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CAUSES AND VISIONS OF CONFLICT IN ABKHAZIA

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CAUSES AND VISIONS OF CONFLICT IN ABKHAZIA

This is not the first attempt to give an account of the conflict in Abkhazia, so problematizing the endeavor might be a good place to start.[1] One might begin with "hard facts"—that is, with a description of what happened and when. This seems obvious and safe—any account of a violent conflict is vulnerable to the charge that it is "tendentious," particularly when the author is a member of one of the parties to the conflict. Staying close to "hard" facts might therefore deter such accusations. But this is only an illusion. "Letting facts speak for themselves" has always been a favorite polemical method for ardent partisans. In reality, facts never speak for themselves but are used or abused by the people who select them. Empirical research is of course necessary, but one has to be aware that selecting facts, let alone assessing their importance or uniting them in a cohesive picture, is impossible without making certain assumptions. For example, one must choose the starting point of the narrative—the first event from which the conflict as conflict is said to unfold. But any answer to the question "Who did the first wrong?" is inevitably contentious.

This problem is not limited to those who represent or sympathize with one of the parties to the conflict. Being free of emotional involvement may be helpful, but it hardly guarantees "impartiality." A theoretical assumption may be just as sacred for an emotionally detached academic as a piece of land is for a combatant in an "ethnic" war. Moreover, the level of tolerance towards rival paradigms in the academic world is scarcely higher than tolerance between ethnic enemies, and the desire to support a scholarly point may influence the arrangement of facts no less that the desire to make a political point influences the arrangement of facts showing that "we are right and they are wrong."

Analyzing popular assumptions and biases about the Abkhaz conflict or similar conflicts is thus a natural starting point. I do not mean to imply that I intend to rid myself of all prejudgments and reach some ideal point of observation. Having tried for many centuries, western philosophers appear to have given up the hope of finding such a point. Rather, popular assumptions about the conflict have to be formulated and elucidated because an interpretation of the "facts" depends upon them. Moreover, these assumptions constitute factors in the conflict itself. The conflict began because certain people had certain assumptions about themselves, about others, and about political fairness in general. In addition, the assumptions of outsiders had an impact because "direct" participants treated them as powerful and authoritative forces.

For me, then, the description of a conflict is primarily the description of ideas, symbols, stereotypes, visions, and assessments. The account of actual events—certainly

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[1]See, for instance: Fiona Hill, *Report on Ethnic Conflicts in the Russian Federation and Transcaucasia*, Harvard University: Cambridge, Mass., 1993; Suzanne Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations: The Caucasus and Post-Soviet Disorder*, Zed Books Ltd.: London, 1994; Catherine Dale, *Development and Implications of the Conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia*, in: "Conflicts in the Caucasus", Conference Proceedings, International Peace Research Institute: Oslo, 1995; Alexei Zverev, "Ethnic Conflict in the Caucasus 1988-94," in Bruno Coppieters, ed., *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, VUB University Press: Brussels, 1996.

important in itself—only makes sense once the conflict is framed in a certain way. Thus, while a number of narrative accounts of the conflict already exist, I contend that the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict has yet to be adequately described.

In the text that follows, I focus on the perspectives of four major actors. The first and second actors are those of the direct parties to the conflict—the Georgians and the Abkhaz.[2] The third is that of Russia, which has been involved in the conflict throughout all of its stages, at least according to the Georgians, and can therefore be treated as a party to the conflict with its own vested interests. Finally, there is the perspective of the West, the direct involvement of which in a military and even a political sense has so far been limited but that dominates modern political discourse by defining terms like "ethnic conflict," "territorial integrity," and "minority rights." The West is also seen as the ultimate arbiter in defining standards of acceptable political behavior, and it has therefore had a much greater impact on events than would appear at face value.

How to Name It?—Words and Essences

The first and most important way to frame reality is to name it. The conventional argument in language theory holds that terms do not express the "essence" of reality but denote it, and it thus does not matter what term is chosen as long as those employing it agree on a definition. This argument has definite practical value, and when speaking about conflicts like Abkhazia, I often use commonly accepted terms regardless of whether I like them. The people who are usually described as "parties to the conflict," on the other hand, invariably feel strongly about the way it is named. Those engaged in debates about a particular conflict often insist on the use of particular terms, an insistence that outsiders tend to view as merely another obsession. But this obsession over words and symbols is one of the most important features of the consciousness shared by both Georgians and the Abkhaz (describing that consciousness as "post-communist" would be correct but one-sided, so I will leave it unnamed). And what but the mentality of participants is the primary cause of the conflict in the first place?

