



Contemporary Caucasus Newsletter

The Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies

Issue 3

Summer 1997

A Message from the Executive Director

I am pleased to report we have fulfilled our plan this past academic year, thanks to some storming by our leading shock workers. This year we hosted our first Visiting Scholar under the Caucasus Program; organized a two-day workshop/conference entitled "Institutions, Identity, and Ethnic Conflict: International Experience and Its Implications for the Caucasus"; sponsored fifteen talks by visiting speakers; published and distributed a series of e-mail calendars of events; maintained our Caucasus web site; and continued to support the training of our graduate students focusing on the region.

It was a pleasure to have Dr. Ghia Nodia as our first Caucasus Visiting Scholar this past term. Dr. Nodia is the Chairman of the Board of the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) in Tbilisi, Georgia. While at Berkeley from early January until the beginning of June, Dr. Nodia led a seminar for Berkeley faculty and graduate students; gave numerous public presentations at Berkeley and elsewhere; prepared a major paper on Abkhazia that will be published as a BPS Working Paper this year; helped organize our annual conference; and gathered teaching and research materials for his return to Georgia. His well-attended seminar at Berkeley was entitled "Nationalism, Ethnopolitics, and Ethnic Conflict in the Caucasus." Dr. Nodia was also the keynote speaker at the 2nd Annual Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN), which took place at Columbia University in April.

Our annual Caucasus conference, "Institutions, Identity, and Ethnic Conflict: International Experience and Its Implications for the Caucasus," took place on 2-3 May 1997. Co-sponsored by BPS, the Institute of International Studies, and the Center for Slavic and East European Studies, the conference began with a workshop for academics on broad theoretical issues and interesting case studies. The second day was a public event that dealt specifically with the Caucasus, with separate panels on Chechnya and the North Caucasus; Georgia and Abkhazia; and Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh. We were particularly pleased that turnout at the conference was over 100, which suggests a continuing public interest in this fascinating and important region. We will publish a conference report with a summary of each presentation later this year.

Our visiting speakers series brought many interesting scholars to Berkeley in the 1996-1997 academic year. Visiting speakers included Robert Ware (Oxford University, Politics); the Honorable Tedo Japaridze (Ambassador of the Republic of Georgia to the United States); Liana Kvarchelia (Center for Humanitarian Programs, Abkhazia); Michael Ochs (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe); Revaz Gachechiladze (Tbilisi State University, Human Geography); Alec Rasizade (Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC); Alex Rondeli (Tbilisi State University, International Relations); Ludmilla Haroutunian (Yerevan State University, Sociology); and David Darchiashvili (CIPDD, Tbilisi).

We continue to distribute a quarterly calendar of events over the internet to over 100 scholars of Caucasus studies who are located in the region, the United States, Russia, and Western Europe. The calendar provides news about upcoming conferences and workshops, academic announcements, and recent publications on the Caucasus. If you wish to include a notice in the calendar, please send an e-mail message with details to bsp@socrates.berkeley.edu (and please note our address change). If you wish to subscribe to the calendar, send a message to the same address and include your own e-mail address and a brief description of your current position and research interests.

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An archived copy of the calendar can be found at our website (see the box at the bottom of the next page). The site includes a program description, past issues of the newsletter, the e-mail calendar, a list of key research institutions working on the Caucasus, links to useful web sites with information about the Caucasus, a bibliography of works in English on the Caucasus, and a page on Chechnya with publications by our affiliated faculty and academic staff.

Next year we are planning to bring Professor Levon Abrahamian to campus as our annual Caucasus Visiting Scholar for the fall term. Professor Abrahamian will also serve as the William Saroyan Chair in Armenian Studies at UC Berkeley. A Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Ethnography at Yerevan State University, Professor Abrahamian is currently engaged in a major research paper as head of a project entitled "Transformations of Identity in Armenia in the Twentieth Century." While at Berkeley, Professor Abrahamian will teach two courses, "Peoples and Cultures of the Former Soviet Union" and "Armenian Culture and Identity in the Changing World," and he will lead an informal graduate seminar for the Program.

Our research theme for the 1997-1998 academic year is "The Geopolitics of Oil, Gas, and Ecology in the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea." Our annual Caucasus conference will address this theme and will again be held at Berkeley at the beginning of May 1998.

