Multinationality, Regions and State-Building: The Failed Transition in Georgia

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Multinationality, Regional Institutions, State-Building, and the Failed Transition in Georgia

MONICA DUFFY TOFT

This essay examines Georgia’s stalled transition to democracy following the collapse of the Soviet Union. I argue that Georgia’s failure to build a stable and unified state following its independence cannot be properly understood without considering the impact of regional institutions inherited from the Soviet Union. The dynamic process of independence turned Georgia’s formally functional but largely moribund regional institutions into reactive instruments of fearful ethnic minorities and led to conflict.

Ironically, the reactive political mobilization within some of Georgia’s regions was stoked by fear and resentment of Russian neo-imperialism within the central ruling elite in Georgia. Georgia responded to Russian hegemonic leadership of the ‘Commonwealth of Independent States’ with a form of nationalistic chauvinism of its own, which though defensive and integrative in its intent, proved threatening to national minorities within Georgia and disintegrative in its consequences. Abkhaz nationalists, for example, countered Georgian chauvinism with their own and threatened to secede, thus weakening the territorial integrity of Georgia. Ajars accepted that Ajaria belonged within the Georgian homeland, and rather than independence, Ajaria’s primary concern was the maintenance and enhancement of its privileged regional position vis-à-vis the centre. A third group threatened by Georgian nationalism was the Ossetians, whose autonomous administrative status inherited from the Soviet era was threatened by dissolution from Tbilisi. Like the Abkhaz, the Ossetians felt threatened by the Georgian nationalizing state and sought to preserve their autonomy by separation. While Abkhazia and South Ossetia were largely conflicts over national autonomy, Ajaria was almost exclusively a conflict over administrative and economic autonomy. In the end, the combination of the shock of independence, combined with long simmering nationalist resentments and a large, powerful, imperialist neighbour, made it impossible for Georgia to establish stable institutions capable of moving it towards its goal of a strong, multinational and democratic state.

This essay proceeds in four parts. In the first part I present a brief theoretical discussion of ‘stateness’, a variable considered ‘seriously
under-analyzed' by Linz and Stepan, yet crucial to understanding transitions (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Stateness refers to the relationship between nation-building, state-building and democratization. Next there is an overview of four key national groups in Georgia – Georgians, Abkhaz, Ajars and Ossetians – in relation to the territory of Georgia. At the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union there were three autonomous entities in Georgia: the South Ossetia Autonomous Oblast, the Ajarian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.1 The third part of the essay examines Abkhazia, Ajaria and Ossetia and how each region reacted to the nation-building and state-building efforts in the capital as Georgia sought independence from Moscow, largely from 1989 to 1994. The fourth part shows how national rivalry and Russian interference intensified the stateness problem, and how this in turn hampered a democratic transition in Georgia. The contribution concludes that understanding this transition requires us to trace the links between nationalism, regional institutions, state building, and finally, transition to democracy.

As elucidated by Linz and Stepan, the stateness problem relates how a polity’s structure and identity affects its transition to democracy. When there is congruence between the identity of the nation and the borders of the state, then democratization and consolidation remain a distinct possibility:2 ‘This congruence empirically eliminates most stateness problems and thus should be considered supportive conditions for democratic consolidation.’3 If congruence between a nation and the borders of a state is lacking however, then the democratic transition will be severely hampered.4 Predicted difficulties arise because different nations within the borders of an emerging state are unlikely to accept the nationalist ideal and vision for the state as espoused by leaders of another nation. The state will be seen as illegitimate by a portion of the population. As a system of government that is premised on the consent of the governed, democracy and institution-building will remain contested and elusive.

In democratic transitions, emerging states need to legitimate authority among the governed. This process of legitimization often entails merging of a national conception of who should belong – who should be a full citizen – with the trappings of the state. This national conception hinges on particular characteristics, includes some and excludes others. Often the national conception includes a national majority, but it may not.5 Those who find themselves outside the dominant conception are likely to characterize the emerging nation-state as non-representative and illegitimate. National minorities then face the question of whether to voice their concerns and/or choose to exit and form their own states.
The decision to voice or exit is not made in isolation. It is made in the context of a contest over who the state should properly govern. This contest usually involves give and take whereby voicing of fears of discrimination might be countered by reassurances that rights and privileges will be protected, regardless of national character. In these instances we should expect the national group not to pursue exit from the state. If, however, fears are not soothed through accommodative rhetoric and policies on the part of the nationalizing state, then voice might be abandoned in favour of exit. If the national group fears survival of its language, culture or religion, then it might perceive independence as the sole option to preserve identity. This is especially true if the state committed crimes against national groups.

In the next section we examine this voice-exit option among the Abkhaz, Ajars and Ossetians in the context of the nationalizing state of Georgia (Brubaker, 1996). The Ajars did not see themselves as ethnically distinct from the dominant Georgians, and as such, the conflict here was regional as opposed to ethnic. Once this was understood by both sides, a solution to this conflict based on coexistence within Georgia became relatively straightforward. Challenges to state authority persisted, but these challenges were never a hindrance to state-building because they were formulated as claims to administrative and economic rather than political autonomy. The Abkhaz and South Ossetians, by contrast, feared what they saw as a Georgian nationalizing state. For these ethno-regions, exit – even if it meant joining another state – became the preferred option.