Though western observers are less preoccupied with terminological debates, the terms they choose also manifest a kind of prejudgment or prejudice. The conventional argument about the arbitrariness of terms is a normative abstraction rather then a description of scholarly practice. Especially when it comes to social and human sciences, the choice of words is rarely accidental and says a great deal about the way that reality is framed—or, to put it differently, it says a great deal about the kind of western discourse by which this reality finds itself reconstructed.

"Ethnic" conflict?

Conflicts like the one in Abkhazia are routinely called "ethnic conflicts" by Westerners. However, neither word ("ethnic" or "conflict") is usually accepted by the parties themselves. Georgians, for example, are very unwilling to use this term and resent when

[2] How one understands "Georgians" and "Abkhaz" as parties to the conflict (the Georgian people in the ethnic sense, the Georgian political elite, the Georgian state, the Abkhaz ethnocracy, the multinational people of Abkhazia, etc.) is a problem in itself, which I will skip at this point.

others use it because they believe it implies a kind of anti-Georgian prejudice. It is not an ethnic conflict but a *political* conflict, they insist. And while I know less about the Abkhaz reaction to this term, I rather doubt that the Abkhaz are any happier with it than the Georgians.

What do Georgians mean by juxtaposing these two terms ("political" and "ethnic") and resenting the term "ethnic conflict"?[3] The Georgian preference for calling the conflict "political" implies that the conflict is about statehood, and more particularly, about the independence and territorial integrity of the state. Georgia is fighting not specific ethnic communities but "separatists"—that is, people who are challenging its territorial integrity, whatever their ethnic origin. The conflict is also about independence because—Georgians insist—they are staged or encouraged by the "Russian Empire" or "imperial forces in Russia." The Abkhaz, they assert, would not make separatist demands, or at least would not be so bold in raising them, had they not been encouraged to do so by the Russians (which again means Russian "imperial forces," not ethnic Russians). Moreover, the conflict as "ethnic conflict" would imply that its cause was *ethnic hatred*, and that it occurred because ethnic communities hated each other and could no longer live together. And because ethnic Georgians constitute the majority in the country and dominate the government, they bear primary responsibility for the coexistence of ethnic communities. Defining the conflict as "ethnic" would therefore imply that Georgians are intolerant of minorities and are to blame for the conflict. Moreover, there are a number of ethnic minorities in Georgia who are much more numerous than the Abkhaz and or the Ossetians (Georgia's opponents in another separatist conflict). If Georgians cannot co-exist with the Abkhaz and Ossetians, than they can be expected to clash with others as well—but this has not, in fact, been the case.

Likewise the Abkhaz do not see their cause as stemming from initial hatred between themselves and ethnic Georgians. For them, the conflict is about self-determination, about their right to define their political status and stand up to those who want to deprive them of their land, their ethnic home. The Georgians—that is the Georgian state—are seen as "imperialists" and invaders who have usurped the power to make decisions about the fate of the Abkhaz people. The ethnic Georgians who lived in Abkhazia before the war were seen as colonial settlers whose presence resulted from a successful Georgian conspiracy led by Stalin and Beria—ethnic Georgian leaders of the Soviet Union—who wanted Georgians to outnumber the Abkhaz in their own homeland. Accordingly, the war in Abkhazia is simply a national-liberation struggle against foreign invaders. Moreover, Abkhaz leaders insist that Abkhazia is a multinational (that is, multiethnic) country where anyone is welcome, ethnicity notwithstanding, as long as he or she is loyal to the Abkhaz state.

Hardly any sensible Georgian or Abkhaz would deny that ethnic animosity between the two communities is a reality now. Moreover, radicals and moderates on the both sides have different views on whether and under what circumstances reconciliation is possible.

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[3]A typical example: a report from the Fourth International Forum of People's Diplomacy in Moscow, which was entitled "Ethnic conflict or political conflict?" The head of the Georgian delegation, Aleksandr Gerasimov, emphasized as a very important positive element that "it became once more clear at this meeting that the conflict in Abkhazia is not an ethnic conflict between Georgians and Abkhaz, it is a political conflict" (*Sakartvelos Respublika*, 15 May 1993).