Our affiliated graduate students focusing on the Caucasus are keeping themselves busy. Ivan Ascher, who joined Berkeley's Political Science Department in the fall, studied Turkish during the academic year and will be studying Azeri in Baku this summer. Ivan received a three-year graduate training fellowship from the National Science Foundation this year. Catherine Dale presented a paper at the ASN conference entitled "Conflict and Displacement: Construction of the State in Azerbaijan," published two papers in edited volumes, continued studying Turkish during the academic year, and is studying Georgian this summer in Tbilisi. Keith Darden will travel to Tbilisi and Yerevan this summer, conducting interviews for his dissertation on CIS integration. David Hoffman, who served as our Graduate Student Coordinator during the academic year, made a presentation at the ASN conference entitled, "Ethnicity, Ethnic Conflict, and the Long Road to Akmola." He continues to study Turkish, Kazakh, and Azeri and to research the influence of oil and gas production on politics in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Serge Glushkoff formed a graduate student working group this year entitled "Environmental Issues in the Former Soviet Union," and he continues his research

on environmental conservation and protection in the former Soviet Union, focusing on the watershed into the Black Sea and the effects of the oil industry on the ecology of the Black Sea. We are also pleased to welcome Jarrod Tanny, our first history student specializing on the region. Jarrod plans to focus on nationality policy in Transcaucasia in the Stalin era.

Finally, I will be on leave next year as a National Fellow at the Hoover Institute at Stanford, where I plan to write a book on secession and autonomy in the Soviet successor states, with case studies of Chechnya, Abkhazia, Karabakh, and South Ossetia, as well as Tatarstan, Crimea, and Gagauzia. My BPS responsibilities will be assumed for the year by Dr. Marc Garcelon. Dr. Garcelon received his Ph.D. in sociology from UC Berkeley in 1995. He has served as a Lecturer at Berkeley's Department of Sociology for the past two years, and he is currently revising his dissertation, "Democrats and Apparatchiks: The Democratic Russia Movement and the Specialist Rebellion in Moscow, 1989-1991" for publication. The Caucasus program will be in excellent hands during my year's absence.

Edward W. Walker
Executive Director

Nationalism, Democracy, and “Ethnic Conflict” in the Caucasus

Ghia Nodia

Our first Visiting Scholar for the spring term this year, Ghia Nodia, led a graduate seminar on identities and ethnic conflict in the Caucasus. The following summarizes some of the main themes of Dr. Nodia’s presentations at these seminars.

The common practice of describing violent conflicts in the former Soviet Union today as “ethnic” is inappropriate, above all because the distinction between “ethnic” and other types of conflict is often unclear. For example, while the conflict between Georgians and the Abkhaz is usually treated as a case of ethnic conflict, the confrontation between Georgia and the USSR prior to 1991, which in many respects was very similar, is not.

In fact, there are two types of genuine “ethnic conflict.” The first is “pogrom-type” attacks on one ethnic group by another. The key characteristic of pogroms is that they have no real political agenda other than blind destruction of the ethnic enemy. The second is what might be called “tribal violence,” in which conflicts with neighboring ethnic groups are assumed by both groups to be a “normal” part of life.

None of the conflicts in the Caucasus fall into either category. In Abkhazia, for example, the “Abkhazian” combatants consisted not only of ethnic Abkhazians but also of Chechens and other North Caucasus peoples, as well as Russians and Armenians. Moreover, there was no history of sustained conflict between Abkhazians and Georgians that could reasonably be characterized as a “way of life.” And finally, the conflict was for the most part between elite-led armed groups who articulated relatively clear and conflicting “national projects.”

In practice, the use of the term “ethnic conflict” is used to suggest, first, that a particular conflict is taking place under conditions of anarchy, or at least resides outside of formal political space. Second, it is used to imply that the conflict

has primordial roots based on deeply-held “ancient” hatreds between ethnic groups. In the former Soviet Union generally, and in the Caucasus particularly, ancient hatreds have been absent prior to the outbreak of most of the so-called “ethnic violence.” Far more important explanatory variables have been the dynamics of nation-building and the clash of different national projects, projects that have usually been defined and orchestrated by elites, not by society at large.

Dr. Nodia defined the term “national projects” in idealist terms. A national project entails claims about the rightful status of the political “we,” or the nation; its position in the world community of nations; and its world historical role. Inevitably, understandings of status involve claims to territory and ownership. More prosaically, national projects also often entail identification of the major tasks confronting the nation in the short term.

A number of explanations have been proffered for why conflicts have broken out in some instances and not in others. One stresses the differing mobilizational strengths of various national projects. For example, the capacity of Georgian nationalism to mobilize the people is said to have been stronger than that of the Azeris but weaker than that of Estonians or Lithuanians. The second emphasizes pre-existing institutional bases for national identity in the form of administrative territorial recognition in the Soviet federal hierarchy. Autonomous oblasts, in Dr. Nodia’s view, did indeed constitute “ethnic landmines” in many cases. Less persuasive have been explanations based on the putative “hot-headed” temperaments of the peoples of the region. These cultural explanations would be more

Contemporary Caucasus Newsletter, No. 3 Summer 1997. Published by the Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. Edited by Edward W. Walker, Alexandra Wood, Stella Bourgoïn, and David Hoffman. To subscribe, send a request by e-mail to bsp@socrates.berkeley.edu or contact us at: Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, University of California at Berkeley, 361 Stephens Hall # 2304, Berkeley, CA 94720-2304. Phone: (510) 643-6737. Fax: (510) 643-5045. Copies of this newsletter may be found at our Caucasus Program web site: <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~bsp/caucasus/caucprog.html> .

plausible if they focused not on some ill-defined notion of temperament but stressed instead “political culture,” understood to mean, for example, the ability to commit to democratic political methods and the confidence to do so. Hysteria leading to ethnic violence often arises when people lose faith in institutions and in their ability to pursue national ends using “civilized” means.