REGIONALISM AND ETHNICITY IN GEORGIA

The first time Georgians had complete political control over their historic homeland was from 1918–21. Prior to the Bolshevik revolution ethnic Armenian businessmen dominated the urban environment, and along with ethnic Russians, occupied the most important posts in government. Independence marked an opportunity for ethnic Georgians to gain prominence (Suny, 1980: 207). Statehood, however, was short-lived: in 1921 Bolshevik troops invaded. Georgia became a Soviet Socialist Republic, first as part of the Republic of Transcaucasia, along with Armenia and Azerbaijan, then in 1936 it became a separate Union Republic. This consolidation was not welcome because it represented a threat to Georgian national identity as well as Russian domination (Pipes, 1997: 266–93).

Georgian national identity thus developed as national self-protection against feared domination of a Russian ‘higher’ culture and its potential for russification. As the system evolved, however, the titular nationalities,
including Georgians, developed their own versions of national chauvinism. Within Georgia most national minorities perceived Georgia as a protected area of privilege for Georgians (Pipes, 1997: 290). Georgians received top political posts in the Republic, the largest subsidies for cultural projects, and access to economic networks of illegal operations. Close kinship ties, combined with the dominance of a distinctly Georgian caste within the republic’s political elite, ‘reinforced the exclusionary character of politics in the republic, the sense of superiority of the titular nationality and inferiority of the non-Georgians’ (Suny, 1994: 318). The following three sections introduce the important geographical, demographic and historical context of the groups and regions which disrupted Georgian stateness, and as a result, Georgia’s democratic transition.

Georgia and the Georgians

Due to its geostrategic location at the heart of the Caucasus, Georgia has been the site of competition of many empires seeking hegemony in the region. Conquered successively by the Persians, Byzantines, Arabs, Mongols and Ottomans, Georgia accepted Russian imperial domination in 1801. During the Soviet period, Georgia was a Union Republic and a federation. It contained three political-administrative subjects: two Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs) – Abkhazia and Ajaria – and one Autonomous Oblast’ – South Ossetia. The ASSRs were the most politically developed of the administrative entities due to the existence of republican legislatures and executive branches. Designed to give recognition to smaller ethnic groups, the Autonomous Oblasts (and Okrugs) were placed under the jurisdiction of either provinces or territories. Events in Georgia from 1990 mirrored those in other republics and regions that inherited autonomized structures from the Soviet era. Not only did Georgia, as a Union Republic, seek to leave the USSR, but its ASSRs, including Abkhazia and Ajaria, took advantage of the legal pretexts provided by Gorbachev to assert greater autonomy, and even secession in the case of the former, through the ‘All-Union Law on the Demarcation of Powers Between the USSR and Members of the Federation’ passed by the USSR Supreme Soviet in April 1990.

Georgians represent an ancient Christian nation living in the southern part of the Caucasus. Ethnically they are part of the Kartvelian people, and call their land Sakartvelo and themselves Kartveli. Three groups make up the largest proportion of the Kartvelian group: Georgians (85%), Mingrelians (10%) and Svans (1%). Each group speaks a different language within the South Caucasian (Kartvelian) language group. Each language is quite distinct, and Georgian is the only written language in this
group (Comrie, 1981: 197). The Georgians, Mingrelians and Svans are related ethnically. What has distinguished them since the eighth century is language. The Georgian language is one of the oldest in the region: the script has been traced back to at least the fourth century. The Georgians were united with Russians in Christianity (albeit under the Georgian Orthodox Church), so the primary characteristic that separated them from the Russians was language; and it was language that determined social, political and economic mobility (Suny, 1994: 128).

With the 1926 census, the Mingrelians and Svans had their own census grouping, but thereafter all three linguistic groupings were classified under the broader ethnic category of ‘Georgian’. Nonetheless, within Georgia there existed strong sub-ethnic or regional identities, including Ajarian, Imeretian, Kakhetian, Mingrelian and Svan. Because the Mingrelians, for example, speak a different language and the Ajars adhere to Islam, the distinction between these groups and the ethnic Georgians is more pronounced. The status of national minority is not conferred on these regional groupings, however, as each is seen as part of the larger Georgian national majority.

Well over 90% of all Georgians worldwide live in Georgia proper, and in 1989 Georgians constituted approximately 70% of Georgia’s republican total population of 5.4 million. Given that almost all Georgians reside in what they see as their homeland, it is not surprising that Georgians have the highest levels of language retention. Over 98% of all Georgians consider Georgian to be their native language, while only a third claim Russian as a second language. These data suggest a nation with close and continued affinity to its homeland and language.

**Ajaria and the Ajars**

The region known as Ajaria is located in the south-western part of Georgia. Its western border is the coastline of the Black Sea, to the south is Turkey, and to the east and north lies the rest of Georgia proper. The jurisdiction of Ajaria passed from the Ottoman to the Russian Empire to Turkey to Georgia, then finally to the Soviet Union. Ajaria’s importance as a region can be traced to the latter part of the nineteenth century when Russia developed the capital Batumi, which became the third largest city in the province of Transcaucasia. As an important strategic and economic port and industrial centre, Batumi provided international rail and sea access, and oil pipelines were later constructed to Baku (Akiner, 1986: 243). In 1922 Ajaria became an ASSR subordinate to the Republic of Transcaucasia. In 1936 it was subordinated to Georgia, when Georgia achieved full Union Republic status separate from Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Ajarian ASSR was an anomalous entity of the USSR.
Whereas most of the autonomous entities were established on the basis of language or nationality, Ajaria was afforded autonomous status on the basis of religion.12

As mentioned above, the Ajars of Georgia were not considered a national minority for most of the Soviet period. Rather Ajars are considered to be ethnic Georgians, although they profess Islam as their faith. Conversion to Islam occurred during Ottoman rule from the sixteenth to the late nineteenth century. Ajars remain committed to Islam and there are few interfaith – Islamic–Christian – marriages (Bennigsen and Wimbush, 1986: 208). In the 1926 census, the Ajars were provided with their own national category, which distinguished them from the Georgians. This category was dissolved for the 1939 census, despite the fact that some continued to identify themselves as distinct from Georgians more broadly.13 During this early Soviet period, Islam in Ajaria was severely repressed with mosques and religious schools closed and Islamic names georgianized. Derlugian called it ‘a time of calamitous ethnic homogenization’ that, for the most part, seemed to have succeeded (Derlugian, 1995: 33–5). As a consequence of the georgianization policies most Ajars were assimilated and came to recognize themselves as Georgians.

