soviet-bred intelligentsia. Yet in the time of the confrontation between Javakheti Armenians and Tbilisi that developed during the early 1990s, Javakhk took upon itself the role of forging governing mechanisms

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<sup>66</sup> Darchiashvili, 'Ethnic Relations as a Security Factor'.

<sup>67</sup> Guretski, 'The Question of Javakheti'.

in the legal vacuum that ensued from the rejection of prefects appointed by Gamsakhurdia. As mentioned in chapter seven, local Armenians repeatedly refused to accept subsequent central nominees for the position of Prefect. This took place through physically preventing the appointee from taking office, involving several instances of violence. The Armenian community demanded that the Prefect be an ethnic Armenian, wary of the power vested in the position of the Prefect and the lack of democratic mechanisms or guarantees.<sup>68</sup> The standoff lasted between January and November 1991. To compensate for the lack of authority during this time, Javakhk organized elections for a Council of Representatives of 24 people, and an effective ruling body composed of seven people. This council in effect controlled Javakheti until at last an acceptable candidate for the Prefect position was proposed by Tbilisi. The council then self-dissolved. The apparent ease with which the council dissolved would tend to point to a lack of radicalism within Javakhk. Yet at one point, a vote on declaring independence had emerged in a council meeting, but failed to reach a majority vote. This implies that the body itself was divided on the policy to adopt vis-à-vis Tbilisi – advocates of both compromise and confrontation seem to have been involved. Nevertheless, a paramilitary organization associated with Javakhk called *Parvents* has been formed, which has access to weapons that were used by Javakheti Armenians that fought in the Karabakh war.

The demand for autonomy was raised again in the mid-1990s. In December 1996, Javakhk raised demands for a special administrative status for Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda – in practice, demanding the undoing of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region and regional autonomy for Javakheti.<sup>69</sup> In August 1998, Javakhk representative Yervan Sherinian stated that Javakhk's main goal was to 'compel the Georgian authorities to create an Armenian autonomous region within Georgia'.<sup>70</sup> He charged that unless Georgia agrees to that, Javakheti Armenians may 'divorce their Georgian brothers in a civilized way'.<sup>71</sup> Hence in the mid-1990s, Javakhk activism remained high. Toward the end of the 1990s, however, the Javakhk movement seemed to dissolve, whereas political formations under other names emerged, such as the political party 'Virk', that has aggressively demanded autonomy for Javakheti.<sup>72</sup> This fluid situation is symptomatic of the divisions existing in Javakheti itself between local 'clans'.<sup>73</sup> These are in turn connected with figures in the wider Georgian political scene. Hence whereas most Armenian political activity has been concentrated in Akhalkalaki, the region of Ninotsminda has remained much

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<sup>68</sup> Guretski, 'The Question of Javakheti'.

<sup>69</sup> *Akhali Toeba*, 11 January 1997; *Asbarez*, 25 February 1997.

<sup>70</sup> RFE/RL Newline, 24 August 1998, quoting *Caucasus Press*, 22 August 1998.

<sup>71</sup> *Resonansi*, 24 August 1998.

<sup>72</sup> Hasan Kanbolat and Nazmi Gul, *The Geopolitics and Quest for Autonomy of the Armenians of Javakheti (Georgia) and Krasnodar (Russia) in the Caucasus*, Ankara: AVSAM, 2000.

<sup>73</sup> 'Inter-Clan War in Akhalkalaki: the Only Idea They Share Is That of Autonomy', *Resonansi*, 21 September 1998.

calmer.<sup>74</sup> Some Georgian observers link this to the relationship between the ‘clan’ led by the *Gamgebeli* (head of local administration) of Ninotsminda with the informal political grouping around former Georgian parliamentary speaker Zurab Zhvania.<sup>75</sup>

This is an example of the use of co-optation techniques by the Shevardnadze government to appease some of the radical Armenian leaders in Javakheti. Hence one of the Javakheti leaders was appointed head of the traffic police in the region, a lucrative position as it makes possible the informal ‘taxation’ of traffic through the region to Armenia. Moreover, the Armenian movement in Javakheti is heavily influenced by the Dashnaksutiun party, which holds a dominant position in the Armenian Diaspora, especially in the United States. The Dashnaksutiun party’s program mentions the aim of ‘restoring’ Javakheti as a part of Armenia. Importantly, the Javakheti issue gained increasing attention in the Armenian Diaspora since 2000, possibly related to the advent to power in Armenia of Rboert Kocharyan, who entertains good relations with the Dashnaksutiun whereas his predecessor Levon Ter-Petrosyan banned the party.

### 7.3.9. External Support

Javakheti’s most obvious potential source of external support is Armenia. Moreover, the presence of a large Russian military base has meant that although Javakheti lacks a border with Russia, Russia has had possibilities to provide Javakheti Armenians with external support. Investigating the actual patterns of relationships between Javakheti Armenians on the one hand and Russia and Armenia, respectively, reveals important clues to understanding the peculiar development of Javakheti during the 1990s.

Russian policy on an official level has been muted. Little mention has ever been made by Russian officials of Javakheti – except in private to Georgian officials.<sup>76</sup> Moscow has not publicly supported the rights of Javakheti Armenians the way it expressed support for Abkhazia or South Ossetia. Russian statements nevertheless often stress the ‘stabilizing role’ that Russia’s military base in Akhalkalaki plays in the region. The base acts in a self-styled way, ignoring the Georgian legislation when it sees fit. For example, the soldiers in the base are paid in Russian Rubles – which is a major reason that the Ruble is the main currency circulating in Javakheti. This is in contravention of Georgian legislation which stipulates that the Georgian Lari should be the legal tender for all transactions. Normally, goods can not be bought in foreign currency, currency must first be exchanged into Lari, while the government has no significant restrictions on currency exchange. Another crucial matter is the employment structure at the base. Though accurate figures are not

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<sup>74</sup> Darchiashvili, ‘Ethnic Relations as a Security Factor’. (p. 12/16)

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Ghia Nodia, Head of the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Development, and Democracy, Tbilisi, February 2002. To the picture belongs the fact that Zhvania has partly Armenian ancestry.

<sup>76</sup> Personal communications, ministry of foreign affairs, Tbilisi 2002.

made public, it is commonly estimated that one third of officers and NCOs, two thirds of soldiers, and the quasi-totality of non-fighting personnel are local ethnic Armenians. This implies that Georgian citizens are enrolled in military duty for another state on Georgian territory, whereas Javakheti Armenians have refused to serve in the Georgian army until 1996, when some Armenians were drafted into the Georgian army. Moreover, Armenians serving in the Russian military are easily granted Russian citizenship.

The 'local' character of the Russian military base may to a large extent be conditioned by the financial problems of the Russian army: recruiting local Armenians is significantly cheaper than moving Russian personnel to Akhalkalaki. However, in practice, this amounts to the creation by Russia of combat-ready and well-trained formations of local Armenians. The likelihood that these soldiers would be involved in a hypothetical confrontation between Javakheti Armenians and Tbilisi is obvious; likewise, the possibility that the Russian military would be drawn into the conflict as it was in Abkhazia is also significant. Should this seem conspiratorial, one only needs to recall the fate of the 104<sup>th</sup> airborne brigade located at Ganja, Azerbaijan. The Elçibey government in Baku had negotiated the withdrawal of all Russian troops by the end of 1993; however, the 104<sup>th</sup> brigade vacated its premises in June 1993 without informing the government of Azerbaijan, leaving behind large parts of its weaponry in the hands of a local warlord, Surat Husseinov, who subsequently marched on Baku, leading to the fall of the government.<sup>77</sup> Fears in Georgian leading circles that a similar development may occur if Russia is forced to close the base in Akhalkalaki are substantial.<sup>78</sup> External support for Javakheti Armenians has hence been forthcoming from Russia through the activities of the military base in Akhalkalaki.

As for Armenia, its position has in great part been dictated by geopolitical realities, forcing Yerevan to exert a *moderating* influence on the Javakheti Armenians, in stark contrast to its direct interference in the Mountainous Karabakh conflict. In fact, whereas Armenian nationalists put Javakheti only one step below Karabakh on its list of *reconquista*, the very involvement in Karabakh has been the reason for Armenian moderation in Javakheti.<sup>79</sup> The war with Azerbaijan cut off Armenia's main trade links with the rest of the Soviet Union, which went through Azerbaijan; but also impeded the opening of its border with Turkey, given that Turkey cites an end to Armenian occupation of

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<sup>77</sup> See Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, pp. 99-102, for a detailed overview of this episode.

<sup>78</sup> Presentation by Defense Minister David Tevzadze at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, April 2001.

<sup>79</sup> In fact, Georgian and Azerbaijani observers alike argue that Armenian nationalists were contemplating which of the two regions, Javakheti or Mountainous Karabakh, to annex first. Due to the institution of autonomy in Mountainous Karabakh and the considerably higher levels of hatred among Armenian nationalists for Azerbaijan than for Georgia, the decision was accordingly taken to 'begin with' Mountainous Karabakh. Interviews, Baku and Tbilisi, September and November 2000, February 2002.

Azerbaijani territories as a prerequisite for the normalization of relations. Landlocked Armenia's links to the world are hence restricted to either Iran or Georgia, and its nearest seaport is Batumi. This geopolitical reality has put Georgia and Armenia in a curious relationship of mutual dependence. Although Georgia has built a strategic partnership with Armenia's arch-enemies Turkey and Azerbaijan and has a diametrically different foreign policy orientation (Georgia sees Russia as its main threat but Armenia sees Russia as its chief ally), the two countries have seen the need to keep a working relationship. Consecutive Armenian leaders have been aware that a possible conflict in Javakheti could not fail to involve Armenia and ruin relations with Georgia, thereby in all likelihood cutting Armenia off from the Black Sea and leaving it economically dependent solely on Iran. Moreover, the prospect of a Georgian-Armenian confrontation would also increase the likelihood of Azerbaijani military operations to take back Mountainous Karabakh. Since Armenia simply cannot afford this given its isolation and the already dire conditions of its economy, official Yerevan has been exerting a moderating influence on Javakheti Armenians in order to lower the tensions in the area. In December 1991, during the first winter of the war in Karabakh, an Armenian delegation led by its chief of staff Vazgen Sarkissian (later Prime Minister) reportedly visited Akhalkalaki in order to preserve the stability in the region. Armenian leaders, most notably Sarkissian and former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, have repeatedly referred to Javakheti as a Georgian internal affair.<sup>80</sup> Ter-Petrosyan even closed an Armenian newspaper that argued for the annexation of Javakheti.<sup>81</sup> The Dashnaktsutiun party, the largest grouping in the Armenian Diaspora, has also campaigned for the annexation of Javakheti. Whereas the Dashnaktsutiun was outlawed under Ter-Petrosyan, his successor, Robert Kocharyan, legalized the party and appointed one of its leaders as an advisor. While this worried many Georgians, Kocharyan has followed the cautious line of his predecessor on Javakheti. Georgian leaders, meanwhile, have been fully aware of their dependence on Armenia to keep the situation calm in Javakheti, and have been compelled to balance Georgia's growing relationship with Azerbaijan based on mutual geopolitical interests with a concomitant attention to Armenia. Hence a symbiosis evolved between two governments that often regard each other with significant suspicion. In practice, Armenian leaders intervened in early 1992 when the Gamsakhurdia government had fallen, and Javakheti leaders seemed to consider the option of independence in the opportunity provided by the collapse of Georgian statehood.<sup>82</sup> Armenia, at this point basically devoid of electricity and under trade embargo from Turkey and Azerbaijan and in war with the latter, sent an envoy to Akhalkalaki to prevent a deterioration of the situation which could put Armenia in a two-front war.