Dr. Nodia discussed the substance of the national projects of Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia at some length. Georgia’s national project is based on the western

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model of the nation-state. It is thus non-imperialist (in the sense that it makes no territorial claims beyond its internationally-recognized borders) and non-assimilationist (Armenians in Georgia are to remain Armenian, Abkhazians are to remain Abkhazian). The major task today is to overcome those internal and external forces that oppose the creation of a Georgian nation-state. Above all, the main enemy is Russia, while “the West” is Georgia’s principal friend and role model. The main competing national project in Georgia, as articulated by some people, entails an admission of Georgian weakness and acceptance of Russia as Georgia’s all-powerful patron.

In Armenia, in contrast, the primary goal of the country’s national project is not independence per se—after all, Armenia attained independence in 1991 without having to fight for it, and it faces no real threat to its independence today. Rather, it is the survival of the Armenian nation, including its diaspora. The legacy of victimization and “echoes of 1915” play a critically important role here. At the same time, many Armenians remember the glory of Armenia in the fifth century, a memory that sometimes expresses itself in irredentist projects, above all the recovery of the “lost territory” of Nagorno-Karabakh. For Armenia, the primary enemies are Azerbaijan and Turkey, with Russia serving as its main friend and protector. As with Georgia, the West still serves as a model, and there is little interest in “Middle-Easternization.” Unlike in Georgia, however, there is no significant alternative project in Armenia.

The national project of Azerbaijan is less articulated than the previous two. This largely stems from the fact that Azeri national identity and pan-Turkic sentiments are sometimes blurred. Mass national movements in

Azerbaijan emerged principally in reaction to Armenia’s claim to Karabakh. Accordingly, the national project defines the enemies of Azerbaijan as Armenia and Russia, while Azerbaijan’s friends are Turkey and the West. The picture is complicated, however, by the fact that many members of the Azeri political and cultural elite are highly Russified and harbor strong pro-Russian sentiments.

The national projects of the three Transcaucasian states share two important characteristics. First, all three identify Russia as the clear, dominant force in the region. Although Russia’s debacle in Chechnya has weakened this assumption, Russia is nevertheless seen as having a de facto veto over political and economic processes in the region. Second, in each of the Transcaucasian countries anti-Russian nationalism was not ethnic in nature. In fact, ethnic Russians in each country are accepted as legitimate inhabitants and do not experience the popular resentment and persecution that occurs elsewhere. Resentment toward the Russian state does not equate with resentment towards ethnic Russians “next door.”

The Russian national project is the least well-defined. Because national survival is not at issue, it is based primarily on Russia’s relationship with the West. The key task is to win respect from, and/or inclusion in, the West. Failing inclusion, however, there is no viable alternative national project for Russia except the restoration of Communism. There is, however, the will for an alternative project, as evidenced by the rise in “Slavophilism,” “Eurasianism,” and similar trends in the Russian policy discourse. But these notions cannot form the basis for a truly distinct national project because in fact they are reducible to mere anti-Westernism.



Charles Fairbanks, Dominique Arel, and Ghia Nodia (left to right) at our April conference

Azerbaijan: The Pitfalls of Oil Politics

Alec Rasizade

Alec Rasizade was a visiting scholar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC in 1996-1997. From 1992-1994, Dr. Rasizade served as the first permanent Azeri correspondent at the United Nations, where he reported on UN/US/Canadian affairs to the Azerbaijan government news agency and several Baku newspapers. Dr. Rasizade presented the following talk at Berkeley on 31 January 1997.

There is currently a marked double-standard in US policy towards Azerbaijan, Dr. Rasizade argued. Formally, the US supports democracy in the region, but in practice it continues to support Azerbaijani President Heidar Aliiev, who replaced the former, democratically-elected President Abulfaz Elchibey through a military coup in 1993.

Dr. Rasizade offered several explanations for US support for a regime whose democratic credentials are questionable. First and foremost, the US believes that President Aliiev is a stabilizing force in Azerbaijan, regardless of his undemocratic credentials. Aliiev is indeed a clever politician and a realist and is thus not likely to repeat the mistakes of his predecessor in dealing with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Rather than attempting to win back Nagorno-Karabakh through military means, Aliiev is concentrating instead on the development of Azerbaijan's economic capacity, most notably its oil production and export capabilities.

This strategy depends heavily on the involvement of western oil and gas companies, and it thus translates into an Azerbaijani foreign policy that is heavily oriented towards the West. Given that Azerbaijan is located in a region that is largely anti-western due to the influence of Iran and Russia, it is understandable why the US would support Aliiev. Political stability and a pro-western orientation in Azerbaijan—a country which has experienced four changes in government since 1991—is thus a priority of US foreign policy.