But both would also claim that this animosity is the result, not the cause, of the conflict. Georgians dislike Abkhaz not because they have some particular misgiving about the Abkhaz in particular or about minorities in Georgia in general, but because the Abkhaz are "separatists" who want to take what Georgians believe is a legitimate part of Georgian territory. The Abkhaz in their turn dislike Georgians as imperialists and aggressors who want to deprive them of their land. But Georgians would proudly support a "good" Abkhaz who denounced the Abkhaz separatism, while the Abkhaz would do the same for a non-imperialist Georgian who supports the Abkhaz cause (although there are, unfortunately, not many examples of either pro-Georgian Abkhaz or pro-Abkhaz Georgians to be found).

It would therefore be reasonable to summarize the root of the resentment against the phrase "ethnic conflict" by saying that both sides see it as *denigrating their cause*, for two reasons. First, it assumes that the parties to the conflict are intolerant of other ethnic groups in general, an allegation neither would accept (they are intolerant, respectively, of separatists and imperialists, not specific ethnic groups). Second, the term "ethnic conflict" is usually applied to the Third World, not to similar conflicts that have broken out in the past in the West. Labeling the conflict as "ethnic" is therefore seen as implying that the parties to the conflict are themselves "backward" and "uncivilized."

Nevertheless, both Georgians and Abkhaz have lately become used to the term "ethnic conflict" and no longer protest against it as vigorously. It is so widespread that objecting seems hopeless. This does not mean, however, that the implications of the term have become acceptable. Rather, the term is just seen as part of a power discourse with which one has to comply.

The fact that the participants dislike the term is not, however, sufficient grounds for rejecting it. In so far as nationalists of any type are beset by "the demons of history" and contaminated by "false consciousness," their petty terminological resentments may be dismissed or considered of marginal importance, as is usually the case. Why not denigrate causes that deserve to be denigrated? I think, however, that the term "ethnic conflict" may also be quite misleading. The general literature on "ethnic conflict" suggests that the term itself pushes research in a certain direction that is not necessarily the right one. In particular, it is widely assumed that the parties involved in "ethnic conflict" are predominantly defined on an ethnic basis. Michael E. Brown, trying to summarize several theoretical papers on modern ethnic conflict, takes this definition for granted: "*At the risk of stating the obvious* [italics are mine - G.N.], an "ethnic conflict" is a dispute about important political, economic, social, cultural, or territorial issues between two or more ethnic communities."[4] *Issues* may vary, but the conflict will still be described as "ethnic" as long as its agents, or the parties to the conflict, are "ethnic groups" or "ethnic communities."

What does it mean, however, that an ethnic community is involved in an "ethnic conflict"? To put this question differently, what is the difference between an *interethnic* and an *international* conflict? Most conflicts that are called "international" have some kind of ethnic element behind them—are they also "ethnic conflicts?" For instance, was World

[4]Michael E. Brown, "Causes and Implications of Ethnic Conflict", in: Michael E. Brown, ed., *Ethnic Conflict and International Security* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1993), p. 5.

War II an "ethnic conflict?" The Germans defined themselves in ethnic-racial terms, and they often referred to their adversaries in ethnic terms. It was during the war that Stalin became an open Russian nationalist who appealed to the past glory of the Russian people and downplayed communist ideology in an effort to mobilize his country against the enemy. Even the United States detained its own nationals of Japanese origin during the war simply because of their ethnicity. (Can this be called a kind of temporary "ethnic cleansing"?)

In the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, on the other hand, the armed groups fighting on the Abkhaz side were multiethnic in composition and included Russians, Armenians, Chechens, Kabardins, and so on. Indeed it is questionable whether ethnic Abkhaz fighters were a majority of those fighting on the Abkhaz side. While Abkhaz leaders scorn the view that Georgians really fought against Russia and that the Abkhaz were merely the latter's fifth column in Georgia, they nevertheless emphasize that the Abkhaz cause had multiethnic support and that there were even some Georgians who fought with the Abkhaz. At the same time, the Georgian army was comprised mostly of ethnic Georgians but included some representatives of other ethnic groups as well, while a small Ukrainian battalion participated on the Georgian side. So which war fits the definition of the "ethnic conflict" better—World War II or the war in Abkhazia?[5]