Because the census category for Ajars ended in 1926, it is difficult to estimate the number of Ajars. The 1989 census indicates that the Ajar Republic contained a total population of 381,000. Of this population, ‘Georgians’ constituted 317,000. The number of Ajars, or Muslim Georgians, in this last figure has been estimated to be around 130,000–160,000, or 34–42% of the regional population (Bennigsen and Wimbush, 1986: 208). Consistent with the non-migratory patterns of other Georgians, the total number of Ajars living outside Ajaria is very small.14 In terms of national histories the Ajar–Georgian relationship is complicated because most Ajars today see themselves as Georgian. Georgians, in contrast, are reluctant to accept Ajars as belonging to the wider ‘Georgian’ identity due to religious differences. For most Georgians, Georgian means being Christian. The Ajars are Muslim and are, therefore, not considered ‘real’ Georgians.

Abkhazia and the Abkhaz

Abkhazia is located between the greater Caucasus mountain range and the shore of the Black Sea. It is bounded by the Psou River in the north-west and the Inguri River in the south-east. It is located in the north-west corner of Georgia, with the regions of Svanetia and Mingrelia to the east and south-east, respectively; and it shares its northern border with Russia. Authority over Abkhazia was won by the Russian Empire in its conquest
of the Caucasus which led to the decimation of the Abkhaz population. Nonetheless during the Bolshevik revolution, the Abkhaz managed to gain status as a Soviet Republic, a founding member of the Union, on an equal footing to Georgia – a status codified in Abkhazia’s Constitution of 1925. Abkhazia’s separate but equal administrative status was annulled in 1936 when Abkhazia was subordinated to Georgia as an ASSR. Abkhazia’s main economic and material contribution to the Georgian economy was in the tourism industry and agriculture. Its location along the Black Sea and corresponding tropical climate made it one of the most visited tourist areas during the Soviet era. Agricultural production consisted primarily of citrus, tobacco, tea and wine. The port of Sukhumi was also an important transit point for the international shipment of goods, and the railway that connected Georgia to Russia in the north traversed Abkhazia.

Throughout their shared history Georgians and Abkhaz have contested each other’s claim to whose ancestors constitute Abkhazia’s original inhabitants. During the 1950s, 1960s, and then again in the 1980s, scholarly debates among Georgian historians challenged Abkhaz claims of being indigenous to the territory, arguing that Abkhaz were ‘recent’ settlers who had displaced Georgians. For their part, Abkhaz scholars regard Georgians as the ‘newly-arrived, non-native population of Abkhazia’, and Abkhaz intellectuals, academics and politicians have attempted to prove the primordial history of the Abkhaz in this region.

Contrary to Ajars, Abkhaz are classified as a national minority in Georgia. They are recognized as ethnically and linguistically distinct from Georgians. According to the 1989 census, the total population of the Republic of Abkhazia was 525,000. Abkhaz totalled about 93,000, constituting 18% of the Abkhaz republic population, compared with the Georgians who constituted 46%. Whereas the Abkhaz population increased 9.2% between 1979 and 1989, Georgians increased by 13.6% in the same period. Abkhaz were a mere 2% of the total population of Georgia.

It was in the seventeenth and eighteenth century that some Abkhaz and Gurians (whose descendants are the Ajars) converted to Islam. After the suppression of two rebellions against imperial Russia in 1866 and 1877, large portions – half of all Abkhaz, and all the Muslims – of the Abkhaz population were exiled or left for the Ottoman empire. As a result there are more Abkhaz living in Turkey and other parts of the Middle East, 100,000–150,000, than in Abkhazia proper. Both Christianity and Islam are thus present among the Abkhaz, with neither commanding strict adherence.

The Abkhaz speak a different language than Georgians. Abkhaz is part of the North-West Caucasian branch, and had the status of a literary
language in the Soviet Union (resulting in the publication of books, journals and a newspaper) and is written in the Cyrillic script. As the Soviet regime rationalized the multitude of languages, Abkhaz was scripted into Latin. This changed after the subordination of the republic to Georgia, and from 1938 Abkhaz was scripted in Georgian. A ‘rapid process of “georgianization”’ followed, with Georgian replacing Abkhazian as the only language of Abkhazia (Bennigsen and Wimbush, 1986: 214). Although use of Abkhazian was restored in 1956, it remained a minor language (Akiner, 1986: 224–6).

According to the 1989 census, 94% of Abkhaz consider Abkhaz to be their primary language, and another 79% consider Russian their second language. This figure reveals the depth of the cultural schism between Abkhaz and Georgians. Only 3% of Abkhaz claim a language other than Russian as their second tongue.21 Although this language divide might be interpreted as the result of hostility of Abkhaz to Georgians, such an interpretation would be wrong. The divide has more to do with the lack of interaction between the nations. Those ‘Georgians’ who lived in Abkhazia, some 45% of the population, did not speak Georgian but rather Mingrelian. According to one estimate almost 25% of Abkhaz and 44% of Georgians (in 1979) living in Abkhazia could not communicate with one another. The language divide was reinforced, if not fully explained, by the territorial distribution of populations. The language issue reveals a deep divide between these two ethnic groups as the attempt to impose Georgian on the Abkhaz entrenched resentments, in particular, at discrimination in favour of Georgian speakers in access to higher education, government offices and professions (Hewitt, 1995: 225).