Despite western support for Aliiev, Azerbaijan remains highly unstable. The economy is in dire straits, despite substantial foreign investment in the oil industry. The World Bank estimates that unemployment in the country is now 52 percent—a shocking number, even by post-Soviet standards, and a dangerous indicator of possible social unrest. Corruption is rampant and dangerous. Even while fighting raged in Nagorno-Karabakh, war profiteers

and corrupt officials engaged in profiteering that damaged Azerbaijan's war effort.

Among the reasons for the poor performance of the Azerbaijani economy is that business practices, particularly in the oil industry, are not transparent, and profits from oil production do not filter down to society. As Dr. Rasizade put it, "Nobody really knows how much oil is being produced." Some two or three million tons of oil per year is not reported at all. Even western oil companies apparently do not have reliable figures on total extraction. This unreported oil is sold on the black market, with profit used to line the pockets of certain elites.

Nevertheless, Azerbaijan still produces a great deal of oil each year. But even the revenue from oil sold through legitimate channels does not help those in greatest need in Azerbaijan, who include the elderly, the growing legions of poor, and the nearly one million refugees in the country. Only 50 to 100 families close to President Aliiev and his allies enjoy real access to oil profits.

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Dr. Rasizade went on to discuss the prospects for peace in Nagorno-Karabakh. In his opinion, the conflict in Karabakh has reached an equilibrium point. Armenian forces have already achieved their strategic goal of securing Karabakh and a connecting corridor to Armenia, and thus are unlikely to advance or attack further. In Azerbaijan, however, there is clearly considerable pressure on the government to reclaim territory. With 20 percent of its territory currently occupied and nearly one million internal refugees hampering economic and social development, this is understandable. Aliiev is aware,

however, of the limitations of Azerbaijan's military capabilities and understands that Azerbaijan cannot reconquer the lost territories. He also fears that a military setback would lead to another coup attempt in Baku. The Azerbaijan military is also being forced to deal with other active or potential insurgencies, such the Talysh uprising in the south (which is backed by Iran) and the Lezgin independence movement in the north (supported by Russia).

Neither are the Azerbaijani people enthusiastic supporters of war. Although the refugees in the republic put constant pressure on the regime to reclaim lost territory, some have already settled down and adjusted to a new life in Baku and elsewhere. The Azerbaijani people as a whole want peace and are disillusioned with their leaders. Even academics—often a source of nationalist and patriotic rhetoric—have become subdued.

As a result, it is very unlikely that Azerbaijan will launch a military offensive. Instead, the government is trying to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict using its political contacts with the West and its economic ties to western

oil companies.



Nayerh Tohidi at our April conference.

Armenia's Progress Towards Democracy

Ludmilla Haroutunian

On 24 February 1997, Ludmilla Haroutunian delivered a presentation at Berkeley on recent political developments in Armenia. Dr. Haroutunian is the Head of the Sociology Department at Yerevan State University and was a Visiting Scholar in 1997 at the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University.

In 1991, as the Soviet Union moved towards dissolution, many observers in the USSR and elsewhere predicted that the post-Soviet experience would be characterized by quick and easy democratization and marketization. This optimistic view was shared by many individuals in Armenia.

However, despite the pro-democratic leanings of society, the regime in Armenia today is semi-authoritarian. The reasons for this unfortunate outcome can be traced to two factors. First, the initiation of the democratization process in Armenia was primarily state-directed and did not emerge from a process of grassroots mobilization. Second, the process was often spontaneous in nature and lacked

proper planning. As a result, previously-existing institutions, such as trade unions, were destroyed or disbanded, but the leaders of the nascent democracy made no efforts to establish suitable replacements.

When parliamentary elections were held in the summer of 1995, international observers characterized them as "free but not fair" because of interference by the ruling government of President Ter-Petrosian. Not surprisingly, the result was a pro-government legislature and an end to the separation of powers between executive and legislative branches of government. Although there is still a relatively free press in the republic, the executive is a political "monolith" in which all key decisions are made by President Ter-Petrosian and his immediate advisors.

Dr. Haroutunian continued by asking, “Why have the Armenian people accepted this authoritarian outcome?” She listed four key reasons. The first is that the country, for much of its independence, has been in a virtual state of war with Azerbaijan. Fighting in and around Nagorno-Karabakh has distracted people’s attention from democratization and intensified feelings of nationalism, which made criticism of the government difficult. The implementation of the economic blockade of Armenia by Azerbaijan and Turkey reinforced a “barracks mentality” in the populace. As a result, the threshold of tolerance for authoritarian rule was raised in the interests of stability.

Second, the spread of poverty in the country has similarly raised the population’s tolerance threshold. People who are cold and hungry are more apt to be concerned with issues of economic sustenance rather than abstract concepts of democracy.