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<sup>80</sup> Baku News Summary, 1 September 1998.

<sup>81</sup> Igor Rotar, 'Tbilisi Has Only Partial Control Over Georgia's Armenian Regions', *Prism*, vol. 4 no. 10, 15 May 1998.

<sup>82</sup> See Levon Sevunts, 'Squeeze Play in the Caucasus: Russia could tighten its grip as Georgia, Armenia break out of bear hug', *Montreal Gazette*, 29 November 1999.

Armenian attention to Javakheti remained strong, as former President Ter-Petrosian met with Georgian President Shevardnadze in Javakheti a few years later. In practice, Georgia's vulnerability to yet a further ethnic conflict – a scenario that some Georgian and international observers deem would amount to a *coup de grace* to the struggling Georgian state – has given Armenia a guarantor role over the Armenians of Javakheti, with the reluctant consent of the Georgian government. Georgian observers generally agree that Armenia's stance is the key to continued peace in Javakheti; in this context, the improved fortunes of the Dashnaksutiun in Armenia as well as their increased agitation regarding Javakheti has caused considerable worry in Georgia.

Armenia's 'accord' with Georgia over Javakheti has also probably influenced Russia's position. Whereas Moscow has used numerous levers at its disposal to weaken the Georgian government and force it to change its foreign policy orientation, it has never played the card of Javakheti, which it is fully capable of doing. Gas supplies have been cut off at times of political expedience, and a discriminatory visa regime was imposed in late 2000 that forced Georgian citizens except citizens of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to acquire visas before traveling to Russia. This latter measure, of course, is a flagrant infringement of Georgia's internationally recognized sovereignty over these territories. Moreover, Russian aircraft have bombed areas of Georgia where it arbitrarily considered that Chechen rebels were hiding (the Kodori and Pankisi gorges). But Russia has failed to utilize the Javakheti card, though Georgian officials claim Moscow has often reminded Tbilisi of its possibility to do so. Armenia's concerns over Javakheti may have conditioned Russia's policy. Moreover, Russia's policy in the South Caucasus has sought to achieve a controllable level of instability – and Moscow may have realized that stirring up a conflict in Javakheti could push Georgia over the brink and lead to an uncontrollable situation that could plunge the wider South Caucasus into war. In any case, Javakheti is a case where geopolitics have dictated crucial external support for the prevention of conflict rather than support, as in Abkhazia or South Ossetia, for belligerence among minority leaders. This factor has undoubtedly been a major reason why conflict has been avoided in Javakheti despite a situation containing many elements otherwise conducive to conflict.

### **7.3.10. The Lack of Autonomy**

The lack of assertive response by Javakheti to events that could have been served as catalyzing factors of a conflict deserve to be noted. The conflict over Prefects is one example; other serious issues have included the creation of the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, and several minor armed confrontations, all of which could have precipitated a major crisis. The first confrontation took place during the unruly days in late December 1991 that ended Gamsakhurdia's rule. As Gamsakhurdia fled to Armenia, the Military Council's National Guard tried to enter Javakheti, but was prevented from doing so by the locals; likewise, the unit loyal to Gamsakhurdia that tried to make its way back to

Georgia from Armenia through Javakheti was disarmed by the local Armenians.<sup>83</sup> Another armed incident in August 1998 clearly displays the suspicion and insecurity felt by the Javakheti Armenian community. A Georgian military detachment was approaching Javakheti in order to hold joint exercises with the Russian personnel from the Akhalkalaki base. They were met near the border of Javakheti by an estimated 25 Armenians armed with 'mortars and other artillery'. When reporting to their superiors on the development, they were ordered to withdraw back into their bases outside Javakheti.<sup>84</sup>

Policies of the central Georgian government have, as noted above, generally been cautious in relations to Javakheti. Nevertheless, from 1994 a new form of administrative division was created in Georgia: the country was divided into newly created Regions, larger than the Soviet-time regions. Javakheti was merged with Meskheta, creating the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, with Akhaltsikhe as its capital. Hence Akhalkalaki's status as a regional center was removed, and more importantly, the almost homogeneously Armenian-populated Javakheti was incorporated with majority-Georgian Meskheta. As Meskheta had a larger population than Javakheti, this diluted the ethnic Armenian component in the new administrative unit. Whereas Armenians formed close to 95% of Javakheti's population, they now form only roughly half of Samtskhe-Javakheti's population. An ethnic Georgian, Gigla Baramidze, was appointed head of the region.<sup>85</sup> This decision, created by decree no. 237 issued by Shevardnadze, led to increased campaigning for independence among Javakheti Armenians. Over 40,000 signatures were collected in the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts to introduce a legislative initiative (for which 30,000 signatures are needed) to discontinue the creation of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, and to grant Javakheti territorial autonomy. However, nothing came out of the initiative as Tbilisi ignored the demands of the Javakheti Armenians.

This series of events raises important questions. Several indicators pointed to a high likelihood of conflict in Javakheti. Cultural differences were not great but relatively significant; the national conceptions of Armenians and Georgians are mutually exclusive; a notable level of past conflict existed; Javakheti is an area of very rough terrain, in which significant nationalist groups were active, even briefly instituting *de facto* self-rule and possessing paramilitary forces, effectively denying the Georgian government control over the territory for most of the 1990s. Several 'sparks' occurred that could have ignited a conflict, yet this did not happen. Conflict was avoided for two main reasons. As mentioned earlier, both the Armenian and Georgian governments treated the issue of Javakheti with extreme caution. Yerevan reined in the Javakheti radicals while effectively being granted a guarantor position over Javakheti; Tbilisi refrained from attempting to

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<sup>83</sup> Guretski, 'The Question of Javakheti'.

<sup>84</sup> 'Standoff Defused on Georgian-Armenian Border', *RFE/RL Newsline*, 17 August 1998.

<sup>85</sup> Baramidze was removed from his post in January 2002 after having physically beaten and almost killed the *Gamgebeli* of Akhaltsikhe with his sidearm.

exert full territorial control over Javakheti, by for example deciding not to move in to dissolve the council of representatives created by Javakhk or to try to disarm the *Parvents* paramilitaries. Such actions could have directly sparked a conflict, yet unlike in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Tbilisi did not engage in any misadventures in Javakheti.

But neither did Javakhk. Developments between 1988 and 2000 in Javakheti point to a lack of means, and to a certain extent also a lack of leadership, to promote a systematic and sustained aggressive nationalist campaign, although Javakheti's situation was not too different from that of Abkhazia or South Ossetia. A nationalist movement, Javakhk, certainly existed; but it lacked the political skill, finances, and network to establish itself as a vocal voice for Armenian self-determination in Javakheti. It was unable to build a significant movement to revoke the establishment of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, in spite of an apparently widespread public opposition to it, as proven by the ease with which Javakhk collected over 40,000 signatures in a relatively small and predominantly rural population. Likewise, it has been unable to mount a political campaign to mount a struggle for political autonomy, an idea that seems to enjoy widespread popular support in Javakheti. This was the case largely because Javakheti did not have territorial autonomy. Devoid of autonomy, Javakheti did not produce an ethnic Armenian elite or intelligentsia during the Soviet period. Such an elite, which existed in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and, significantly, in Mountainous Karabakh, would have had much more political skills, experience, and Soviet network to build a strong movement for autonomy or unification with Armenia that would most likely have found a fertile soil given the current Georgian political climate and the specifics of the Javakheti situation. Javakheti lacked a Soviet-style Nomenklatura, but also an ethnic intelligentsia. Its nationalist leadership was mainly composed of petty officials in city councils and of school teachers.

Lacking autonomy, the Armenian leadership had no institutions to fall back upon; it did not have a parliament with which to oppose or 'annul' the 1994 decision to establish the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, which was perceived by Javakhk leaders as 'anti-constitutional' and as designed to 'counterbalance the Armenian majority in Javakheti'.<sup>86</sup> Yet the only manner in which they were able to voice their opposition to the measure was through the collection of signatures that the Georgian government simply ignored. Furthermore, the Javakhk leaders lacked financial resources and foreign contacts that autonomy and links to Moscow had brought South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as illustrated by Ardzinba's career. Neither did Javakheti have any constitutionally enshrined borders, and Tbilisi succeeded in incorporating it with a largely Georgian region to its west, reasserting somewhat Georgian jurisdiction over Javakheti by ruling the area from Akhaltsikhe and not from Akhalkalaki. Because Javakheti lacked autonomy, Javakhk lacked political institutions, finances, experience, a local intellectual base, as well as political skills and

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<sup>86</sup> Guretski, 'The Question of Javakheti'.

outside contacts, all factors that could all greatly have helped the movement in its efforts to promote a Javakheti Armenian ethnic agenda.

#### 7.4. Azeris of Kvemo Kartli: the Silent Mass

The Azerbaijani population of Georgia located in the South and Southeast of the country is one of the country's most populous minorities at close to 350,000, and by far the fastest-growing one, with the exception of the Kurds.<sup>87</sup> The Azeri population is predominantly rural, and dominates demographically in most of the Kvemo (Lower) Kartli province. These areas all lie less than an hour's drive from Tbilisi. Azeri communities also exist in Tbilisi itself, the city of Rustavi, and the Lagodekhi district of Kakheti, near the border of northeastern Azerbaijan. The non-Azeri population of these regions is mainly composed of Georgians, Russians, and Armenians. The Azeris have been among the least politically active regional groups in Georgia, and certainly the least active minority population. But this generally quiet picture conceals the relatively significant inter-ethnic tensions that existed during the late 1980s between Georgians and Azeris, which culminated in 1989-90.<sup>88</sup> The tensions then led to the exile of several hundred Azeri families from Kvemo Kartli.<sup>89</sup> Yet these relatively serious ethnic tensions did not lead to large-scale ethnic mobilization among the Azeris, and the situation cooled down. Unlike in Javakheti, the inter-ethnic relations between Azeris and Georgians have improved considerably since then, and previously dominant suspicions have given way to relative harmony.<sup>90</sup>

##### 7.4.1. Cultural Differences

Azeris and Georgians differ considerably in both language, customs, and religion. The Azeri language is a Turkic language closely related to the Turkish of present-day Turkey, hence of a totally different language family than Georgian. Since few Azeris in Georgia speak Georgian, communication between the two groups normally has taken place in Russian. In terms of religion, Azeris in Georgia are divided between a Sunni Muslim majority of ca. 70%, and a Shi'a minority.<sup>91</sup> Georgians, of course, are Orthodox

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<sup>87</sup> Gachechiladze, *New Georgia*, notes that between 1926 and 1979 Azeris grew double as fast as the rest of Georgia, though recent reports show that emigration of working-age men to find work in Russia and elsewhere has led to a decrease in birth rates.