South Ossetia and the Ossetians

Ossetians live in the central Caucasus region on both sides of the Caucasus mountain range. This geographically divided region was separated administratively in the Soviet period, with North Ossetia as part of Russia and South Ossetia incorporated into Georgia. South Ossetia has an external northern border with North Ossetia. Ossetians are descendants of the Alans and trace their presence in Georgia to the thirteenth century when they were driven south by the Mongols. Despite the fact that a majority of Ossetians are Eastern Orthodox Christians (though there is a small minority of Sunni Muslim Ossetians), they ‘are not strangers to Islam’ (Omrod, 1993: 462). This is due to their shared history and interaction with other Muslim groups in the region as well as their Sunni Muslim ethnic kin.

Ossete is considered the primary language of 98% of Ossetians, with 60% claiming Russian as their second language (Henze, 1991: 166).
Ossete is a North-East Iranian language and is divided into two dialects: Digor and Iron. Iron is the literary language and is spoken by the majority of Ossetians, almost exclusively among the Ossetians in South Ossetia. The language was scripted into Cyrillic in the nineteenth century, and later into Latin for a brief period. As with Abkhaz, it was scripted into Georgian from 1938 to 1954, but later reverted back to Cyrillic (Comrie, 1981: 159–64). As with the Abkhaz language the imposition of Georgian was perceived as Georgian cultural hegemonism. According to the 1989 census there were about 164,000 Ossetians living in Georgia. The majority of Ossetians therefore do not reside in South Ossetia, but in districts bordering the South Ossetia Oblast’ (Birch, 1995: 50). Within South Ossetia proper there were 65,000 Ossetians. They constituted two-thirds of South Ossetia’s population of 98,000, with Georgians making up most of the remaining population.

The South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast’ was formed in 1922 within the Republic of Transcaucasia. In 1925 North Ossetia (then an Autonomous Oblast’ of Russia) and South Ossetia tried to unite (and join Russia), but were unsuccessful. This campaign was only one manifestation of the region’s hostility to Georgian rule and show of loyalty to Moscow. During the Soviet period, Ossetia was considered to be one of the most Sovietized and pro-Russian regions of the FSU (Birch, 1995: 43–4). As with Abkhazia and Ajaria, South Ossetia was subordinated directly to Georgia when Georgia became a full Union Republic, separate from Armenia and Azerbaijan. As it was attributed the reduced status of an Autonomous Oblast in the Soviet Union, South Ossetia had a less institutionalized and weaker level of autonomy than did Abkhazia and Ajaria.

NATION-BUILDING, STATE-BUILDING, AND GEORGIA’S FAILED DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

Georgia had to deal with political structures and institutions inherited from the Soviet Union: three autonomous entities that were established on the basis of recognizing a particular nationality.22 This status privileged the titular nations of these autonomies and thus gave them institutional resources as well as legitimacy as nations (Roeder, 1991: 196–232, Treisman, 1997: 212–49). In Abkhazia, for example, the parliament passed its own legislation, subject to confirmation by the Georgian parliament. Additionally, given the procedures for electing republican officials, these officials had to be handled as legitimate representatives of at least part of the state’s population. In negotiations with Vladislav Ardzinba, Chairman of the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet, over Abkhazia’s
status, Eduard Shevardnadze, himself in office following the coup that
displaced the democratically-elected Zviad Gamsakhurdia, acknowledged
the legitimacy of Ardzinba as the head of Abkhazia’s Supreme Soviet and
the fact that he represented the population of that republic. Nonetheless,
Shevardnadze remained committed to the idea that Abkhazia was an
integral part of Georgia.

Could Gamsakhurdia or Shevardnadze have crafted the political
situation in a way that would have dampened secessionist tendencies?
Probably not, because tensions among the different groups had already
reached breaking point. In every decade during the Soviet period,
nationalist challenges were evident. In the 1930s and 1940s, language
scripting and educational concerns increased friction, while historical
challenges over who settled first in Abkhazia surfaced in the 1950s, 1960s
and then again in the 1980s. From the national minorities’ perspectives,
the trappings of the formal and informal institutions of the republic
seemed to favour the majority Georgians. Post-Soviet conflicts in Georgia
thus arose from the perceptions of minorities that the newly independent
Georgia would strengthen the Soviet era practices of privileging
‘Georgians’ at the expense of other ethnic groups, including by
institutional means. The sentiments carried over from the Soviet period as
most of Georgia’s national minorities perceived Georgia as a realm of
institutionalized Georgian ethnic privilege, where politicians in the centre
sought to define an exclusivist conception of national identity which
constantly reinforced a sense of ‘a Georgia for Georgians’. In this light,
Gamsakhurdia can be seen as a manifestation of processes and perceptions
that were already in evidence.