Third, the absence of a middle class in Armenia in the wake of the collapse of Soviet socialism hindered democratization. Like other post-communist societies, Armenia lacked this basic societal safeguard against authoritarian “backsliding.”

Finally, the polarization of society in Armenia along economic lines precluded coalition-building at the elite level in opposition to authoritarian rule.

In September 1996, presidential elections were held in Armenia. These elections were widely condemned by outside observers as neither free nor fair. State involvement in promoting the incumbent, President Ter-Petrossian, was even more extensive than in the preceding year’s parliamentary elections. Moreover, there was evidence of considerable electoral fraud. Some observers have even claimed that Ter-Petrossian not only did not pass the 50 percent threshold needed to avoid a second round, but actually may have come in second to his principal opponent, National Democratic Union Chairman Vazgen Manukian.

Despite the unfortunate character of the 1996 presidential elections, Dr. Haroutunian argued that there are some grounds for optimism about the prospects for democracy in Armenia. The communists, she noted, received fewer votes in Armenia than anywhere else in the CIS. Moreover, the state’s overt manipulation of the election results has led Armenian society to become a stronger, more united force for change. More Armenians are mobilizing to “defend freedom.” Finally, Ter-Petrossian

appears to have taken warning from the violence in Yerevan after the election, and he now appears to be genuinely interested in a dialog with society.

The apparent trend towards increased support for democracy has been supported by recent public opinion surveys. Armenians appear to have renewed their commitment to human rights and market reforms and to have a waning interest in the Karabakh conflict. Buoyed by a vibrant NGO sector, the continued involvement of foreign governments, and the influence of its large diaspora, Armenia is slowly creating a new civil society.



American University of Armenia in Yerevan.

Coming soon

Conference Report

Institutions, Identity, and Ethnic Conflict: International Experience and Its Implications for the Caucasus

This report will summarize the presentations from the second annual Caucasus Conference co-sponsored by the Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, the Institute of International Studies, and the Center for Slavic and East European Studies at UC Berkeley.

This two-day workshop and conference was held on 2-3 May, 1997 at UC Berkeley. The workshop dealt with broad theoretical issues and interesting case studies, while the public conference specifically addressed the Caucasus with the following presentations:

Panel on Chechnya and the North Caucasus:

John B. Dunlop, *Prelude to Conflict: Bilateral Negotiations Between Moscow and Grozny, 1992-94*; Paula Garb, *Ethnicity, Alliance Building, and the Limited Spread of Violence in the North Caucasus*; Gail W. Lapidus, *Chechnya in Regional Comparative Perspective*; Johanna Nichols, *War and the Politics of Non-Natural Language Endangerment in the Caucasus*

Panel on Georgia and the Abkhaz Crisis:

Catherine Dale, *The Politics of Representation in the Abkhaz Crisis*; Ghia Nodia, *Nationalism and Subnationalisms in Georgia*; Ronald G. Suny, *Fragments and Forms: National and Supernational Identities in Georgia*

Panel on Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh:

Nora Dudwick, *The Borders of Belonging: State and Citizenship in Armenia and Azerbaijan*; Charles Fairbanks, *Negotiating Post-Communist Ethnic Conflict*; Nayereh Tohidi, *Gender, Religion, and Ethnicity in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: A Regional Perspective*

Published by the Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies and the Institute for International Studies. Publication information will be announced as it becomes available. Watch our web site for further details: <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~bsp/caucasus/caucprog.html>

Demographics and Ethnic Conflict: The Case of Abkhazia

Revaz Gachechiladze

Revaz Gachechiladze is Head of the Human Geography Department at Tbilisi State University. He was a visiting professor at Mt. Holyoke College in 1996-1997. Following is a summary of a presentation at Berkeley by Dr. Gachechiladze on 27 January 1997.

Dr. Gachechiladze began by noting the Abkhaz people's long-standing complaint that they were becoming an ethnic minority within their own country during the Soviet period due to in-migration of other peoples, particularly Georgians and Russians. The root of the problem was not demographics, however. Rather it was the creation of ethnically-defined administrative divisions by Soviet leaders. The decision to create internal borders using ethnic criteria has been a major source of ethnic tension and conflict throughout the Caucasus. Naming an area after an ethnic group, Dr. Gachechiladze noted, suggested that the titular ethnic group had an ownership claim to the land. As a result, there is inevitably an imbalance of rights between ethnic groups within a given territory.

Abkhazia, unlike other autonomous areas of the North Caucasus such as Dagestan and Chechnya, has a history of independent statehood. The Kingdom of Abkhazia existed during the Middle Ages. On the other hand, the territory and population of Abkhazia today is relatively small. In 1989, Abkhazia had a total population of approximately 525,000 people, 17.8 percent of whom were ethnic Abkhaz. Nevertheless, the territory had the status of an autonomous republic (ASSR), the same status, for example, as the much larger Tatarstan ASSR, with its 3.6 million inhabitants in 1989. The status brought with it a host of privileges, including preferential treatment of ethnic Abkhaz within the republic (e.g., reservation of certain key posts, such as minister of the Abkhaz ASSR militia, minister of culture, local police chiefs, and judges, for ethnic Abkhaz).