<sup>88</sup> On the tensions in the early 1980s, see Elizabeth Fuller, 'How Serious Are Inter-Nationality Tensions in Georgia?', *Radio Liberty* Report No. 444/83, 25 November 1983.

<sup>89</sup> See Konstantin Kokoev and Guram Svanidze, 'Problems of (Ethnic) Minorities in Georgia', *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, no. 1, 2000.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Süleyman Süleymanov, editor-in-chief of the *Gürüstan* newspaper, (published in Azeri language in Tbilisi); and Imir Mamedli, official in the State Chancellery of Georgia, Tbilisi, February 2002.

<sup>91</sup> Azeri representatives give different figures, with estimations of the Sunni majority ranging from 60-80%. Most Azeris downplay the differences between the Sunni and Shi'a population, which seems to

Christians. The only common linkage between Azeris and Georgians is the Caucasian identity, which is relatively strong among both peoples. In particular, Azeris in Georgia have stressed their Caucasian identity over the Turkic identity, probably partly in order to stress their points of commonality with the rest of Georgia.<sup>92</sup> This notwithstanding, the cultural differences between Azeris and Georgians are significant.

#### **7.4.2. National Conception**

The differences in culture are compounded by the exclusive character of national identities. Being an ethnic Azeri makes it near-impossible to be accepted as a 'Georgian' in the reigning interpretation of Georgian nationhood. The ethnic identity of the Azeris has not by itself been overly pronounced, but they are well aware of their links with Azerbaijan, Azeris in Iran, and Turkey; moreover, their cultural Muslim identity is also present, though few signals of a politicization of religion is present. Some Middle Eastern Islamic organizations have attempted to build Mosques and Madrassahs in Kvemo Kartli, but have been resisted by the Georgian authorities. Islamic radical groups have had little success here, but their activities have been limited. The Azeri identity's Turkic and Islamic markers have made it close to diametrically opposed to the Georgian one, which developed in the historical context of opposition to Islamic Empires, among them the Ottoman Turkish one. This makes the Azeris one of the least likely ethnic groups to ever be considered Georgian.

#### **7.4.3. Past Conflict and Myths**

The historical level of conflict between Azeris and Georgians have been low. A short conflict erupted between the independent republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia in the 1918-1920 period, but was mainly focused on the northern part of the border between the two, around Lagodekhi (in present-day Georgia) and Zaqatala (in present-day Azerbaijan) which were claimed by both republics. Parts of the Zaqatala area formed part of Georgia in 1918-20, but were subsequently transferred to the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan by Soviet authorities. In the late Soviet period, as in other parts of Georgia, Azeri toponyms were changed into Georgian ones, especially in the Bolnisi district.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, the level of political activity among Azeris has consistently been low, and the low conflict level was sustained during the tumultuous period leading to Georgia's independence in 1991. Some Georgian nationalists worried of the demographic increase of Muslim

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be of relative small importance in Azeri society, though it has been raised by some post-Soviet religious groups, often influenced from abroad. See Imir Mamedli, *Iki Prezident Arasynda*, Tbilisi: Intellekti Neshriyaty, 2001, pp. 81-82.

<sup>92</sup> Shifteh Akbarzadeh, 'Local Cultures and Global Change: The Case of Marneuli, a Rural Setting of the Azeri Minority in Georgia', Paper Presented at the Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, New York, N.Y., 13-16 April 2000, p. 6.

<sup>93</sup> Interviews, Tbilisi and Marneuli, February 2002.

peoples, especially Azeris, and as seen in chapter seven, even pressured hundreds of families to leave; nevertheless the political activity among Azeris remained minimal. In 1990, a minor mishap occurred when a false rumor emerged in Tbilisi that Azeris were preparing to secede and join Azerbaijan. Some Georgian nationalists began organizing a march on Marneuli, which could have taken similar forms as the march on Tskhinvali in 1989, but Georgian leaders coordinated with the Azerbaijani Popular Front in Baku, which convinced the Georgians that no such separatist activity was taking place, and the march was aborted.<sup>94</sup> In fact, the general picture of the Azeri of Georgia is that of a minority groups that feels politically vulnerable and seeks to avoid conflict by keeping a low-key profile, deferring to the Georgian government, refraining from challenging its conditions, and thereby escaping the wrath of Georgian nationalists.

#### **7.4.4. Rough Terrain**

As the name of the region suggests, Kvemo Kartli or lower Kartli, is composed mainly of agricultural lowlands, and include some of the least mountainous parts of Georgia. The Mtkvari river runs through Kvemo Kartli, forming the basis of agricultural activity in the province. Around especially the city of Rustavi, large and now partially defunct industries also exist. Though mountainous areas exist closer to Javakheti and to Kakheti, the region is less mountainous than any other region included in this study.

#### **7.4.5. Relative Demography**

Compactly settled Azeri populations dominate several districts of Kvemo Kartli. Azeris form 80% of the population in the Marneuli district; 74% in Bolnisi; 70% in Dmanisi; and 51% in the Gardabani district. However, some of the Azeri areas are interspersed with Armenian and Georgian settlements, making it less than homogenous. In comparison to other minorities, the Javakheti Armenians are more compactly settled in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda, but the Azeris have a higher demographic dominance of most areas they inhabit than either the Ossetians or the Abkhaz.

#### **7.4.6. Ethnic Kin**

The Azeris of Kvemo Kartli live in the vicinity of the border of Georgia with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Contacts between the local Azeris and Azerbaijan are close and multi-faceted. While economically well-integrated in Georgia, the social and educational links of the Azeris are overwhelmingly with Azerbaijan rather than with Tbilisi, despite the geographic closeness of Kvemo Kartli to the Georgian capital. As in the case of Javakheti Armenians, close links between the Azeri community and its ethnic kin across both the Turkish and Azerbaijani border exists. This is compounded by the low level of

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<sup>94</sup> Interview with Avtandil Imnadze, a leader in the Georgian National Movement in the 1980s, Tbilisi, October 1998.

knowledge of the Georgian language, especially as the use of Russian is declining in Georgia. The linguistic isolation hence makes the Azeris' links with Azerbaijan ever closer.

#### **7.4.7. Economic Viability**

The economic situation in Kvemo Kartli is relatively good. A mainly agricultural area, the local Azeris are involved primarily in vegetable and fruit production, which they market in Tbilisi and other cities in eastern Georgia. Kvemo Kartli is arguably one of the regions of Georgia least affected by the economic downturn with the fall of the Soviet Union. Whereas the agricultural production in Javakheti was geared not to local markets but to the supply of specific products such as some types of dairy products to the entire Soviet market, Kvemo Kartli was basically the breadbasket of eastern Georgia. As such, the dissolution of the USSR affected Kvemo Kartli economically much less than Javakheti.<sup>95</sup>

#### **7.4.8. Radical Leadership**

The Azeris are by far the least politically organized minority group in the country. Azeri social and cultural organizations exist, but no dominant politically oriented grouping of Azeris has emerged. An Azeri society was organized in Tbilisi in 1990; the 'Dayak' association was formed within the Rustaveli society the same year; the 'Geyret' popular movement was formed in Marneuli; the 'Birlik' (Unity) movement was formed in Tbilisi in 1992; and the 'Ümid' (Hope) society was founded in Gardabani in 1994.<sup>96</sup> These movements nevertheless never took on a nationalistic stance even though mass meetings were organized at various times, including a 1990 meeting in Gardabani that allegedly drew 10,000 people. Geyret is seen as having been the most nationalist in its program, though it never found support to voice them actively. Discussions regarding autonomy remained within the community and were not extensively raised publicly.<sup>97</sup> However, there were discussions in mid-1989 that Azeris should demand the creation of an autonomous unit with its capital in Rustavi, and Azeri organizations put forward a ten-point program including demands that ethnic Azeris be appointed to administrative positions in Azeri-populated regions, that Azeri-language education in schools be increased, as well as the creation of an Azeri university or pedagogical institute. Yet these demands came to nothing and remained marginal. Vigilante organizations armed mainly with hunting rifles emerged in areas where Azeris felt threatened in 1989; yet armed clashes never occurred with Georgian nationalist movements. However, armed clashes did take place in June 1989 and again in late 1990 between local Azeris and Svans that had

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<sup>95</sup> Interview, David Darchiashvili, Researcher at the Georgian Parliament and the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, Tbilisi, February 2002.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Süleyman Süleymanov, editor-in-chief of the *Gürüstän* newspaper, (published in Azeri language in Tbilisi); and Inir Mamedli, official in the State Chancellery of Georgia, Tbilisi, February 2002.

<sup>97</sup> Mamedli interview.

been resettled to the Marneuli district in 1987 after their settlements in the mountains of Svaneti had been destroyed by avalanches.<sup>98</sup>

However, Azeri representatives stress their cooperation in this period with moderate Georgian groups and their loyalty to the Georgian state. Commenting on their lack of response to onslaughts by Georgian nationalists in 1989-90, they argue that Azeris are by nature a peaceful people busy working on the land, that their Islamic identity made them law-abiding citizens, and stress that especially as Azerbaijan was in conflict with Armenia, it was imperative to secure peace and cooperation with Georgia.<sup>99</sup>

Potential grievances around which a political grouping could conceivably have mobilized were present, given the social isolation, low political representation, and lack of educational opportunities of the Azeri population. Yet no political movement emerged in response to these grievances. Leadership, let alone radical leadership, has been absent among Azeris in Kvemo Kartli.

#### 7.4.9. External Support

The obvious candidate for external support to the Azeris in Georgia is the Republic of Azerbaijan. However, the historically good relations between Azerbaijanis and Georgians, and more importantly the development of good and strengthening relations between the political leaderships of the two states at independence have ensured that the Azerbaijani government harbors no aims to produce political tensions regarding the Azeris in Georgia. Quite to the contrary, Azerbaijan and Georgia have formed a strategic partnership during the late 1990s based on their pro-western orientation, their common wish to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures, and their mutual dependence in energy issues. Azerbaijan is a source of transit fees and energy for Georgia; Georgia is a key transit route for Azerbaijan in its efforts to export its oil and gas resources to western markets. As in the case of Javakheti but in a fundamentally different manner, Azerbaijan has contributed to keeping the Azeri population in Georgia loyal to the government, including efforts by Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev to influence Azeris in Georgia to vote for Eduard Shevardnadze and his Citizen's Union Party in elections. In Javakheti, Armenia has tried to avoid tensions that could negatively impact on Armenia itself; in the case of Kvemo Kartli, the Azerbaijani government has never had to step in to abate tensions, but has acted as a guarantor of the security of Azeris by the close relations with Tbilisi that Baku entertains. Azeris in Georgia also played an important role in the development of relations between the two countries. This has not prevented some Azerbaijani opposition politicians, most recently Ali Kerimli of the Popular Front Party, of voicing concern about the discrimination of Azeris in Georgia. Such utterances

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<sup>98</sup> Elizabeth Fuller, 'Azerbaijani Exodus from Georgia Imminent?', *Report on the USSR*, 15 February 1991, p. 17.

<sup>99</sup> Mamedli interview.

nevertheless remain marginal, and are not supported by the rest of the opposition, which supports the Azerbaijani government's foreign policy in most of its facets.