Tensions among the national minorities, especially the Abkhaz, were
apparent well before the era of perestroika and free elections. 1978
marked an important low point when the government of Georgia failed to
revise Georgia’s constitution. In a move to reduce tensions, the
government sought the removal of a clause that guaranteed Georgian as
the only official language of the republic. Mass demonstrations of
Georgians objected to this measure and forced Shevardnadze, who was
then First Party Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party (1972–85), to
back down and retain the clause. Non-Georgians interpreted this
capitulation ominously: it was widely viewed as a retreat in the face of
nationalism and as evidence of a further increase in Georgian national
chauvinism. This same incident played into majority Georgian fears of
encirclement by minorities, whose patron and protector was assumed to be
Moscow. This 1978 Constitutional debacle incited Abkhaz elites to seek
Moscow’s protection. Letters expressing grievances and concerns
included a request that Abkhazia be removed from Georgia’s jurisdiction
and subjugated directly to the Russian Republic. Moscow did not support Abkhazia’s secession but did get Georgia to adopt a plan for bettering the economic and cultural conditions in Abkhazia.

Similarly, South Ossetia demanded unification with North Ossetia to form a single polity within Russia, effectively seceding from Georgia in 1989. The 1989 demand was rejected and violent clashes erupted between local Georgians (who feared unification with Russia) and Ossetians. The Georgian Supreme Soviet quickly rejected the South Ossetian ‘declaration of sovereignty’ and unilaterally abolished its autonomous status altogether. A state of emergency was declared: demonstrations were banned, newspapers were suppressed, and Georgian was declared the official language. Ossetians countered by declaring their language the official language of the oblast. Both examples of attempted de-institutionalization of the Soviet legacy – revocation of South Ossetia’s autonomy status and language usage – seriously exacerbated relations between Georgia and South Ossetia.

On 28 October 1990 parliamentary elections were held in Georgia. Six Georgian nationalist blocs competed in the elections against the Communists. With 68% of the electorate participating (Abkhaz and Ossetian party candidates were prohibited from running), Gamsakhurdia’s Round Table-Free Georgia bloc emerged victorious garnering 155 of 250 seats. The Communists finished second with 64 seats. Gamsakhurdia was elected chairman of the Supreme Soviet and he formed the first non-communist government from his Round Table/Free Georgia coalition with Tengiz Siguia as prime minister. Gamsakhurdia’s ascendance in politics unnerved the national minorities. His dissident writings often invoked the idea of an imperilled Georgian nation, the destruction of its land, language and culture. He blamed both Moscow and the minorities. So his cry of ‘Georgia for the Georgians’ was interpreted as a battle cry for the suppression of minorities (Slider, 1997: 170–71). Gamsakhurdia had been elected on a platform that called for an independent Georgia, with a free market economy, a multiparty system and a legal system that protected the rights of all citizens. It also supported the strengthening of the rights of Georgians, restricted immigration and protection of the Georgian language. This part of the platform was common to all the parties competing in the elections (Jones, 1993: 297). What was not common was that Gamsakhurdia added his messianic message of not only a Georgia for Georgians, but a Georgia for Christian Georgians. And it was not just rhetoric. The autonomous status of South Ossetia had already been abolished in December, and the status of Ajaria was also threatened. Gamsakhurdia justified the abolition policy by declaring that the Ossetians had the right to self-determination only in those lands that
constituted the homeland of the Ossetian nation, namely in North Ossetia. South Ossetia, like Abkhazia and Ajaria, was Georgian land, Georgian homeland.

Thus, by the time the first democratic elections came in 1990, national divisions were sufficiently hardened. Electoral laws provide a case in point. Article 8 of the laws governing the election required all parties registered to have country-wide reach. Because national minorities in Georgia supported parties with limited regional reach they were threatened with being disenfranchised from the political process. To make matters worse, the one party which seemed to support the rights of the minorities, the Communist Party, added a clause in its platform which affirmed its commitment to Georgia’s territorial integrity. The only way minorities could ‘voice’ their views was by boycotting the elections. Within a week the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia declared itself a sovereign Soviet Socialist Republic. This declaration was overturned by the Georgian Supreme Soviet shortly thereafter.26

As with South Ossetia, Abkhazia’s fate was partly tied to the inherited structures of the Soviet Union. Because Abkhazia was subordinate to Georgia during the Soviet period, the Georgians claimed that it should remain subordinate. Yet, Abkhazia’s situation was a bit different than South Ossetia in that there was also an institutionalized precedent for its independence from Georgia, as codified in its 1925 constitution. Depending on the date, both sides’ claims regarding Abkhazia’s had clear institutional parameters that seemed equally legitimate and compromised as Georgia sought to shake off Soviet institutions.

From the very outset of Georgia’s transition and through its first election, Tbilisi faced multiple ethnic and regional challenges. Although Georgians were two-thirds of the population, one-third was not. These groups perceived a Georgian state as a vital threat to their own ethno-national interests. From the Georgian perspective, these minorities were also perceived as a threat. Not only did they inhabit borderland areas that abutted Russia, but they directly appealed to Moscow for help and to be subordinated to the Russian Federation. Just as the minorities feared continuation of a perceived Georgian imperialism, so too did Georgians fear Russia’s imperialism and seeming support for Georgia’s minorities, especially Abkhazia.

Ajaria, the other autonomous region in Georgia remained peaceful, despite concerns that it too would succumb to violence and war. In the case of Ajaria, calls for greater autonomy were at first met with much resistance from Tbilisi. Whereas the fact of autonomy was not questioned for Abkhazia, just the degree of autonomy, in the case of Ajaria proposals were advanced in Tbilisi for abolishing Ajaria’s autonomy altogether.
The chief proponent of abolishing Ajaria’s autonomy was Gamsakhurdia himself. Even under perestroika Ajars feared that as Georgia moved towards greater independence it was also moving towards a more exclusivist conception of what it meant to be a Georgian. Furthermore, the status of the Ajar Republic was directly and publicly threatened. During the 1990 Supreme Soviet elections, Gamsakhurdia’s Round Table garnered only 24% of the vote, while the Communist Party came in first with 56% of the vote. The result was the reverse of the overall Georgian election outcome which gave 62% to the Round Table and 26% to the Communists. These election results soundly defeated Gamsakhurdia’s view that Ajaria’s autonomous status should be dissolved. Following these elections, Gamsakhurdia retreated. Abolishing Ajaria’s autonomy would now have to be a local initiative.