According to Dr. Gachechiladze, Abkhazia's geographical location helped account for the territory's status in the Soviet period. Home to some of the most beautiful seaside resorts in the USSR, Abkhazia served as a retreat for much of the Soviet political elite. Local Abkhaz leaders therefore had access to Kremlin leaders, and they were thus more likely to have their demands heeded.

The "awakening" and assertion of Abkhaz nationalism in the Soviet era is particularly surprising given the historical weakness of Abkhaz identity. Linguistically, Abkhaz is related to Circassian and Adygei, and Abkhaz speakers inhabit both the south and the north slopes of the Caucasus range. From the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, Abkhazia was part of a so-called United Kingdom that encompassed not only ethnic Georgians and Abkhaz, but all other groups in what is now western Georgia as well. Within this United Kingdom, what might be called "cultural/religious affiliations" were more important than ethnicity. Georgian, French and Tatar culture were particularly influential. Georgian Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Islam all made in-roads into the republic. Georgian was both the *lingua franca* and the language of high culture. The first bible introduced in the area was in Georgian, and the Abkhaz language itself did not become a literary language until the end of the nineteenth century, when an alphabet was invented by an ethnic Abkhaz and an ethnic Georgian in order to translate ecclesiastical texts into the vernacular. The first Abkhaz-language book was not published until 1912.

The Soviet practice of naming an area after an ethnic group suggested that the titular ethnic group had an ownership claim to the land.

An important indicator of the fluidity of identities prior to the Soviet period was the fact that the names of individuals—usually an important ethnic marker—tended to change as rulers changed. Moreover, ethnic borders were not neatly aligned with political boundaries, and indeed proved more durable and less fluid because rulers tended to change more rapidly than local populations.

Even relatively reliable demographic information from Abkhazia did not become available until the nineteenth century. In 1864, the Abkhaz principality, as a result of a

divisive internal feud between pro-Ottoman and pro-Russian factions, was absorbed into the Russian empire. The area became the “Sukhumskii Okrug” within the empire, and those Abkhaz who had favored closer ties to Turkey and the Ottoman empire emigrated to Turkey. Nevertheless, many of those who stayed in Abkhazia sided with the Turks during their ongoing conflicts with Russia, particularly during the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78. These loyalties led the Russian government to encourage continued Abkhaz emigration to Turkey. Russian sources put the number of emigrants during this period at 32,000, with 13,000 Abkhaz remaining, which is probably a reasonable estimate. (These figures, however, like emigration estimates for other periods, are contested by

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Abkhaz historians, some of whom claim that the Abkhaz numbered as many as 500,000, not 50,000, at the time.) Complicating the situation further is the fact that a significant portion of the émigrés returned—up to one-half, according to some sources. Unfortunately for the Abkhaz, however, the Russians had already given much of their land to settlers from the European parts of the empire, including Bulgarians, Cossacks, Germans, and Estonians, as well as to Greeks, Armenians, and Georgians. The resulting resentments over property contributed to the Abkhaz belief that they were being discriminated against.

Nevertheless, borders in the region remained highly fluid and ill-defined, with particular areas still identified as belonging to particular “lords,” as in feudal times. Moreover, many members of the newly emergent working class were ethnic Mingrelians. In the Gali area, which is now the part of southern Abkhazia bordering on Mingrelia, some 90 percent of the population probably spoke Mingrelian as their first language.

In the period since, demographic data indicate that population figures for ethnic Abkhaz and other ethnic groups residing in Abkhazia have fluctuated dramatically. However, in many cases these fluctuations resulted from changes in policies that created incentives for people to change their ethnic identity. For the most part, then, they did not reflect changes in language use, migrations, or real changes in political loyalties. For example, in the early part of this century, individuals had an incentive to list Abkhaz as their identity because the Abkhaz, not being Christian, were exempt from military conscription. In 1910, however, conscription became universal, and

incentives changed again. As a result of these and similar changes in official policy, the population of entire villages would suddenly be reclassified. By 1926, the ethnic composition and distribution of the region had thus become extremely murky.

Dr. Gachechiladze then presented census figures and estimates of ethnic breakdowns in Abkhazia. The 1959 Soviet census listed a total figure of 62,900 ethnic Abkhazians, who made up 15.1 percent of the total population of the region. These figures grew to 95,900 and 17.8 percent in the often-cited 1989 census. However, intermarriage was relatively common (some 15 percent of Abkhaz had a Georgian spouse), many Abkhaz spoke Russian or Mingrelian at home, and Russian had become the *lingua franca* of the republic. Moreover, most Abkhaz (some 70 percent) were educated in Russian-language, not Georgian-language, schools, which contributed to their orientation toward Russia and away from Georgia. Only Abkhaz literature and history tended to be taught in Abkhaz.