#### **7.4.10. The Lack of Autonomy**

The Azeris of Kvemo Kartli have never had any political autonomy, and did not voice any claims to that effect as did representatives of the Armenians of Javakheti. The lack of autonomy in the Soviet period also meant that there existed no local Nomenklatura or intelligentsia; likewise, there was never any political institutions controlled or dominated by the local Azeri population that bred a natural leadership in the region. Together with the close relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia, the lack of autonomy and the rural (and therefore politically less organized) character of the population of the region to a large extent explains the absence of ethnopolitical activity in Kvemo Kartli.

### **7.5. Ajaria: Regionalism Enforced**

Ajaria, like Abkhazia, is a Black Sea resort area strategically located between Turkey and Georgia proper and also functioning as Armenia's main seaport. Ajaria is ethnolinguistically part of Georgia, but was a part of the Ottoman Empire until 1878. Ajaria was incorporated into the Russian empire in the Turkish-Russian war of 1878, but this did not immediately lead to Ajaria's integration with the rest of Georgia. When the South Caucasus was first delimited in 1918, an idea was briefly floated that Ajaria would form the core of a Muslim Southwest Caucasian republic. Finally, when the Soviet delimitation took place, Ajaria became the only autonomous entity in the Soviet Union that had enjoyed its status because of religious differences from the titular nationality of the republic it belonged to. When Gamsakhurdia came to power in 1990, he had publicly campaigned for the lifting of Ajaria's autonomy. Given that the threat of lifting autonomy contributed significantly to the conflict in South Ossetia, and that it is deemed in the theoretical literature a highly significant factor in ethnopolitical conflict, a process of escalation could have been expected to take place. Protests took place in Batumi, and Ajaria in 1990 received a strong leadership that was intent on denying Tbilisi control over the autonomous Republic, and Ajaria grew increasingly isolated from the rest of Georgia.<sup>100</sup> Yet nothing even approaching 'ethnic' mobilization took place in Ajaria, although the republic enjoyed many factors that could have enhanced its capacity to revolt against the center, including external support.

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<sup>100</sup> O. Zoidze, 'Postsovietskaia Gruzia: Problemy Natsionalogo Edinstvo I Stanovleniia Gosudarstvennosti', in *Severniy Kavkaz-Zakavkaz'e: Problemy Stabilnosti I Perspektivy Razvitiia – Materialy Mezhdunarodnoy Konferentsii*, Moscow: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 1997, p. 123.

### 7.5.1. Cultural Differences

Ajaria culturally shares similarities with northeastern Turkey as much as with Georgia. A large Laz population there (linguistically kin to Mingrelians) forms Turkey's second largest compactly settled minority after the Kurds.<sup>101</sup> The Ajars, like the Laz, are Muslim though they are ethnically Georgians – or more specifically, Gurians (speaking a western Georgian dialect). During Ottoman rule, the Ajars were affected by the Millet system of administration in the Empire, which installed religion as the main social identity. This emphasis on religion enforced the separate cultural identity of the Ajars from the Georgians, and moreover, their Georgian language included many Turkish loan words.<sup>102</sup> During the pre-Soviet times, the Ajars, like Kurds, Meskhetian Turks, and Azerbaijanis, were simply classified as Muslims, and the South Caucasus was neatly divided culturally into Armenians, Georgians, and Muslims. Yet during the Soviet period, the Ajars were a particular target of atheistic campaign enforced by Moscow, and did not enjoy any protection from Tbilisi given that the authorities in Tbilisi did not feel any particularly strong urge to protect the Islamic identity of a Georgian population. Indeed, to many Georgians, the concept of a Muslim Georgian is a contradiction in terms, given the central role of the Orthodox church in Georgian cultural identity. As the *Korenizatsiia* policies waned in the 1930s, Ajars were gradually seen simply as Georgians, and a policy of total assimilation was introduced in the 1970s and 1980s. They were only counted as Ajarians in the census of 1926, when they numbered ca. 70,000. Extrapolating these figures would suggest that the Ajar population today is roughly 160,000 to 190,000.

As the religious component of their identity was constantly suppressed during the Soviet Union and ethnicity emphasized, Ajaria was secularized, which also meant georgianized, since religion was the only factor separating them from the rest of Georgia. Indeed, analysts note a significant level of assimilation of Ajars during the Soviet era.<sup>103</sup> As a result, whereas Ajars retain a feeling of separate cultural identity, they do generally feel Georgian. The level of cultural differences between Ajars and Georgians are hence low.

### 7.5.2. National Conception

The definition of Ajars as Georgians has implied that they are included in most definitions of the Georgian national community. Certainly, the opinion that 'Georgianness' and

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<sup>101</sup> In elections to the 1924 parliament, the Turkish parliament had its only flirtation with autonomy for minorities. Deputies from the predominantly Kurdish southeast were termed 'Kürdistan Milletvekili, or deputies from Kurdistan. Deputies from the Laz northeast bore the title 'Lâzistan Milletvekili' indicating that Kurds and Laz were singled out as minorities to receive special rights.

<sup>102</sup> See Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire: A Guide*, London: Hurst, 1985, p. 207.

<sup>103</sup> Georgi M. Derluguian, 'A Tale of Two Resorts: Abkhazia and Ajaria Before and Since the Soviet Collapse', in Beverly Crawford and Ronnie D. Lipschutz, *The Myth of Ethnic Conflict*, Berkeley: University of California, International and Area Studies Research Series, No. 98, 1998.

Christianity are interrelated is strong in Georgia, but importantly, the Ajars *themselves* have a strong Georgian identity, unlike any other minority in Georgia. Hence on the whole, the Ajars are accepted as members of the national community. As such, they are the only minority population in Georgia to be accepted as ‘Georgians’ in the predominant conception of the Georgian nation. The national conceptions are hence in this case inclusive and not exclusive. However, the radical Georgian nationalists that dominated the late 1980s saw the Ajars as deviant Georgians that basically needed to be converted or at least totally secularized in order to be accepted as ‘proper’ Georgians. In this particular situation, the relationship is in the words of Monica Toft similar to a ‘two-way mirror’, where ‘one group does not think of itself as an “other” but another group does’.<sup>104</sup> In other words, even though Georgian nationalists may not have accepted Ajars into their conception of the nation, the Ajars continued to see themselves as Georgians nonetheless.

The vague and non-ethnic character of identity in Ajaria has led to some uncertainty. Muslims in Ajaria may hold a Georgian identity in addition to the Ajar one; likewise, Christians in Ajaria may not feel Ajar in the communal sense of the term (the word ethnic is not used since the basis of the separate identity is religion); yet living in Ajaria, they may have a territorial or civic Ajarian identity. In sum, the inclusiveness and compatibility of the two identities blurs the picture.

### **7.5.3. Past Conflict and Myths**

Having been reunited with Georgia through annexation by Russia in 1878, Ajaria again fell to the Ottomans on April 15, 1918. As Kazemzadeh notes, ‘it became painfully clear that the population of Ajaria was helping the Turks. The Ajarians tore up railway lines, wrecked trains, and conducted guerrilla operations which increased the disorder in the rear, bringing fear and confusion to the defending army.’<sup>105</sup> Hence the Ajars’ affinity with Turkey was still strong at this point, which suggests that many Ajars identified themselves primarily through their religious affinity with Turkey and not their linguistic affinity with Georgia. The question of Ajaria again came up several months later when the Ottomans had been defeated. In fact, Ajaria was claimed by four powers: Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the abortive ‘Southwestern Caucasian Republic’ (encompassing Ajaria, Kars, Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki and Nakhchivan) all laid claim to the region. Armenia as it demanded access to the sea; Georgia since it considered Ajaria a historic part of Georgia; Azerbaijan since it was Muslim and desired a corridor to Turkey. Azerbaijan later supported the claims of the Southwestern Caucasian republic, which was close to the

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<sup>104</sup> Monica Duffy Toft, ‘Two-Way Mirror Nationalism: the Case of Ajaria’, in Moshe Gammer, ed., *The Politics of the Caspian*, London: FrankCass, forthcoming 2002.

<sup>105</sup> Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia*, p. 102.

defeated Ottoman forces. The British seemed inclined to give Batumi the status of a ‘free city’; however they finally ceded it to Menshevik Georgia in early July 1920.<sup>106</sup>

Hence a significant level of past conflict existed between Ajaria and Georgia at the time of the first world war. Much like the Ossetians and Abkhaz, Ajaria resisted incorporation into Georgia, instead siding with an external enemy of Georgia’s; the only difference is that it was not Bolshevik Russia but Ottoman Turkey. In spite of this conflict level, however, there has been little mythification of this past, less than in either Abkhazia or Javakheti. As will be seen below, this was the case in great deal because of the assimilation of Ajars in the Soviet period.

#### 7.5.4. Rough Terrain

Abkhazia is located in the western plains of Georgia, on the Caspian coast. The western and northern parts of Ajaria are coastal plains, forming a narrow strip of lowlands on the Black Sea coast. However, eastern and southern Ajaria, bordering Samtskhe-Javakheti and Turkey, is composed of rougher terrain: mountains reaching over 2,500 meters in altitude form most of Ajaria’s territory. The two parts of Ajaria have also been politically differentiated, often supporting different families in power struggle for control of the region. The topographic conditions have generated certain problems, for instance a landslide in 1989 that displaced thousands of people.<sup>107</sup> Most of Ajaria, almost two thirds of its territory, is covered by forests.<sup>108</sup> While highland parts of Ajaria may be inaccessible, a large part of its territory, including the capital and port of Batumi, are easily accessible from Georgia along the Black Sea coast. On the whole, Ajaria’s terrain can be characterized as relatively rough, comparable to Javakheti and South Ossetia.

#### 7.5.5. Relative Demography

The relative demographic situation in Ajaria is less well-known than that of other regions of Georgia, given that the Ajars have not been counted as a separate ethnic group since the 1926 census, when they numbered 71,000 (whereas Georgia’s population was 1,8 million), and formed 54% of the population of Ajaria.<sup>109</sup> In subsequent censuses, because of the Soviet Union’s campaign against religion that particularly targeted Islam, Ajars (whose separate identity rested on religion and not ethnicity) were counted simply as Georgians. Extrapolating the figures from 1991, the proportion of Ajars in Ajaria is likely to have remained roughly the same; Soviet atheism may have reduced the number of

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<sup>106</sup> Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia*, pp. 199-203.

<sup>107</sup> See Georgia Country Profile, part. 3, distributed through *Turkistan Economy Bulletin*, 13 February 2000.

<sup>108</sup> David Chantladze, ‘The Adjara Region of the Republic of Georgia’, U.S. Department of Commerce *Bisnis*, September 1999 ([www.bisnis.doc.gov](http://www.bisnis.doc.gov))

<sup>109</sup> Elizabeth Fuller, ‘Georgia’s Adzhar Crisis’, *Report on the USSR*, 9 August 1991, p. 8.

people identifying themselves partially by their Muslim religion; on the other hand Muslim peoples, Ajars included, generally have somewhat higher birth rates. Most of all, there is a significant uncertainty given that the Ajar and Georgian identities are not exclusive, as was seen above. Hence there is great uncertainty regarding the number of Ajars in Ajaria. While some observers argue the Ajars are in a minority in Ajaria,<sup>110</sup> others estimate that the overwhelming majority of the present population of Ajaria (numbering 393,000 people according to official figures) designated as Georgians is Muslim by culture and hence defined as Ajars. Relatively speaking, the Ajars may not form an overwhelming majority as do the Armenians of Javakheti, but can be thought to form a solid majority of their autonomous region's population, something which under typical Soviet circumstances would have provided the Ajars with comfortable control of the institutions of the autonomous region. But Ajaria was not typical, as will be seen shortly.