During the most tense period of confrontations between Ajaria and Tbilisi, Ajaria was accused of separatism. Yet the evidence indicates that Ajaria did not seek independence. The conflict centred on whether Ajaria would remain an autonomous republic (Fuller, 1990: 14). Despite Gamsakhurdia’s rhetoric, therefore, the issue was one of territorial autonomy rather than ethno-religious difference. What accounts for this conflict and its resolution? The initial tension between Tbilisi and Batumi arose from the nature of Georgian nationalizing policies which emphasized a Georgianness that was tied explicitly to Christianity. Because the Ajars were Muslim, they were seen as falling outside this conception of national identity and, therefore, a threat to the unity and the legitimacy of the newly independent state. From the Ajar point of view, however, the religious distinction carried relatively little significance: Ajars considered themselves Georgians and their homeland of Ajaria was seen as an integral part of Georgia. The leader of Ajaria, Aslan Abashidze, frequently made his commitment to maintain Georgia’s territorial integrity quite clear: ‘Our republic is an administrative unit where members of various nationalities live, but all are citizens of Ajaria, and that means of Georgia as well. We have never had, and never will have, any territorial claims against Georgia ... Ajaria is historically a part of Georgia, and there has never been an instance in history in which Ajaria has created problems for its motherland’ (Nezavisimaia gazeta, 27 June 1992: 3).

Rather than point to religious differences, Abashidze stressed the importance of advancing economic interests of the republic. Evidence of this can be found in the slogan adopted by his political party, Ajarian Revival: ‘Wealthy people mean a wealthy state’, which he extended during an interview to ‘a wealthy state is a strong state’ (ibid.). Although
there was resentment in Batumi over the dominance of ‘Christianity’ in Georgia, the conflict hinged on an institutional issue, namely the region’s autonomous status. Separatism was extremely limited, if not non-existent. In 1989 for example, the then Chairman of the Ajar ASSR Council of Ministers, Guram Chigogidsze, in a speech to the Georgian Supreme Soviet warned of the existence of a separatist organization in Ajaria. Yet he stated that at most it consisted of six persons and did not represent the views of the population at large. Similarly, the head of the Ajar Branch of the Georgian Writer’s Union, Pridon Khalvashi, wrote that ‘no separatist inclinations of any kind exist in Ajaria’ (Fuller, 1990: 14).

Two key differences between the conflict with Ajaria and those with Abkhazia and Ossetia stand out. First, Ajaria remained loyal to Tbilisi’s stated aim of maintaining the integrity of the Georgian state. At no time did it advance a claim or support secessionist claims by others. The reason for this is that although there was a religious difference and the nationalizing-Christian-Georgian state was seen as a threat, Ajars imagined themselves and their homeland as an integral part of Georgia. Protecting Georgia’s integrity meant protecting Ajar integrity.

Second, the struggle between Ajaria and Tbilisi over time revealed to Tbilisi and Christian Georgians that unlike the Abkhaz, the Ajars had not in fact advanced its demands for more autonomy as a first step towards secession. The political goal for Ajaria was to protect its institutionalized regional status. Ethnicity, and in this case religion, did manifest itself, but the conflict was largely regional in nature, not ethnic. Over time, Tbilisi came to see the Ajars as the Ajars saw themselves: loyal Georgians who demanded nothing more than the re-institutionalization of their autonomous status. Exit was not pursued at any time, simply voice. In the case of the Abkhaz–Georgian relationship, neither Georgians, nor Abkhaz would deny that the Abkhaz are a distinct nation with a distinct language and culture which can trace its origins to lands in and around contemporary Georgia. Where disagreement lies is in the fate of Abkhazia, the territory. Both see this territory as constituting their homeland. This goes a long way to explain why the question of who settled first – whether an Abkhaz or Georgian – has remained such a volatile issue, before and during the transition. The dynamics of the conflict with Ossetia were similar with the exception that Georgia refused to acknowledge that the territory of South Ossetia was Ossetian homeland. Rather the Ossetians were viewed as interlopers whose true homeland was in the north. In these two cases, exit from Georgia was the preferred course of action, even if it meant subordination to Moscow.
CONCLUSION

As the Soviet Union dissolved, ethnic and regional conflicts in Georgia were intensified by nationalizing policies pursued by the centre which involved the de-institutionalization of Soviet institutionalized autonomies and brought to the fore ethnic and regional grievances. Both the Georgians and the Abkhaz viewed Abkhazia as rightfully belonging to them. In the case of South Ossetia, the Georgians viewed them as recent immigrants at best and invaders at worst. While it is difficult to disentangle nationalist from statist motivations in the struggle to prevent the secessions, it is clear that in South Ossetia, Georgian nationalism had been mobilized around the negative aim of maintaining the territorial integrity of Georgia against a perceived threat of Russian neo-imperialism. Because Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatists had come to be seen as agents of Russia, a secession would be simultaneously a reduction in state power, and a diminishing of Georgians’ pride and national identity. With the collapse of the Soviet Union the Ajars advanced only moderate demands, seeking to sustain their administrative status first and economic concessions second. Given its own fight for independence, however, Tbilisi at first not only resisted such claims, but threatened to deprive Ajaria of its pre-existing rights and freedoms.