The main precipitant of the mobilization of Abkhaz nationalism in the Gorbachev period was the desire of certain key Abkhaz leaders, particularly Vladislav Ardzinba, to preserve their political position as the Soviet system was being democratized. Democracy threatened to increase the political power of the Georgians in the republic, who represented 45.5 percent of the population. As Ardzinba put it, the Abkhaz would never allow themselves to become a minority in their “own” country. Abkhaz nationalism was then given a critical boost by the misguided policies of the Georgian government and the political chaos in Tbilisi in 1992.



Johanna Nichols speaking at our April conference.

An Alternative View from Abkhazia

Liana Kvarchelia

Liana Kvarchelia was a professor of English at Sukhumi State University before the Abkhazia-Georgia conflict. Dr. Kvarchelia is Coordinator with the Center for Humanitarian Programs, Abkhazia. Below is a summary of her 25 November 1996 presentation at Berkeley on Georgian-Abkhazian relations.

Recent developments in Chechnya have added a new dimension to the Georgian-Abkhazian peace process. Georgia is now trying to avoid, whenever possible, any comparison between Chechnya and Abkhazia. Shevardnadze was one of the first to give public support to President Yeltsin when Yeltsin ordered the attack on Chechnya in December 1994. Shevardnadze then called for joint efforts to suppress all manifestations of "aggressive separatism" at any cost. However, after the signing of the Khasavyurt accords, he stated that the Abkhazian and Chechen conflicts differed and that the means for their settlement should therefore be different. Despite many similarities there is in fact one important difference between the two situations: the Chechens fought against Russia, while the Abkhazians had to confront Mr. Shevardnadze, with his worldwide image as a champion of democracy and peace.

So far, economic and political sanctions by Russia (including the closing of the Russian-Abkhazian border and the cutting of communication links with Abkhazia) and pressure from Western countries have forced the Abkhazians, after three years of de facto independence, to make some concessions. Abkhazians are willing to sign an agreement whereby Georgia and Abkhazia would unite in a federative union. Still, Abkhazia insists that the relationship between the two parties be put on an equal footing, in accordance with the documents signed by both parties in 1994 under the aegis of the United Nations, Russia, and the CSCE (now OSCE). Only the people of Abkhazia have the right to determine their own future. In the Abkhazian view, negotiations with Georgia should be focused on re-establishing relations between the two republics.

Georgia, in its turn, insists on an arrangement in which it would be the "center" and Abkhazia a province to which Georgia would delegate certain powers. However, Georgia's promises to grant Abkhazia broad autonomy are not believed by Abkhazians. Abkhazians now see the preservation of their statehood as essential to securing

not only their self-determination but also their very survival. Georgia, for its part, is not capable of forcing its will on Abkhazia without outside help. Hence, Georgia is maneuvering to get third parties to do the job.

One instrument of pressure on the Abkhazians has been the issue of Georgian refugees. To affect their prompt return, the Georgian side has insisted that Russian peacekeepers be entrusted with police functions.

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However, that would mean Russian forces would be directly involved in armed confrontation because the return of refugees, before a political settlement acceptable to all sides is reached, would inevitably trigger new clashes.

A recent UN Security Council resolution strongly supported the Georgian demand to return the refugees to Abkhazia and insisted it was inadmissible to link the refugee problem to the issue of Abkhazia's "political status." But for Abkhazians, "political status" constitutes the core of the conflict.

Mr. Shevardnadze has acknowledged that sending troops to Abkhazia was a grave mistake. Georgian refugees from Abkhazia are paying a heavy price for that mistake. Many have already spontaneously returned to the Gali region of Abkhazia, which had been predominantly inhabited by ethnic Mingrelians. Return to other areas, where there were more mixed populations, would only increase tensions. Non-Georgians would see them as Georgia's "fifth column." What is more, three-quarters of the Georgian refugees do not want to return to Abkhazia as long as Abkhazia is not under Georgian jurisdiction,

according to a survey published by the Norwegian Refugee Council in 1995.

A second means of pressuring Abkhazia into accepting Georgian rule is the implied threat of greater Russian involvement. Throughout September and October 1996, Georgian leaders repeatedly threatened to suspend the Russian peacekeepers' mandate and warned of the possibility of reviewing Georgia's military agreements with Russia, and even of seceding from the CIS, if Russia did not help settle the conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia on Georgian terms. These warnings have been followed by statements that the fate of Russian military bases in Georgia will depend on how the Abkhazian conflict is resolved. However, realizing that he cannot rely on Western assistance, Shevardnadze recognizes Russia's geopolitical role as chief broker in the region, and he will therefore not risk alienating Russia completely.