#### **7.5.6. Ethnic Kin**

Ethnically, Ajaria's closest kin is in the Georgian province of Guria to its immediate North.<sup>111</sup> It is rather distantly linked to the Lazuri-origin people in Northeastern Turkey. After Georgia's Independence, economic interaction increased between Ajaria and Turkey, but there is no specifically Ajarian common identity among people in northeastern Turkey. The assimilation of the Lazuri population is relatively pronounced in Turkey, and there is hence no significant perceived kinship between Ajars and people across the border.

#### **7.5.7. Economic Viability**

Especially since independence, Ajaria has developed into one of the wealthiest provinces of Georgia. Its strategic location on the Black Sea coast bordering Turkey has enabled it to profit from most of the border trade between Georgia and Turkey. Ajaria also stayed outside the turmoil of intra-Georgian and Georgian-Abkhaz conflicts, and hence to a large extent escaped the economic downturn of regions like Mingrelia. However, Ajaria's economic viability was high even before Georgian independence. It was crucial in the early 1900s, because one of the world's first pipelines carried Baku oil to the Black Sea via Batumi port. With its port, its crucial role in the transportation system of the Caucasus, and its position as the main geographic link between the Caucasus and Turkey, one of Ajaria's main assets and economic functions is transportation.

Moreover, Ajaria is rich in mineral resources and produces subtropical products including tea and tobacco, and has a first-rate tourism industry welcoming thousands of visitors, mainly from the former Soviet Union. Ajaria has an obvious economic viability,

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<sup>110</sup> Toft, 'Two-Way Mirror Nationalism: the Case of Ajaria'.

<sup>111</sup> See Derlugian, 'A Tale of Two Resorts', p. 277.

and has in the post-independence period sought to achieve the status of a free economic zone.

### **7.5.8. Radical Leadership**

A most striking factor in Ajaria's development in the 1990s is the constant adherence of all its main political figures to Georgian patriotism. When accused of Pan-Islamism or Pro-Turkish feelings as happened during Gamsakhurdia's tenure, or even when Gamsakhurdia before coming to power threatened to abolish Ajaria's autonomy, Ajarian leaders did not answer by resorting to their separate identity as Ossetians and Abkhaz did. Instead, they constantly emphasized their Georgianness. For example, a letter of nine academics from Batumi State University in 1991 retorted to disparaging remarks by Gamsakhurdia by stating that 'to level charges of pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism against the native-born sons of the Georgian earth was neither historically nor politically justified' and caused 'considerable distress' among an Ajarian population 'to whom nothing was more galling than aspersions on their Georgianness'.<sup>112</sup> Likewise, Ajaria's present ruler, Aslan Abashidze, refers to himself as a 'Georgian Patriot', a radically different way of handling the suspicions of Georgian nationalists compared to the Abkhaz, Ossetians, or Javakheti Armenians; Ajaria in fact presented itself, with reasonable success, as an example for the rest of Georgia.

When limited unrest erupted in 1991, as Derluguian puts it, 'Ajaria never challenged Tbilisi; it was Gamsakhurdia who challenged Ajaria'.<sup>113</sup> Though the Ajarian leadership did not answer the challenge, the people did. On April 22, 1991, Ajars poured out on the streets after a rumor, apparently unsubstantiated, had spread that the upcoming elections to the Supreme Soviet would be turned into a referendum on Ajaria's autonomy, and thereby constitute a step in Gamsakhurdia's intentions to abolish it, only weeks after Georgia's declaration of independence. Other grievances voiced included the programs of Christianization of the 1980s, which included old mosques being rebuilt as churches. The demonstrations continued the next day, with demonstrators demanding changes in the leadership of Ajaria, but ended the next day. Shortly before the demonstrations, Gamsakhurdia had in March 1991 forced the Ajarian Supreme Soviet to remove its chairman Tengiz Khakhva, in whose place Aslan Abashidze was elected. Abashidze's election was dubious, since the Soviet Constitution provided that only a deputy could be elected Chairman of a Supreme Soviet; Abashidze was not.<sup>114</sup> Yet from this point onward, Abashidze would increasingly dominate Ajaria, and within a few years achieved full

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<sup>112</sup> Fuller, 'Georgia's Adzhar Crisis', p. 10.

<sup>113</sup> Derluguian, 'A Tale of Two Resorts', p. 281.

<sup>114</sup> See Judith Hin, 'Ajaria: The interest of the Local Potentate in Keeping Violent Conflict at Bay', Paper Presented at the Annual Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, New York, 13-15 April 2000.

control over the republic. Abashidze comes from a princely family from lower Ajaria whose members ruled Ajaria intermittently before the 1917 revolution. His grandfather Memed Abashidze chaired the first Ajarian parliament in 1918-21. A dynastic trend is visible in Ajaria, as even official information sources from Ajaria now stress that the Abashidze family has 'been heading Ajaria since 1463'.<sup>115</sup>

Subsequently, Ajaria developed into an authoritarian fiefdom controlled by Abashidze. Strict rule, violations of Human Rights, and disregard for the central government in Tbilisi have characterized Ajaria. But to an equal extent, a population that were spectators to two civil wars and two ethnic conflicts in Georgia experiences relative wealth, peace, and safety: Abashidze has made a point of cracking down hard on crime, and many observers view Batumi as the safest city in Georgia. With the Georgian government bogged down in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, weakened economically and politically, and fearful of Russian influence (which, as is seen below, was present in Ajaria), Abashidze was in an excellent bargaining position to extract the maximum benefit from Ajaria's strategic location and Georgia's general weakness without risking to pay a price for it. Ajaria refused to contribute to the central government budget, was reluctant to allow Georgian border guards to take over control over its border with Turkey from Russian troops in 1998, and Abashidze even keeps a militia along the administrative border between Ajaria and Georgia. Yet while championing the political and economic autonomy of Ajaria, Abashidze has further strengthened his position by assuming a political role beyond Ajaria. He founded the 'Revival' faction that gained the second largest number of votes in the parliamentary elections of 1999, and emerged as the main contender to Shevardnadze before the 2000 Presidential elections, from which he withdrew shortly before the elections. Abashidze's strategy seems clear: to use Ajaria as a power base, work for a nationwide role that he is ready to trade for government acquiescence of his total control over Ajaria. Another example is his suggestion, made in September 1998, that Javakheti should be made a part of the Ajarian republic in order to solve the minority problems there. Much like the case with his national political role, Abashidze makes it clear to the central government that he desires only to control Ajaria, but that he has capacity to create trouble for Shevardnadze's government should the center try to infringe on his powers in Ajaria. As will be seen below, he is using the presence of a Russian military base as the ultimate safeguard for Ajaria's autonomy. As should be clear from the above, there is nothing radical in Abashidze's policies. As Charles H. Fairbanks summarizes the Ajarian situation:

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<sup>115</sup> See for example the official homepage of the Republic of Ajaria, at <http://www.adjara-ar.org/eng/head.shtml.htm>. It adds that "Aslan Abashidze possesses an acute sense of justice, political foresight, courage, nobility, persistence, and aristocratic bearing. Abashidze impresses an interlocutor with the sharpness of mind, with extremely logical thinking. As he is always sure of being right, he agrees to meet his opponent halfway very rarely but he never neglects the opinion of the latter. He has immense creative energy and remarkable efficiency"

The local boss, Aslan Abashidze, has never raised any question of secession from Georgia. He wants simply to do what he wants and to enjoy the profits of vacation hotels, tropical products, and smuggling across the border with Turkey. There seems to be nothing public in Abashidze's motives; he is operating essentially like a small businessman. The Russian garrison on the border, whose main occupation seems to be smuggling, gives Abashidze the protection to defy the central Georgian government; the Moscow government approves this arrangement because it limits Georgian independence from Russia.<sup>116</sup>

That is not to say that leadership has not been absent in Ajaria: Quite to the contrary, the pragmatic and business-minded attitude of Abashidze, in opposition to the nationalist and adventurist policies of the Abkhazian, Ossetian, and Gamsakhurdia leaderships, contributed to the stability and peace that has prevailed in Ajaria. Though this came at the price of many political rights and freedoms, most Georgians, burdened by war and economic decay, would probably gladly make that trade, as evidenced by Abashidze's limited though significant nation-wide appeal.

### 7.5.9. External Support

Abashidze's political astuteness is proven not only by his reading of the internal Georgian situation and his ability to maximize Ajarian autonomy, but also by his ability to forge external links that have included Turkish business interests, the Russian military, and even relatives of the Clinton administration White House.

The latter example may be the geopolitically least important, but the most spectacular.<sup>117</sup> Abashidze in 1999 managed to attract the brothers of First Lady Hillary Clinton, Tony and Hugh Rodham, to invest in a \$118 million project to export hazelnuts from Ajaria to the west. As Abashidze grew a closer personal relationship to the Rodham brothers (Tony Rodham even became the godfather of his grandson), he soon turned the links to the White House to his advantage, making statements in Georgian politics to the effect that he enjoyed the backing of the Clinton Administration in the forthcoming elections – at a time when relations between Batumi and Tbilisi were sour. As the White House stepped in to rein in the Rodhams, the deal seems to have collapsed.

The crucial geographic location of Ajaria quickly became a source of economic input into the Ajarian economy. In fact, most land trade from Turkey to Georgia, Azerbaijan, parts of Russia and even to Armenia passes through the Sarpi border crossing only a few miles from Batumi, and border trade is estimated to have a turnover of close to a hundred

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<sup>116</sup> Charles H. Fairbanks, Jr., "Party, Ideology and the Public World in the Former Soviet Space," in Arthur M. Meltzer, Jerry Einberger, and M. Richard Zinman, eds., *Politics at the End of the Century* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 252.