Supposedly a major difference between the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and World War II is that the latter was between states while the former was between ethnic communities that were not represented at the international level. But does this distinction clearly apply here? Georgia and Abkhazia were not states with seats at the United Nations when the conflict started (although Georgia later acquired this status), but both had some form of quasi-statehood on the political planet called the USSR (as a union republic within the USSR in the Georgian case, and as an autonomous republic within a union republic in the Abkhaz case). Each had its own parliament, constitution, ministries of culture and education, and other attributes that made them at least feel (and often act) like nation-states. It is absolutely impossible to describe and understand the conflict without reference to these institutions and state symbols. Of course, it matters a great deal—especially for defining the position of the international community—that at least one party of the conflict was not an internationally recognized state. But representing the parties in some imagined space in which "ethnic communities" exist without any state affiliation would be extremely misleading—the entire dynamic of the conflict was determined by the presence of states labeled "Georgian" and "Abkhaz."

That parties to the conflict are often imagined this way by scholars of ethnic conflict is demonstrated by another influential article on the subject. Barry R. Posen has applied the logic of the security dilemma as developed in international relations theory to ethnic conflicts. Once an imperial order breaks down, he suggests, ethnic groups feel they have to provide for their own security. However, once they start to make arrangements to do so (organize, buy arms, etc.), their neighbors become even more suspicious and arm themselves to an even greater extent, which leads to a spiral of suspicion that eventually

[5] The comparison between the Abkhaz war and World War II would not sound as outlandish if we remember that in Abkhazia, both sides routinely addressed the other as "fascist regimes" and made it a public relations priority to prove that atrocities conducted by the other side constituted "genocide."

results in an assault that is understood by one of the parties as a preemptive strike against an imagined future assault by the other party.[6]

Posen's hypothesis of how ethnic conflicts unfold has considerable relevance to post-communist conflicts precisely because he transfers the logic of relations between states to that between "ethnic groups." But along the way, he makes an erroneous assumption about anarchy: in order to conceptualize a conflict as an "ethnic" one, he has to imagine "ethnic groups" that exist in a kind of "state of nature" outside any state order. This assumption, however, is at very least problematic. All the conflicts in the Caucasus (including the one in Abkhazia) began when the Soviet Union was still very much in existence. While liberalization of the Soviet regime eventually led to the breakdown of the Soviet state, this is only obvious in retrospect. In 1988, no one could have predicted with confidence this outcome. Although in some of the new states the situation did eventually degenerate into anarchy or near-anarchy, the onset of violence preceded this stage. It therefore would be fair to say that none of the "ethnic conflicts" on the territory of the former Soviet Union were the result of the breakup of the Soviet Union. Rather the reverse was true—one of the major reasons why the liberalization of the Soviet Union led to the state's breakup was that it could not control the internal conflicts (later labeled "ethnic conflicts" in some cases) between and within its constituent units.

This erroneous assumption logically follows from a self-imposed obligation to conceptualize certain conflicts as being between ethnic groups. In contrast to states, ethnic groups should be imagined as non-political entities (how else?), but as some kind of entities nevertheless. But how can this be done? What does it mean in practice that an "ethnic group" is an *agent* in a conflict? In order to be represented as an entity that is able to be a party to a conflict, an "ethnic group" should be somehow organized or shaped. But if political organization is forbidden by the paradigm of pure "ethnicity," should one assume a kind of tribal organization? Scholars of ethnic conflict do not go that far, but this logic expresses itself in the popular theory of "ancient ethnic hatreds." The theory is rejected by most social scientists because it runs counter to the dominant notion that ethnicity is "constructed" and is in a constant flux. However, the theory of "ancient hatreds" is still extremely popular among journalists and policy-makers (which is probably more important) exactly because it neatly fits in with the notion of "ethnic conflict."

Here, for instance, is how the British scholar and journalist Neal Acherson, presumably unaffected by the dogma of constructivism, presents the picture in his book *Black Sea*: "Different ethnic communities may co-exist for centuries, practicing the borrowing and visiting of good neighbors, sitting on the same school bench and serving in the same imperial regiments, without losing their underlying mutual distrust. But what held such societies together was not so much consent as necessity—the fear of external force.... It follows that when that fear is removed, through the collapse of empires or tyrannies, the constraint is removed too."[7] Suspicion and hatred between ethnic communities is thus the primary assumption, and it is the lack of the conflict rather than conflict itself that needs to be explained. Once ethnic communities are not prevented by a third party from attacking

[6]Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," in: Michael E. Brown, ed., *Ethnic Conflict and International Security* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1993), pp. 103-124.
[7]Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea*, Hill and Wang: New York, 1995, p. 245.

each other, it is only natural that ancient hatreds or the logic of the security dilemma puts them at each other's throats. This is a Hobbesian world, with the important difference that its agents are neither individuals nor states but some strange creatures called "ethnic groups."