Georgia’s interests vis-à-vis Moscow were simple survival: survival as a state with its pre-1991 boundaries intact. Georgia’s leaders – Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze, each understood the Russian threat in a different way. Gamsakhurdia’s response to the threat was to stimulate an aggressive Georgian nationalism. Shevardnadze’s response was to negotiate with Russia, while attempting to capture Sukhumi and militarily crush the Abkhaz secession in a surprise fait accompli attack – perhaps hoping to remove any pretext for Russian intervention. This was a terrible miscalculation as Russia began actively arming and supporting the Abkhaz. Shevardnadze appealed to the United Nations, to no avail, and eventually was compelled to return to negotiations with Russia to resolve the conflict. During one of his weekly interviews, Shevardnadze put it in the following stark terms: ‘Of course I think of the ideals of mankind because the implementation of these ideals depends significantly on Russia. But I also think of my motherland, my little country, first of all. Because, if democracy fails to win there, Georgia will be drowned in blood. It will find itself in an even deeper pool of blood.’ A month later he explicitly linked Georgia’s survival with cooperation with Russia, ‘We have to cooperate with Russia… otherwise Georgia will collapse and disintegrate.’ Despite Georgia’s attempt to be independent of Moscow, Georgia was forced to work with Russia to stop the war raging in Abkhazia.
Georgia dealt harshly with Abkhazia and South Ossetia for three reasons. First, Georgian nationalism had been attached to the notion of a Georgian state free of patronizing Russian domination. Ardzinba made no secret of Abkhazia’s desire to integrate with Russia, and this made it easy for Georgians to view Abkhaz resistance as a smokescreen for Russian neo-imperialism. In short, the loss of Abkhazia would have seriously diminished Georgian national identity. Second, Georgia felt threatened by Russian meddling in its affairs, and feared the loss of territory, however small its autonomies. Third, to have allowed the secessions would have set a bad precedent in multi-ethnic Georgia. If Georgia had allowed Abkhazia to join Russia or achieve independence, then it would have been very difficult for it to deny the same to South Ossetia.

In contrast to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia dealt leniently with Ajaria. The reason is that Ajaria did not make claims that threatened either the territorial integrity or national identity of Georgia. Initially, the non-threatening nature of these demands was drowned out by political struggles in Tbilisi. Once the idea of abolishing Ajaria’s republican status had been defeated and the support of Ajaria for Georgia’s national and state aims vis-à-vis South Ossetia and Abkhazia became obvious, Tbilisi was prepared to more readily accept Ajaria’s autonomous status. In this essay we have been dealing with two cases of ethnic conflict and one case of regionalism within the multinational setting of Georgia. The conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are no longer violent for the most part, but they are far from being resolved. Tensions continue between Ajaria and Tbilisi, but these tensions do not revolve around issues of identity; rather, they are economic and regional in nature, and consequently more amenable to negotiation and compromise.

Ethno-regional division continues to be Georgia’s most serious obstacle to state-building. These divisions make it extremely difficult to build the institutions necessary to stabilize the state and make it capable of supporting institutional and economic reforms. Moreover, until Russia can define a positive national identity independent of its historical tendency towards imperialism, the cascading insecurities which afflict Georgia’s national minorities will continue to inhibit institutional solutions to Georgia’s transition problems. Russia seems to have no interest in helping to permanently resolve the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russian peacekeeping troops remain in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while Russian-led negotiations on the repatriation of 250,000 refugees from Abkhazia (mostly Georgians) are stalled. Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain outside Georgia’s control, having achieved de facto independence. Unless the minorities accept some degree of Georgian sovereignty over their regional territories and Moscow stops...
meddling in Georgian affairs, Georgia will continue to exist in a precarious and unstable transition.

NOTES

1. The capital of Georgia is Tbilisi; the other capitals are Sukhumi (Abkhazia), Batumi (Ajaria), and Ts'khinvali (South Ossetia).

2. According to this thesis, ethnic homogeneity is a prerequisite of democratic state building. This thesis can be traced back to John Stuart Mill, who claimed that ‘Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities.’ Although contemporary scholars agree that national unity and consensus are important to the formation of democracy, most tend to ignore problems of national disunity or assume them away in the belief that with the proper institutional engineering, divisions in a society can be overcome. For the Mill quote, see John Stuart Mill (1869), p.310.

3. Linz and Stepan, p.25.

4. A contrary argument is offered by Raymond Basch who contends that heterogeneity might be a fundamental and positive causal factor of democratization. He compares three cases: Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine. These cases do not however substantiate his claims. The most diverse – or in his terminology ethnically separated – country, Moldova, underwent the most traumatic and violent transition. See Raymond M. Basch, pp.221–42.

5. In Burundi for example, during transition from colonial rule, a minority group of Tutsis promulgated a nationalist vision for the state of Burundi, that excluded and subsequently antagonized the majority Hutus.

6. Although the official rate of Georgia’s national income grew at the third lowest rate in the USSR from 1960–1971, in 1970, Georgians had savings accounts nearly double those of average Soviet citizens (Suny, 1980: 213).

7. These lands had not been united under a single political authority since the fifteenth century. Eastern Georgia (Kartli and Kakheti) was absorbed into the Russian Empire in 1801, Mingrelia in 1803, Imeretia in 1804, and Abkhazia in 1810. See John F.R. Wright (1995), p.136.