<sup>117</sup> Viveca Novak and Jay Branegan, 'Are Hillary's Brothers Driving Off Course?', *Time*, 1 November 2001; David Ignatius, 'Rambling Rodhams', *The Washington Post*, 16 September 1999; David Ignatius, 'The Rodhams: Back in Georgia', *The Washington Post*, 29 December 1999.

million dollars a month.<sup>118</sup> The historical links with Turkey have also given Ajaria a specific place in Turkish policy; in fact, Ajaria received its autonomy in the early 1920s in accordance with the 1921 Treaty of Kars between the Soviet Union and Republican Turkey. Though Turkey unconditionally supports Georgia's territorial integrity, the Muslim identity of Ajaria and the (by Caucasian standards) relatively recent political links puts it culturally closer to Turkey than most other parts of Georgia, and ensures a level of Turkish attention to any central encroachments on Ajaria. More importantly has been the Russian connection. Abashidze built his power back in 1991-92 on close links with the local Russian military commander, General Gladyshev.<sup>119</sup> In an atmosphere where most Georgian politicians, and certainly the Shevardnadze government, have emphatically opposed the stationing of Russian military bases on Georgian territory, Abashidze has explicitly held that their presence in Ajaria form a guarantee of stability. Russian military commanders have also stated their readiness to fight to defend the people of Ajaria.<sup>120</sup> At the time of the Abkhaz war, Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev after a visit to Sukhumi stopped by in Batumi without informing the government in Tbilisi, met with Abashidze, and publicly stated that Ajaria fell 'within the Russian sphere of influence', and noted that if Shevardnadze wanted to see him, he would have to come to Batumi.<sup>121</sup> This was interpreted in Tbilisi as a thinly veiled threat to support Ajarian separation from Georgia. In 1998, when the 1993 five-year agreement between Tbilisi and Moscow allowing Russian troops to control Georgia's borders with Turkey expired, Abashidze refused to allow Georgian border troops to take control over the Ajarian-Turkish border.<sup>122</sup> He may have feared that income from smuggling, which both the Ajarian leadership and the Russian military seem to profit from, would be challenged if Tbilisi took control of the border crossing. Though in a less critical way than in Javakheti, the removal of the Russian military base in Batumi could spark unrest and difficulties for the Georgian government. It seems reasonably likely that given the Russian-Georgian relations of the early 1990s and the belligerence of the Russian military against Shevardnadze's government, a secessionist leader in Ajaria could have played the Russian card offensively as the Ossetians and Abkhaz did. Yet Abashidze's interests have constantly been primarily economic and pragmatic, rather than nationalistic and idealistic. The achievement of the symbolics of independent statehood never had much appeal to Abashidze, who must also have seen the significant cost in terms of destruction and severed economic linkages incurred on the Abkhaz and South Ossetians in their

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<sup>118</sup> Derluguian, 'A Tale of Two Resorts, p. 283, states a figure of US\$60-70 million in the mid-1990s, and trade has increased considerably since then.

<sup>119</sup> Jonathan Aves, *Georgia: From Chaos to Stability?*, p. 42.

<sup>120</sup> Hin, 'Ajaria: The interest of the Local Potentate...', p. 13.

<sup>121</sup> Fiona Hill and Pamela Jewett, *Back in the USSR*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project, 1994, p. 51.

<sup>122</sup> *Jamestown Monitor*, vol. 4, no. 47, 24 march 1998.

secessionist wars. Abashidze was nevertheless content with using his external links to the Russian militarily defensively, fully aware of the deterrent effect it had on any Georgian government attempts to rein in Ajaria's near-independent status.

#### 7.5.10. The Role of Autonomy

The discussion above, like most analyses of Ajaria's low level of conflict, has stressed the role of Abashidze's non-radical leadership and the inclusive and compatible Georgian and Ajarian identities as major reasons for the low level of conflict between Ajaria and the Georgian government. An interesting factor in the Ajarian case is that it had a low incentive structure for conflict, whereas capabilities were relatively high. A secession of Ajaria from Georgia would have been fully feasible, with the levels of external support and economic viability that Ajaria enjoys. Moreover, the institutions of autonomy presented the institutional structures that could have made it possible for an Ajarian elite to provide leadership in a secessionist struggle. Indeed, Abashidze managed to secure his position as the undisputed leader of Ajaria by taking control of the reins of the institutions of the Ajarian Autonomous Republic. He was somewhat doubtfully appointed Acting Chairman of the Supreme Soviet; from this position, he managed to cement his control over the structures of the autonomy partly with the help of Gamsakhurdia, who declared null and void the votes obtained by the Communist Party in the elections to the Ajarian Supreme Soviet in June-July 1991, on the basis of a ban on the party.<sup>123</sup> This guaranteed a majority support for Abashidze in the legislative body. And whereas Abashidze's relationship with Gamsakhurdia remained cordial, his relationship with Shevardnadze grew increasingly tense after a period of cooperation in the early 1990s. Abashidze even refused to visit Tbilisi between 1995 and 2000, fearing that an attempt on his life would be made. However, Shevardnadze never managed to curtail Abashidze's power in Ajaria. Abashidze reigned supreme in Ajaria, but never asserted Ajaria's independence. Neither was he forced with a strong lobby or intelligentsia-led movements for independence such as existed in South Ossetia (*Ademon Nykhas*), Abkhazia (*Aydgylara*), or even Javakheti (the more radical parts of *Javakhe*). As seen above, autonomous status bred a national intelligentsia in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the absence of such an intelligentsia seems to have played an important role in the avoidance of conflict in Javakheti. Why did Ajaria, in spite of its autonomous status, not develop any visible separatist movements, either at the grassroots or at the elite levels? The close ethnic linkages between Ajaria and Georgia, and the authoritarian rule of Abashidze after 1991 may have played a role. But more important was the anomalous character of Ajaria's autonomy.

As noted above, Ajars were not listed separately in Soviet censuses after 1926. In subsequent censuses, they were listed simply as Georgians. Ajaria was already anomalous by being the only Soviet Autonomous region to be based on religious and not ethnic

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<sup>123</sup> Hin, 'Ajaria: The interest of the Local Potentate...', pp. 11 & 19.

basis.<sup>124</sup> The abolition of the communal category of Ajars meant that Ajaria became the only autonomous territory in the former Soviet Union not to *have* a titular nationality. In the words of Derluguian, Ajaria was a ‘land without a people’: there was an Ajaria, but there were no Ajars.<sup>125</sup> Had the development of Ajaria resembled that of other entities in the Soviet Union, the 70 years of Soviet rule in Ajaria could have strengthened the separate identity of the Ajars. After all, the difference between Kyrgyz and Kazakh (the two share a common culture and language, the former being highlanders and the latter plains dwellers) was at best an academic one before the national delimitation in 1924 – at first the present-day Kazakhs were even called Kyrgyz, and the Kyrgyz were called the Kara-Kyrgyz. After Soviet ethnic engineering had settled in, separate national identities, though far from cohesive, have taken root. But not only was the ethnonym ‘Ajar’ abolished: the religious identity marker of the Ajars being anathema in the Soviet Union, the area was subjected to an active policy of assimilation into a Georgian identity. As Derluguian notes, Georgian Bolsheviks that generally considered the concept of a Muslim Georgian a contradiction in terms were allowed to unleash their atheistic zeal on Ajaria, where there was no talk of ‘the development of nationalities’ but of struggling against the ‘noxious relics of the past’.<sup>126</sup>

As a result, there were never any ethnic quota favoring the appointment of Ajars to positions of power, as in Abkhazia or South Ossetia; there were no philological institutes teaching the Ajar culture and history; and no separate, nationally molded Ajar ethnic elite was ever formed. Since the Ajars were officially Georgian, the autonomy of Ajaria did not resemble the autonomy of South Ossetia or Abkhazia: There was no titular nationality to be favored or protected, and therefore Ajaria was in practice not an ethnic autonomy but a region with a higher degree of administrative self-rule than other parts of Georgia. Hence the breeding ground for ethnic mobilization and secessionist aspirations that was provided by autonomy in Abkhazia and South Ossetia simply did not exist.

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<sup>124</sup> With the exception of the farce-like creation of a Jewish Autonomous Area, Birobidjan, not far from the North Korean border, in which a total Jewish population of 10,166, or 0,56% of the Soviet Union’s Jewish population, lived at the time of the 1979 census.

<sup>125</sup> See Derluguian, ‘A Tale of Two Resorts’, p. 275-76.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

# 8

## Conclusions

The situation in the South Caucasus in the late 1980s contained a number of elements that contributed to the rise of ethnopolitical conflict. First and foremost was the gradual dissolution of the Soviet Union, which already by 1988 clearly carried with it a partial and later total breakdown of central state authority. The decrease in central power brought with it a concomitant rise in demands for increased power at the republican level of the union. In the union republics, and notably in the Caucasus, the parallel decline of the Communist ideology's hegemony created an ideological void that was as important as the political void left by the loss of central power. Moreover, the Soviet Union was an authoritarian state where a legal civil society was absent and where the development of a democratic and tolerant political culture was impeded by state authorities. The state, intolerant of dissent, had for decades relied on violence and repression to achieve its domestic goals – something that undoubtedly shaped the political culture of its citizens, and the ease with which violence was resorted to as a political tool. The void created by the collapse of the intolerant communist ideology was filled by equally intolerant ethnic nationalism. This dual collapse of the state's carrying idea but also of its power in an atmosphere of intolerance makes the Caucasus of the late 1980s highly specific, and arguably highly conflict-prone. Whereas the situation was indeed specific and its peculiarities can explain to a large extent *that* conflict emerged between ethnic groups, the question remains why some 'dyads' of center-minority relations in the South Caucasian republics ended up in conflict with each other while others, actually the majority, did not.

As this study has shown, disentangling the factors that have contributed to ethnopolitical conflict in the South Caucasus and attempting to understand the interaction between these various factors is a delicate matter. Yet on the basis of the findings of chapter five and the deeper case studies of chapter seven, a number of conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, a series of permissive conditions or background factors prepared the ground for conflict in certain cases while their absence impeded the rise of conflict in others. Among these, the extent of cultural differences between groups seem to have played a less than central role in the emergence of conflict. Groups that shared various common elements such as the Georgians and Abkhaz, and Georgians and Ossetians, were cases of conflict. Moreover, Azeris in Georgia and Armenia, though subjected both to radical nationalism and having great cultural differences with the majority population, remained silent. The type of national conceptions that dominated in the region seem to have played an important role. The predominance of ethnic and exclusive conceptions of the nation in Georgia, Abkhazia and Ossetia, and the mutually exclusive conceptions of

the Azeri and Armenian nations did a great deal to prepare the ground for tensions and impede the search for compromise in these areas. The Azerbaijani national conception's inclusive attitude to at least the Muslim peoples on Azerbaijan's territory, if not toward the Armenian population, helps explaining the low and manageable level of tensions between the Azerbaijani state and the Talysh and Lezgin minorities. The level of past conflict, divergent interpretation of a conflict-ridden history, of whitewashing the own group and demonizing the other, also seems to have played a great role. The Caucasus is an area where history is entertained and actively and purposefully inculcated by the ethnic elites in the young generation. In this sense, Mountainous Karabakh and Abkhazia had indeed been areas that saw the highest level of conflict in the pre-Soviet era, and where ethnic tensions, moreover, remained important during the entire Soviet era; this prepared the ground for renewed conflict. But Georgia and Armenia fought a war over Javakheti in 1919, an instance that has not been mythified to a great extent; likewise, Georgia and Azerbaijan disagreed on the status of certain territories along their border, but that hatchet has remained buried in the tumultuous last fifteen years. As far as terrain is concerned, it is a fact that all conflict areas were mountainous areas. However, all but one case in the entire study are mountainous, and the empirical record of the conflicts' development, as seen in chapter seven regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia, provide no conclusive hints to the role of rough terrain in the escalation to war there. In particular, the development of the conflict in Abkhazia, dominated by offensive warfare, seems to cause doubt regarding the connection between terrain and conflict. Another factor, demography, has proven to be a poor explanatory factor of ethnopolitical conflict. The Abkhaz case provides powerful evidence that an ethnic group that is a minority even in the area it inhabits can, if circumstances are right, pose a credible challenge to the authority and integrity of the state. Moreover, a striking element of the conflicts in the Caucasus is the small size of the minorities that fought wars with their central governments. The Armenians of Karabakh, the Abkhaz, and the South Ossetians all had numbers ranging from 65,000 to 120,000 people, whereas the states they challenged had populations of five and eight million, respectively. This unlikely challenge is partly explained by the presence of ethnic kin for all these minorities. They all received state support, as seen below; but they also all had neighboring kin that supported them, and where they found material and political support. Chechens and Circassians in the Abkhaz case, North Ossetia in the South Ossetian case, and Armenians in the case of Mountainous Karabakh all acted as dedicated support bases for their kin across the border. Yet that was not specific to the cases of conflict. In fact, all minorities in the study except the Ajars did have such ethnic kin. Most notably, the Armenians of Georgia and the Lezgins had strong ethnic ties across the border that they occasionally used for political objectives. Finally, the issue of economic viability is unclear. The cases of conflict were not areas that had significant natural resources or an economic incentive to separate; though Karabakh and Abkhazia could survive on their own, there were no economic gains to be made from secession. In any case, the story of ethnopolitical conflict in the

South Caucasus is not one of decisions taken with regard to economic calculations. These conflicts were not about economy but about identity, about ownership of territory, and about fear. Fear on the part of minorities for what remaining within the state would imply, even raising issues of cultural survival, as in Abkhazia; fear among the majorities that minority populations, especially in Georgia's case, would serve as a tool of a foreign power to undermine the security and independence of the state.<sup>1</sup> Summing up the background factors, it seems that the issue of past conflict played a role – but especially through its remembrance and mythification, and that the exclusivity of national conceptions was a significant part of the problem. In other words, the empirical evidence tends to show that issues related to incentives were important, whereas background factors related to capacity played a more minor role.