In being cautious about employing the term "ethnic conflict," I do not mean to deny the obvious fact that "ethnicity"—however the term is defined—plays a very important, indeed a central, part in these conflicts. So do memories—although not necessarily ancient ones—of past violence. Rather, my point is that it is incorrect to assert that the conflict in Abkhazia occurred in a non-political state of anarchy. In fact, in all its stages state institutions were involved, and indeed the parties themselves defined their agendas in terms of "state sovereignty," "international law," and the like.

Confusion is also possible because at least two kinds of conflicts are far more deserving of the label of "ethnic." The first would be *tribal warfare* when two neighboring tribes are continuously involved in occasional fighting as a "normal" part of tribal life. The warfare is not directed at any "final" victory or attainment of a particular political end such as status. Much less is it directed at annihilating the enemy through "ethnic cleansing." Rather, it is more a form of economic activity (abducting cattle) or the exercise of male prowess (abducting women). This kind of conflict may be called ethnic conflict *per se*, because it does in fact exist outside the political realm. Many tribes of the mountainous Caucasus were involved in this kind of warfare, like the Khevsurs in Georgia or the Ingush tribes that Georgians call "Kisti." Khevsurs and Kisti still exist in the Caucasus mountains, but they do not show any sign of renewing their ancient skirmishes. On the other hand, nothing in the Georgian-Abkhaz, Georgian-Ossetian, Armenian-Azerbaijani, or Russian-Chechen conflicts allows us to trace them back to this kind of traditional tribal warfare.

A second type of conflict that deserves the label of "ethnic" is when a certain ethnic group (usually a minority) is physically assaulted without any political motivation, usually because of some alleged vice or involvement in a conspiracy. It is not specific institutions or political arrangements, but rather individuals and families—based on their ethnic affiliation—who are the targets of the violence. Anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia and other countries of Eastern Europe, or the much more systematic attempts to wipe out Jews in the Nazi holocaust, are classic examples, although there are many other examples in history as well. One can usually find some indirect political element here (like social discontent being rechanneled by political elites against a specific scapegoated group), but the justification for the assault is based on some kind of quasi-metaphysical or mystical claim rather than rational political interest.

Here we have a resemblance to the conflicts in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. *Ethnic violence*, when people are physically assaulted on the basis of their ethnicity, constitutes their common feature. Ethnic violence has become widely known because of the extent of *ethnic cleansing*. It is then that western journalists arrive and the world sees these countries on television for the first time. Journalists are followed by representatives of the conflict resolution community (both politicians and NGOs), who are charged with the urgent task of stopping the violence and preventing it from resuming. Journalists and members of the conflict resolution community interview people who have

already been exposed to the news from the battlefield and have come to view the opposing ethnic group as the embodiment of evil, rationalizing the enemy image by saying that the other side has done terrible things to their ancestors starting from century *N.* Journalists try to suppress their yawns (or sometimes don't) when they are lectured about history and quickly forget which century was actually mentioned, but they make a note for themselves that these peoples have a record of hating each other for a very, very long time.

It is understandable that the international community becomes interested in particular conflicts because of the extent of violence involved. But if our aim is to *understand* the conflict, we have to realize that violence is only a *stage* in its development, and it should not be taken for granted that this stage was unavoidable. Once violence has broken out, it appears that people are being killed because of their ethnicity and that ethnic hatred has become a central reality of the conflict. This, however, does not mean that ethnic hatred is a constant which just happens to escalate into violence due to the negligence of outside powers. For each conflict that turns violent, there is another where it does not, and the difference cannot be explained by a lower level of hatred. There is no multiethnic society without some level of ethnic tension and suspicion, and a division between "us" and "them" is an integral part of ethnic awareness. However, this does not necessarily lead to aggression and paranoia. The intensity of hatred in "ethnic cleansings" cannot be an independent variable—rather, it requires explanation itself.