Trying to restore Georgia's territorial integrity, however, by agreeing to a Russian military presence in Georgia in exchange for Russian coercion of Abkhazia, will not solve Georgia's problems. Russia is aware that in such a situation, Georgia's loyalty would only be temporary and limited. On the other hand, coercing Abkhazia will undermine any attempts at reconciliation. Abkhazia and South Ossetia at this point have little reason to believe that Georgia is building a democratic state, or that they can seek the accommodation of their rights within it. The Abkhazians and South Ossetians are therefore certain to resist any kind of association with Georgia if there are no genuine guarantees for their own security.

As for the Western position, it seems that oil pipeline interests on the one hand, and considerations of NATO enlargement on the other, contribute to Western indifference to Abkhazia's plight. But any solution to the conflict that is sanctioned by the international community will contribute to long-term security and peace only if it takes into account the particular reasons and claims for self-determination and statehood of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as of Chechnya and Nagorno-Karabakh.

While it may seem impossible to accommodate the principles of self-determination and territorial integrity, if there are sufficient security guarantees for minorities, an acceptable alternative to total independence might be a confederation or a union state in which each entity has equal rights and access to international organizations. Other consensual arrangements that provide for satisfactory safeguards are also possible.

In this regard, the world community can and must play a constructive role if there is to be any long-term

reconciliation between Georgia and Abkhazia. The two main tendencies in the world today—self-determination movements to establish new states and the integration process among older states—need not in the long run contradict each other. The new states-to-be are seeking independence not because they want to isolate themselves from the rest of the world, but because they want to be integrated into the world community directly and equally.



Hurst Hannum at our second annual Caucasus conference in April 1997.

Forces of Stability and Instability in Transcaucasia

Ghia Nodia

Ghia Nodia is Chairman of the Board of the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) in Tbilisi, Georgia. While at BPS as Caucasus Visiting Scholar, Dr. Nodia delivered the following talk on 12 February 1997.

It is difficult to explain the profoundly rapid changes in the Transcaucasus over the past six years simply by focusing on culture. Cultural theories tend to assume that cultures change only slowly and with considerable difficulty, but in fact the extent of cultural change in the Transcaucasus has been dramatic. Geopolitical factors therefore seem to have been far more important. The evolving relationships between countries such as Iran and Armenia, or between Georgia and Russia, are better able to explain the nature of the transitions underway in this complex region.

Since 1989, the changes in politics, society, and economics in the Caucasus can be divided into two relatively distinct phases. The first, which lasted from 1989 to 1993, was defined by extreme political instability throughout the region, except in Armenia. Ethnic warfare and frequent coups characterized the period. Since 1993, however, cease-fires and stabilization have replaced the near anarchy of 1989-1993.

Dr. Nodia rejected the hypothesis that direct outside intervention explains the shift in the Caucasus towards a more stable equilibrium. The Yugoslavia analogy, where US-led western involvement brought about a cessation of hostilities, does not apply to the Caucasus because the West has had limited involvement there. The main foreign geopolitical actor in the region has been Russia, and Russia, according to Dr. Nodia, has not significantly changed its policy of attempting to take advantage of, and sometimes of fostering, instability in the region.

Rather than direct outside involvement, it is the West's economic influence that helps explain the stabilization of the region. The growing influence of international institutions, particularly the IMF and World Bank, but also Western oil companies, has been particularly important. However, this increased Western economic involvement also needs to be explained, since it became possible only after the region's turn towards stabilization in 1993-1994.

Key here was the process of state-building in the region. The sudden advent of independence meant that the ruling elites of the new states were initially politically immature. In addition, each country experienced a massive economic crisis. As a result, politics became the domain of "rallies and conspiratorial theories," and elites had incentives to become "ethnic entrepreneurs" who relied on "romantic heroism" and the "right of history" as the basis for their legitimacy. This is in marked contrast to Latin American countries, where the rhetoric during democratic transitions has often been equally nationalistic, but where political elites have usually been more mature than those in the Transcaucasus in 1991.

Today, after years of turmoil, the new regimes in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia are relatively stable. Pragmatic realism rather than romantic revolutionism characterizes their political programs. Each regime can

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be characterized as a mixture of democracy and a "police state" in which the police remain the most important power base for the leadership and are accorded more importance and prestige than the army.

This relative stability, however, manifests itself differently in each country. In Georgia, a left-wing opposition of communists has replaced the right as the prime antagonist of the government, and the threat of "warlordism" has largely disappeared. In Armenia, society has indicated a willingness to take to the streets to oppose President Levon Ter-Petrossian's growing authoritarianism.

For the region as a whole, ethnic conflicts no longer present the same danger because the major conflict zones

have “already exploded,” and governments and people are war-weary. This is reflected above all in Azerbaijan’s unwillingness to pursue a military solution to the impasse over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Despite these signs of stability, Dr. Nodia warned against jumping to the conclusion that further stabilization is inevitable. The death of Shevardnadze, Aliev, or Ter-Petrosian would likely provoke a political crisis and even violence in each country. And it is always possible that violence will break out again in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, or Abkhazia.



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