8. Only the Union Republics were granted the right to secede as affirmed by article 80 of the Soviet Constitution.

9. In addition to this law, a related law – ‘The Law on the Procedures for Resolving Questions Related to the Secession of Union Republics from the USSR’ – was adopted (seemingly and hastily in response to the Baltic Republics’ moves towards independence). This law was signed by Gorbachev on 3 April 1990. Article 3 stipulated: ‘The peoples of autonomous republics and autonomous formations shall retain the right to decide independently the question of staying in the USSR or in the seceding Union republic, as well as to raise the question of their own legal state status.’ For a discussion of the debates surrounding the adoption of this law see Izvestiya, 21 and 22 March, and 4 and 5 April 1990.

10. There is little evidence to support that members of these groups do not identify as Georgian. (I have not been able to determine precise numbers of Mingrelians, Svans and Kvartelians in these regions.) However, linguistic differences continue to influence the play of politics. This is due to language use and homelands. Many ‘Georgians’ living in Abkhazia spoke Mingrelian or Svanetian, and not the more dominant Kartvelian. Abkhaz nationals therefore had relatively little interaction with the official Georgian language, ‘Kartvelian’. Furthermore, the homelands of Svanetia and Mingrelia are contiguous to Abkhazia. Svanetia is located long the southern slopes of the Caucasus range in western Georgia and shares its northern border with Russia, while Mingrelia is to south. Both share western borders with Abkhazia. Keeping these considerations in mind, I nevertheless refer to the Kartvelians, Mingrelians and Svans as Georgians, unless indicated otherwise.


12. The only other one was Birobidzhan, the designated ‘Jewish’ homeland.
13. A census was also conducted in 1937. A category of Ajar was included. There were a total of 88,230 Ajars in the Soviet Union, and of these 88,217 lived in the Georgian Republic. This census was not officially published or publicly available. The official reason provided was that it was statistically flawed in its underestimation of the total number of the population than was expected. See Vsesoiuznaia perepis’ naselniia 1937g. (1991), pp.83 and 95. For a discussion of the 1937 Soviet census see Lee Schwartz (1986), pp.48-69.

14. Also recall from above the fact that over 90% of all Georgians worldwide and 95% of FSU Georgians live in Georgia. Data on the Ajars from personal correspondence with Zaal Anjaparidze of the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, Tbilisi, Georgia, (CIPDD).

15. See Narodnoe Khoziaistvo Gruzinskoi SSR za 60 let (1980), pp.82, 125-6.

16. What is striking is that the Georgian historians have accepted that the Abkhaz have been in Abkhazia for at least 300–500 years, while the Abkhaz claim at least a 2000-year history. For frank discussions of these issues, see B.G. Hewitt (1996), pp.190–225.


18. Armenians constituted 15%, Russians 14%, Greeks 3%, and Ukrainians 2%.

19. According to one estimate there are some 250 Abkhaz-Abaza villages throughout Turkey and a rough estimate of 100,000–150,000 in Turkish cities and towns. There may be an additional 5,000 Abkhaz living in Syria, and a small number in Jordan and Iraq. Those Abkhaz (and Cherkess and Adyges) living abroad identify themselves as Circassians, however, and not Abkhaz. Data from personal correspondence with Zaal Anjaparidze of CIPDD, Tbilisi, Georgia, and Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush (1986), p.213.


22. For a discussion of the relationship between nationalism, democracy, and federalism see Juan J. Linz (1997).

23. Ardzinba was a member of the CPSU since 1967, and from 1988 he was a deputy in the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and chairman of the Commission for Autonomous Entities. He was elected on the basis of his position in the Communist Party, and as a legislator who sought to protect the rights of minorities more generally. He was a vocal advocate of the Abkhaz nation, but at a time and in a context in which such advocacy had little political impact. Ardzinba was also a Doctor of History, specializing in the history and culture of the peoples of the Ancient Orient and Asia Minor. He lived in Moscow until 1988, where he was with the Institute of Oriental Studies. In 1989 he became the director of the Abkhazian Gulia Institute of Language, Literature and History.

24. The actual degree of discrimination and equitable access in Abkhazia is unclear. According to Communist Party rolls in Abkhazia, Georgians constituted 51% of party membership, but only 44% of the population. Yet, according to another source, the Abkhaz constituted only 17% of the population, but occupied some 40% of the cadre positions. For the party figures see Darrell Slider (1985), p.53. For the cadre positions see Pravda, 21 September 1989, p.4. In terms of deputies to the Georgian Supreme Soviet and the contingent from the Republic of Georgia to the USSR Supreme Soviet, ethnic Georgians were 80% of the former and 66% of the latter. The Abkhaz were 8% of the former and 3% of the latter. Thus, the Abkhaz did seem to have less representation in the institutions at the republican level than at the all-Union level (although above the level of total Abkhaz population in Georgia of just under 2%). See Narodnoe Khoziaistvo Gruzinskoi SSR za 60 let (1980), p.31.

25. Shireen Hunter points out that as soon as the ‘Georgians’ were offered a chance to debate the nature of their political system, the idea of a ‘theo-democracy’, or ‘a Christian state ruled on democratic but not secular principles’ was advanced. Gamsakhurdia should be noted as important advocate of an independent Christian Georgia. He envisioned Georgia’s spiritual role as mediating between East and West, Islam and Christianity. See Shireen Hunter (1994), p.112. Also see Jonathan Aves (1992), p.159.

26. On 25 August 1990, the parliament of the Abkhaz Autonomous SSR adopted a resolution on

27. Although he modified his position somewhat, Gamsakhurdia did not acknowledge publicly that his statement on the abolition of the republic caused the weak support for his Round Table-Free Georgia Coalition. Rather, he blamed it on subversive imperialist agents operating in the republic. See Ronald G. Suny (1994), p.400, fn.26 and Elizabeth Fuller (1990), p.14.


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