Ethnic "Conflict": Conflict, War, and Ethnic Violence

Some comments are in order about the term "conflict" as well. It is commonplace to argue that conflict and violence are not the same thing: conflict may be defined as a contradiction between interests or projects pursued by two or more parties, while violence is only one of many ways to overcome those differences. When people speak about "ethnic conflicts," however, this term is usually used interchangeably with "ethnic violence." The distinction, however, is not just terminological pedantry. Explaining a conflict as a clash of interests or projects is one thing; it requires the analyst to evaluate what these interests are, why have they come into contradiction, whether they can be reconciled, and so on. Why it happened that a conflict became violent is a different challenge. It may be that the conflicting interests left no choice. But it may also be that the outbreak of violence cannot be explained without referring to additional factors. Explaining what the conflict is about and why it took a violent turn are two very different intellectual tasks.

This distinction therefore relates to the issue of the *avoidability* of violence and the possibility of settlement. I believe that in the course of the demise of the Soviet Union, the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict was unavoidable. Fighting a war to resolve that conflict, however, was not necessary. These points seem simple but neither is popular, at least in Georgia. On the one hand, many Georgians argue that the conflict was nothing but a Russian provocation. Accordingly, if Russians had been kind enough to have refrained from inciting it, there would have been no conflict at all. On the other hand, many also believe that under the circumstances, war was unavoidable, but the Georgian military should have fought that war more effectively.

A distinction should also be made between *territorial war* and *ethnic violence*. Many western observers tend to believe that post-communist ethnic conflicts are primarily about ethnic cleansing. This, however, is denied by both sides in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Rather, both assert that it was the territory, their national home, that they were defending (although both also accuse the other side of "genocide" and/or ethnic cleansing). Both sides deserve the benefit of doubt here. Though there were many instances of ethnic violence and ethnic cleansing, ethnic cleansing was not necessarily the primary aim for either party. Just as any conflict may or may not become violent, so a territorial war may or may not lead to *ethnic* violence. When Georgian troops entered Abkhazia in August 1992, they did so with the announced intent of securing highways and railways from terrorism. One can argue that this was just a pretext and that the real purpose was to depose the separatist Abkhaz leadership, commanded by Vladislav Ardzinba, and establish control over the break-away province. But even this would not mean that the ultimate objective was to wipe out the ethnic Abkhaz population.[8] The same is true for the other side as well: armed resistance to what the Abkhaz saw as an "imperialist invasion" by the Georgian army does not require expelling all or most of the ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia (although that was, in fact, a result of the war).

The Clash of National Projects

I think it is much more useful to define a conflict by the nature of the *issues* at stake rather than the nature of participants. The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is simply another struggle about the nation-state and the *status* of particular groups that call themselves "nations" in the modern world of nation-states. Ernest Gellner was correct when he said that "nationalism engenders nations, not vice versa."[9] Accordingly, the issue, or the project, of the nation-state defines the parties (that is, nations, or "ethnic groups" if one prefers), not vice versa. Georgians and Abkhaz do not exist as communities outside their political projects but are "constructed" as communities because they are mobilized around certain issues, and they can only sustain themselves as communities to the extent that they succeed (fully or in part) in carrying out those projects.

This also implies that the conflict is a totally modern one—I would even call it a conflict of political modernization. The Abkhaz and Georgians have coexisted in a common political space for centuries. Even if some feuds broke out during those years, the modern conflict cannot be traced back to any medieval grievances—appeals to medieval history

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[8]All Abkhaz sources on the conflict that I have seen refer to a statement by the Georgian military commander (later defense minister) Karkarashvili saying that he would sacrifice one hundred thousand Georgian soldiers in order to kill the same number of Abkhaz, thereby wiping out all the ethnic Abkhaz population of Abkhazia (versions of that phrase vary from one report to the other). I happened to watch the interview of Karkarashvili which is quoted and, although I do not remember the exact wording myself, can say that what he meant was that it is silly on the Abkhaz side to fight, that Georgians will never give up Abkhazia, so the Abkhaz are putting their very existence in danger—even if one hundred thousand people die in the war on each side, Georgians would still be there, but not the Abkhaz. This may have been nasty statement, but Karkarashvili was merely expressing in his own way the idea that was always reiterated by Georgian officials at the time—that it was the radicalism of Abkhazia's leadership, not Georgia's, that endangered the existence of the Abkhaz as a group.