The factors related to incentives and capacity, if assumed to indicate the conflict potential of a case, provide little assistance in explaining the emergence of conflict in Georgia. In fact, only Ajaria stands out as having a low conflict potential. In particular, Ajaria was the only minority to be included within the Georgian national conception, and had low levels of past conflict, and close to no mythification of whatever past conflict had existed. As such, while Ajaria had some capacity to challenge the government, it scored low on all factors related to incentives to do so. Ajars felt Georgian, were accepted as Georgian, and had little grievances against Georgians. The remaining four cases, however, are more complicated. All of the four (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Javakheti Armenians, and Kvemo Kartli Azeris) have a comparable assortment of background factors. All had various levels of historic conflict with the Georgians; all were excluded from the Georgian national conception; all had ethnic kin abroad; and all except the Azeris of Kvemo Kartli lived in rough terrain. Economic indicators were mixed, as were the salience of cultural differences. The conflict potential of these four cases were then, judging from the background factors, relatively comparable.

How does autonomy relate to this? Autonomy, as discussed at length in chapter one, affects background factors mainly in the way that it promotes the separate ethnic identity of the group. As such, autonomy in Abkhazia and South Ossetia served to promote a separate ethnic consciousness among the Abkhaz and Ossetian population of these two regions, something that could not be done in Ajaria since there were officially no Ajars. Through a separate educational system, the Abkhaz and Ossetians were shielded from Georgian cultural influence. Though few Abkhaz lived in Georgia proper, it is instructive to see the differences between the Ossetians living in South Ossetia and those living in the rest of Georgia. In fact, Ossetians were among the minorities in Georgia proper known to assimilate voluntarily without much difficulty in Georgia. They learnt Georgian, often married Georgians, and many of them increasingly came to see themselves as Georgian, in spite of the exclusive character of the Georgian national conception.

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<sup>1</sup> See Stuart Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, Cornell University Press, 2001.

Anecdotal evidence confirms this, and numerous persons of Ossetian origin reportedly attempted, often successfully, to have their official 'nationality' in their documents changed to identify them as Georgian. Incidentally, the same process occurred among Armenians, especially those that did not live in the compact Armenian settlements in Tbilisi or Javakheti. In South Ossetia, however, the ethnic frontiers seem to have been much more pronounced. The Ossetians there were not at all as willing to give up their Ossetian identity, very much because it was entertained and promoted by the autonomous leadership of South Ossetia.

Autonomy also inherently impedes the development of a civic conception of the nation. A civic nation implies that all citizens, by virtue of being citizens, are members of the national community without regard to differences of language, religion, or other ethnicity markers including color or customs. But if minorities are accorded territorial autonomy, that implies that they are singled out as being different, given a special status. The very existence of such special status discourages the development of overlapping and inclusive identities. The concept of all citizens being equal and members of a civic nation is hardly compatible with the singling out of specific groups on the basis of their ethnicity. The very institution of autonomy in this sense implies a rebuttal of the concept of an inclusive and integrated civic nation. The Georgian national conception was already predominantly ethnic; and in this sense, the institution of autonomy was an obstacle to the development of the Georgian national conception in a civic direction.

While background factors do not assist significantly in explaining the emergence of conflict, the analysis of catalyzing factors, however, changes the picture somewhat. Radical leadership was present in three of these four cases. In fact, with the exception of the Kvemo Kartli Azeris, the remaining three cases saw a very similar growth of a nationalist movement that claimed to represent the group and voice its grievances. Javakhk, Ademon Nykhas, and Aydgylara all emerged in 1988, at the time that the Georgian national movement gained strength. Among Azeris, various cultural groups did spring up, but none was able to claim a leading role, and no strong nationalist grouping ever emerged that claimed to represent the ethnic group. The responses of the three nationalist movements to the increased strength of the Georgian nationalist movement were also very similar. Aydgylara and Ademon Nykhas began campaigning for stronger links to the rest of the Soviet Union, demanded higher status for their autonomies and eventually demanded independence and attachment to the Russian Federation. Javakhk demanded the institution of an autonomous region for Javakheti, and a strong current existed in the organization for attachment to Armenia. Likewise, during the Gamsakhurdia government's rule in Tbilisi, all three movements sought to minimize the Georgian government's authority in their respective regions and to maximize their own control.

Hence a dissatisfied and disgruntled elite existed in all three areas that pursued centrifugal tendencies. The main difference between the Javakheti case on the one hand,

and the South Ossetian and Abkhaz cases on the other, was the institutional base and political skill of the leadership. These two factors are intimately tied to the existence of autonomy in Abkhazia and South Ossetia but its absence in Javakheti. The comparison between South Ossetia and Javakheti is particularly illustrating. These two areas scored equal on all factors save autonomy. Both had low-to-middle cultural differences with Georgians, were excluded from the reigning national conception, had comparable levels of past conflict that lacked substantial mythification, both were poor areas in very rough terrain, both dominated their respective regions demographically, and had ethnic kin across the border with which they had close ties. If anything, the Armenian demographic dominance of Javakheti was considerably larger than that of Ossetians over South Ossetia. Yet the response of these two minority groups to the growth of official Georgian nationalism were very different. Both were apprehensive of the government's attempts to strengthen the supremacy of the Georgian language over Georgia's entire territory. Yet Javakheti Armenians had little possibility to resist this, had no instruments either to prevent it or to oppose it. South Ossetia did: the institutions of its autonomous region, and most notably its parliament. As the South Ossetian parliament began waging a war of laws with Tbilisi, the conflict escalated; the lack of such instruments in Javakheti made it more difficult for the Armenians there to challenge the central authorities' policies.

Similarly, the institution of autonomy provided South Ossetia with an institutionalized leadership, in control over a bureaucratic institution with clear decision-making mechanisms and a strong chain of command. The outward unity of the South Ossetian leadership shows to a considerable level of discipline and conformity with authority. This is in stark contrast to the wobbling, indecisive, and inconsistent policies of Javakheti, and to the apparent divisions within the organization. Javakheti had no bureaucratic basis, was a loose association of sub-groups with divergent interests, and lacked a chain of command that ensured that the leadership's policies were followed or implemented. In this sense, autonomy played an important role in the emergence of a leadership that was not only radical but also cohesive and effective in taking decisions and implementing them. The issue of political experience is also important: Ossetian and Abkhaz leaders were part of the Soviet Nomenklatura, by virtue of their positions in the Soviet bureaucracy. They had political training and experience – in fact, they were mid-to-high level functionaries in the Soviet system. Similarly, the founders of Aydgylara and Ademon Nykhas were part of the official Soviet intelligentsia. Because Javakheti lacked autonomy, Javakheti had neither intelligentsia nor Nomenklatura. It was composed of officials in the Akhalkalaki city council, school teachers, minor businessmen, collective farm directors, etc. The difference in the institutional basis and the political capital in the nationalist movements was hence of crucial importance in the escalation of conflict.

Concerning radical leadership, it is also necessary to account for the aggressive attitude of the Georgian nationalist movement toward minorities. As chapter seven showed, the Georgian nationalist forces targeted all minorities in different ways. However, the

pressures exerted seem to have been particularly strong on two minorities: the Azeris and the South Ossetians. These minorities bore the brunt of the Georgian nationalist fervor to a large extent because of their geographic closeness to Tbilisi. Abkhazia and Ajaria are both far away from Tbilisi in Western Georgia, whereas Javakheti is very inaccessible and geographically isolated from Tbilisi though it is not as far away. The conflict with South Ossetia has gained much more attention than the situation in Kvemo Kartli, where troubles actually preceded the escalation in South Ossetia. As has been seen in chapter six, inter-ethnic clashes erupted in South Ossetia in the summer of 1989, and the 'March on Tskhinvali' organized by the Georgian nationalists in Fall 1989 (See page 158) was a significant factor in the escalation of tensions. Yet a similar situation was taking place only a few hundred kilometers to the South. The Georgian nationalist campaign in Kvemo Kartli, and then especially in the Bolnisi area, had all intentions to effectuate an ethnic cleansing of the 'Tatar' population. The gravity of the conditions are best testified to by the emigration of several hundred families from the region. This was not dissimilar from the cleansings of Azeris that had taken place in Armenia from late 1987, which was one of the first instances of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, though what happened in Armenia was immensely more systematic and on a much larger scale.

Ossetians and Azeris were subjected to very similar nationalist campaigns. Yet in South Ossetia, a nationalist response grew, which contributed to the escalation of the conflict to organized violence and eventually war. But in Kvemo Kartli, the Azeri population that did not leave Georgia appealed to the brotherhood of Georgians and Azeris or simply remained silent. In spite of an environment heavily conducive to ethnic mobilization, given the events in Ossetia, Abkhazia, the conflict in Mountainous Karabakh, etc., such a process did not take place. The Azeris were a rural, peasant population, and as such had little political or social organization; they may even have desired to remain calm for the sake of the conflict in Mountainous Karabakh; but the fact remains that the Azeris were subjected to heavy pressures and did not answer the challenge of the Georgian nationalists. No nationalist movement either in Kvemo Kartli or in Azerbaijan took up the cause of the Azeris in Georgia. This very different development as compared to South Ossetia can be related mainly to two factors, both of which were related to the lack of autonomy in Kvemo Kartli. Firstly, lack of autonomy meant a lack of leadership. In South Ossetia, as viewed above, the local Ossetians had both a Nomenklatura and a local intelligentsia that actively fanned the flames of ethnic nationalism. But in Kvemo Kartli, since there was no autonomy, there was no Nomenklatura; and there was no institute of history or pedagogical institute from which the typical Caucasian nationalist like Alan Chochiev, Vladislav Ardzinba, or even the more moderate Abulfaz Elchibey could emerge. Secondly, the Azeris lacked institutions. Where the Ossetians, in spite of their small numbers, controlled the institutions and media outlets of the South Ossetian autonomous region, the Azeris of Kvemo Kartli in spite of being several times larger did not have the capacity to demand a raise of status, condemn the Georgian nationalists, or

appeal to help from Moscow or Azerbaijan – because they lacked a parliament. Leadership and institutions were lacking – both of which were provided by autonomy in the South Ossetian case.

A major finding of this study has been the role of external support for the minorities that waged secessionist battles in the South Caucasus. Whether in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or Mountainous Karabakh, the role of external forces, both private in the form of volunteers from the North Caucasus or Armenia, or state support from Russia and Armenia, were crucial in the war efforts. The issue, however, is more complicated than meets the eye at first sight: external support and external encouragement are potentially two different things. In the case of Mountainous Karabakh, there is little doubt that the two were one and the same. The Karabakh movement was in power in Armenia from late 1990, had virtually come to power on one issue – the annexation of Karabakh to Armenia. That the Karabakh authorities could expect support from Armenia and received encouragement from Yerevan is beyond doubt. The situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is less blatantly obvious. South Ossetia is known to have been significantly more nationalistic than North Ossetia; if any Ossetian nationalist leadership existed, that was in the South and not in the North. That doesn't mean that the North was not a very valuable asset for the Ossetian nationalists in South Ossetia; what it does mean is that encouragement at an early stage was probably not a cause of the conflict. In Abkhazia, the Confederation of Mountain Peoples played a less circumspect role. It had designated Sukhumi as its capital in 1989, and its very creation was to a large extent a display of support for Abkhazia on the part of the Circassian and other North Caucasian peoples. The Confederation and its members can be said to have played a role in encouraging Abkhaz secessionism. But in both cases, Moscow's role was significantly more powerful. When Georgia moved toward secession from the Soviet Union, it was perfectly feasible both for Moscow and for the Abkhaz and South Ossetian authorities to envisage that these two regions would remain part of the Soviet Union. More blatantly put, Moscow at numerous occasions made it clear to Georgia that should it seek secession from the USSR, it would have problems with its autonomous regions – an understatement, as it happened. There is little doubt that Moscow was consistently entertaining the separatist ambitions of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian elites in the hope of exerting leverage on Georgia. Until the end of 1991, this policy was employed to prevent Georgia from seceding; after independence, it was employed ever more vigorously to keep Georgia within the Russian sphere of influence.

With regard to Javakheti, Armenia's policies of keeping Javakheti calm and influencing the Javakheti Armenians toward compromise have been mentioned. Comparing this situation with Abkhazia, however, it is interesting to note that the brunt of active external support for Abkhazia came after it had declared independence in July 1992, when Kitovani's paramilitary forces invaded Abkhazia. Javakheti at least one occasion voted on secession from Georgia, but the secessionists could not muster enough votes among the

leadership of the organization. Supposing that Javakhk had declared the independence of Javakheti and Kitovani, or some Georgian paramilitary leader, had launched a similar attack on Javakheti to the one he launched in August 1992 on Abkhazia, it is very doubtful whether the Armenian would have remained neutral. Given the nationalist sentiment in Armenia at the time, and the dominance of nationalist forces in the country's politics, Armenia would have been likely to come to the rescue of its ethnic kin in Javakheti. The point here is to distinguish between encouragement before the act of secession, and actual direct support after that act has already been undertaken. What lacked in the case of Javakheti was not the will of Armenia to support Javakheti in an actual situation of need; that support would almost certainly have been forthcoming at some level. What was missing was an encouragement to move toward secession that was completely natural given Armenia's predicament. Had an actual spark been ignited in Javakheti, however, the Armenian policy could have been a lot different. But the spark never came, because Javakhk was unable to rise above its internal divisions and develop into the cohesive nationalist movement that its founders and leaders intended it to be, or to rally enough support among the population. Javakhk lacked institutions to legitimize its leadership; it lacked outlets to influence the people; and it lacked a bureaucratic organization that provided it with a distinct chain of command and a decision-making mechanism.

The Javakhk leaders also lacked the contacts in the Soviet military and party hierarchies that the leaders of the South Ossetian and Abkhazian autonomous regions had. By virtue of their autonomous status, Abkhazia and South Ossetia also had their separate party organizations, which did not exist in Javakheti or Kvemo Kartli. Being party functionaries, the officials in the autonomies had a wide range of direct interaction with union-level authorities and bureaucracy, despite their formal belonging to the Georgian republic. Ardzinba's case is the most obvious example of how an official from an autonomous region could make use of his contacts in the power ministries in Moscow to attract support for his region's secessionist ambitions. The Armenians and Azeris in Georgia lacked such conditions, and therefore had no direct link to Moscow.

Autonomy is hence intimately related to both the leadership and external support factors. In fact, the large role that autonomy played in the conflicts in the South Caucasus is very much related to the way autonomy interacts with a number of other explanatory factors in this study. Autonomy, at the basis, affects both group incentives and capacity to challenge the government. Though its impact on group identity and group cohesion is significant and an important permissive condition for conflict, autonomy's impact on group capacity and its interaction with leadership and external support were even more important in transforming these regions from areas of ethnic tension to areas of conflict. In particular, the way in which autonomy positively influences leadership cohesion and provides a radical leadership with a ready-made toolbox for ethnic mobilization is important. With its decision-making structure, its executive and legislative institutions, its

defined borders, its financial resources, and its control over media outlets, an autonomous structure is a coveted target for ethnic entrepreneurs. In both the cases of South Ossetia and Mountainous Karabakh, the nationalist forces emerged outside the official *Nomenklatura*, in groups belonging to the local intelligentsia that, of course, had close links with the *Nomenklatura*. These nationalist groups at first met with resistance from the official leadership of the autonomies, which were wary of challenging the central Soviet authorities, that enforced the status quo. The nationalist forces then concentrated their energy on acquiring control over the autonomous institutions, in fact managing to 'convert' many officials to their cause, and eventually replacing those that did not. Once in control of the autonomous structures, the nationalists were able to put the entire autonomous machinery to work to promote their secessionist agenda.

This study has aspired to show how the institution of autonomy contributed significantly to the emergence of ethnopolitical conflict in the South Caucasus. Yet having established this linkage raises as many questions as it answers. Two main questions are of particular urgency: first, what are the implications of the results of this study for autonomous regions in areas that do not form part of the former Soviet Union? In other words, what is the validity of this study for a wider sample of cases? And secondly, if autonomy is indeed a factor that contributes to conflict, what practical policy implications does this conclusion carry?

The answer to the first question, whether the findings of this study would be replicated in other parts of the world, cannot be securely found without additional research into the specific cases of autonomous regions across the globe. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the Soviet experience, and in particular the Caucasian experience, are unique in many ways. In few other parts of the world will one find autonomous minorities within republics that are in turn part of a larger, federal entity. That factor is relevant especially in terms of the availability of external support; for most autonomous minorities, there is no 'Moscow' to which they could turn for help against their republican leadership. Likewise, few ethnic groups will find themselves in multiethnic states that have the paradoxical features of being both governed by a communist ideology and having a highly primordial understanding of ethnicity.

In spite of these and other peculiarities of the Soviet Caucasus, however, there are important elements of the role of autonomy there that are likely to operate in the same manner under different political and social conditions. The role that autonomous institutions play in promoting the separate identity of the autonomous ethnic group will almost invariably be a feature of autonomy; in fact, that is precisely why autonomy is demanded and granted. Secondly, the ready-made borders and symbols of the autonomy are also intrinsic to its territorial nature, and serves both to mentally and physically determine the area that is 'ours' versus the area that is 'theirs', hence increasing separation but also presenting a ready-made delimitation for a secessionist leader. Even more importantly, the role of autonomous institutions as a toolbox for ethnic entrepreneurs is

also intrinsic to autonomous regions. Most autonomous regions do have, and will have, quasi-state institutions that provide a bureaucratic machine, executive and legislative powers, means to influence the population, and not least a certain popular legitimacy that are extremely valuable assets for a nationalist leader that wishes to pursue a course of separation.

That said, the evidence in this study also has the important context of a weakening state. Hence what can be derived from this study is that autonomous institutions are likely to play such a role in case the central institutions of a state weaken either due to internal political or economic problems, as in the case of the Soviet Union or, due to external factors that could include a global or regional economic crisis, or a conflict with a foreign power. Under such conditions of flux and change, autonomous regions could very well pose great challenges to the central authorities in multinational states.

Assuming that autonomy does act as a catalyst of conflict under given circumstances, what implication does this finding carry? When confronted with the results of this study, one disheartened practitioner of diplomacy raised the obvious question: if autonomy, bearer of much hope for the management and resolution of ethnopolitical conflicts, is not actually a solution but is rather inherently problematic, what is the way to manage ethnic tensions? The answer does not lie in any general and easily applicable model, and that may itself be one of the most important consequences of realizing the pitfalls of autonomy. Where there has been a tendency to view solutions linking ethnicity and territory, especially territorial autonomy, in one form or another as cure-all prescriptions, this study points to the merits of devising political structures that cut across ethnic and other communal divisions, encourage civic identities, but discourage the use of ethnicity in the political sphere. This study has attempted to show that the advocacy of resolving or preventing ethnic conflict through solutions based on the devolution of power along ethnic lines is at best a questionable and at worst a disastrous enterprise. The little publicized pitfalls of ethnoterritoriality hence need to be kept in mind while formulating policies in and toward multiethnic societies. That does not mean that all autonomy solutions are necessarily destined to collapse or to lead to war. It does mean that whenever the ethnicization of territory can be avoided, it should be avoided.

In particular, the difference between pre-conflict and post-conflict situations is important here. In a post-conflict situation where identities have already been polarized; where the connection between territory and ethnicity are already established, it will be extremely difficult to avoid territorial solutions. Hence to assume that Abkhazia could accept to return to Georgian rule in a new Georgia without internal boundaries and a newly created, democratic and all-encompassing civic state is absurd. However, in areas that have not seen ethnic conflict, the connection between territory and ethnicity is to be avoided if at all possible. In the Caucasus, this study would suggest that granting minorities territorial self-rule, as has been suggested, would not ensure peace in the region – if the findings of this study are of any value, there is reason to think that the creation of

new autonomies would risk destabilize the Caucasus further and impede the building of strong civic and democratic states there.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, increasingly powerful forces are advocating that states should be designed and structured according to political systems that are based on the primordial ethnic identities of its citizens. Creating systems that encourage the formulation of politics on the basis of ethnicity can hardly be equated with progress in a globalized world. Instead of creating systems that resemble a 'museum of peoples' and promoting the salience of ethnicity and ascribed identities in socio-economic and political life, the international community is better advised to devise ways in which to downplay the role of ethnicity and encourage cross-cutting identities. This should in no way excuse the suppression of cultural rights of any people; yet it should not seek to institutionalize separateness. Ethnicity and nationality are not primordial, unchangeable identities but are very much flexible and adaptable. Devising policies that lock such identities into place and seek to preserve them as a value *per se* is unlikely to bring about a world of understanding and cooperation.



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