[9]Ernest Gellner, *Nationalism and Democracy*, Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1983, p. 55.

were very common on the both sides in justifying today's political claims, but that in no way means that today's clashes were incited by ancient memories. There are, in fact, much more modern recollections of the conflict from 1918-21, when the issues at stake were very similar to those today. One could even argue that the post-Soviet Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is a continuation of the pre-Soviet conflict which had been interrupted by decades of Soviet rule (which does not imply that nothing important happened during those decades).

The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict may be called a conflict of modernization because it is in the modern era that the model of that nation-state has become the norm, the blueprint for legitimate state-building. Many liberal commentators resent this fact, calling the idea of the nation-state a "tragic mistake of history" or an expression of "false consciousness." These, however, are value judgments which have little epistemological significance. The fact is that ethnic groups find themselves in a world where the political map is increasingly defined by nation-states and not multiethnic empires, and where political power is legitimized by the will of peoples/nations rather than by the divine right of kings. In this new world, ethnic groups feel like they *have* to define their political status as well. Empires may acquire the policies of "official nationalism"— that is, they may try to assimilate minority populations into their language and culture (for example, the policy of Russification in the late 19th century).[10] Smaller groups that do not have separate political identities when the tide of political modernization reaches them then find themselves confronting what scholars call the "assimilation dilemma."[11] Either they have to acquire the national-political identity of a politically dominant and usually more "advanced" (that is, modernized) nation that has already established a state of its own, agreeing to reduce their native vernaculars to the status of "kitchen languages" while recognizing the superiority of the ways of the powerful and "advanced" nation; or they have to acquire a distinct cultural-political personality of their own and create (or "invent," or "imagine," as modern students of nationalism love to put it) their own project for an appropriate political status that will represent and maintain this distinctness. This process is called "self-determination"— determining one's cultural-political "self" and attempting to acquire a political status appropriate to it.

In the ideal world—ideal, that is, from the nationalist perspective—humanity would be divided into numerous easy-to-define "nations" with their own distinct languages, cultures, political traditions, and (especially important!) historical territories. Territory and political status could then be fairly distributed between them. This, alas, is not the case in the real world. Traditional pre-industrialized society does not prepare the world for a painless division into nation-states. Different ethnic groups create a patchwork of languages, cultures, and political traditions that have to be reshaped to fit the hard and fast lines of nation-states. Which groups have a shared awareness of common ancestry, language, and culture, and are thus eligible for separate nationhood? How distant should

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[10]Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nationalism and Communism*, Methuen: London, 1964, pp. 19-24.

[11]Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe. A comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations,* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1985, p.12; Karl W. Deutsch, *Problems of Nation-Building and National Development*, in Karl W. Deutsch and William J Foltz, eds., *Nation-Building*, Atherton Press: New York, 1963, p. 140.

two related ethnic groups be before they are identified as separate "nations" rather than regional/clan variations within the same nation? There are simply no universal and verifiable answers to these and similar questions.

Nevertheless, the reshaping of pre-modern identities is conducted by new intellectual and political elites. The dominant constructivist or instrumentalist approach in the study of nationalism emphasizes the arbitrary character of this project: elites construct identities, mobilizing people around certain (nationalist) ideas in accordance with their group interests (which usually involve wealth and power). I believe that these approaches often overestimate the malleability of pre-modern identities as well as the rational-choice type motivations that are said to be behind the nation-building process. But (I will avoid going into theoretical arguments here) it is beyond doubt that some deliberate reshaping has to take place.

I will call the basic pattern on which the work of reshaping or reconstructing is based a *national project*. A national project is an ideal construct that usually includes answers to at least the following questions: (1) Who we are?—that is, how do we define the people comprising our national "we"?; (2) What is "our land"?—that is, how can we demarcate the territory that is our national home?; (3) What political status would be appropriate for our group?—that is, are we eligible for fully independent statehood or is a more "modest" state acceptable?; (4) What we are *not*?—that is, in contrast to whom do we define our identity? (recalling the assimilation dilemma, this question can be reformulated as follows: Who would we become if we chose to be assimilated?); (5) Who is our *primary enemy* (this may or may not coincide with the group or state threatening assimilation) and who are our other enemies?; (6) Who are our friends and relatives?—that is, who are our "natural" or provisional allies?; (7) What is our *civilizational orientation*?—that is, to which civilization do we belong ("Western," "Middle Eastern," "Latin," etc.)?; (8) What kind of political and economic order do we want to have?(The late twentieth century seems to provide few choices but "market democracy," although in reality there is a choice, which may be contingent upon the answer to the previous question: nowadays an orientation to the West provides a stronger motivation to adopt a democratic system.)

The issue of political status, however, is the central element of any national project. Typically, a national project is a project of independence—that is, it aspires to the highest political status possible. This means no other national political authority is recognized as higher than the will of "our" nation and that there is at least some core element of sovereignty that absolutely cannot be transferred to any other political body. As a rule, nationalism does not imply isolationism. On the contrary, a seat in the United Nations and other international organizations is usually perceived as the best symbolic recognition of a nation's political fulfillment. But this maximalist aspiration is not indispensable. A nation may accept some kind of special status within another nation-state ("autonomy") but at the same time still require "sovereignty." The latter term is often deliberately used in quite a vague way in order to provide greater political flexibility, but there is a core element that cannot be dissolved: the political status of the nation shall not be defined without its own participation and consent.

Despite political and other disagreements within a national elite, there is usually *the* predominant national project that is taken for granted. Nationalists debate strategy and

tactics, addressing issues such as *how* to implement the project, what to do first, etc. The national project may also change over time in certain respects. But the core ideas and reference points tend to be quite stable. Having more than one strongly represented political project means divided identity (like the traditional Russian division between "Westernizers" and "Slavophiles").

Apart from the content of the "national project," there are other parameters of nationalism that may be harder to define but are also important. How well elaborated and distinct is the national project (does it have clear answers to all the major questions)? How strong or intense is it—that is, does it dominate the political agenda? Can it mobilize a sufficient part of the population (in Miroslav Hroch's terms, is a national movement at stage A, B, or C)?[12] How much is the elite or the population at large ready to sacrifice to realize the national project? How able (mature) is the nation-to-be to undertake unified and organized political action?

Why this nation-to-be constructs itself on the particular basis that it does and not on the basis of a different political project is an important question that cannot be answered in this paper in general terms. Obviously, historical contingencies of the current political situation, the policies of imperial governments, as well as pre-existing ethnic-demographic conditions and historical heritage play their role, and each case is different from the other. But whatever their roots or preconditions, national projects of different nations-to-be (especially neighboring ones) are likely to come into contradiction with each other. These contradictions may be of different kinds, but two major types are particularly important: (1) purely territorial conflicts in which neighboring countries claim the same piece of territory as an inalienable part of their respective "national home" (the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is a classic example); and (2) conflicts that arise when a smaller group claims to be distinct from a larger group that does not recognize its distinctness and insists that the former is an "organic" part of itself.[13]

"Ethnic conflicts" in the Caucasus stem from contradictions between national projects. If we take the two conflicts in Georgia (Abkhazia and Ossetia), the latter can be more clearly defined as a territorial one: a piece of land which constituted the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast in Soviet times should be part of either the Georgian or Ossetian national home. The Abkhaz case, on the other hand, is more complex and controversial. If so, then a description of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict should start with a description of the respective national projects and later move to an account of how the conflict developed in the period of break-up of the Soviet Union. Before doing that, however, I will contest two other possible explanatory frameworks.

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[12] *Social Preconditions*, op. cit., pp. 23-24.

[13] The conflict between Bulgarians and Macedonians is a classic example—Bulgarians consider Macedonians to be a regional variation of Bulgarians who, as a result of various historical contingencies, first became a part of Yugoslavia and then were afforded their own independent state. The Macedonians, in contrast, claim to be a separate nation even if related to Bulgarians.

Majority-minority relations

A version of the "ethnic conflict approach" is the characterization of a conflict as a minority response to a "majority assault."[14] In the face of abuses of its rights by a majority, a minority may turn to separatism as a solution to discrimination. It would be simplistic, however, to apply western understandings of "minority policy" to post-Soviet conflicts. To be sure, majorities (Georgian political elites, in the Abkhaz case) may be far from blameless. But identifying "initial guilt" as an explanatory factor would be misleading in principle because it makes sense to speak about "ethnic minority rights" or "majority responsibility" only in more or less established nation-states with at least some level of democracy. In these cases, the majority or core ("titular") ethnic group takes responsibility for the direction of state policies (because it has more votes), while other groups accept minority status in this particular state but are afforded special rights and protections. However, in the Abkhaz (as well as Ossetian) cases, the point was not that the minorities involved did not like how the Georgian majority was treating them. They simply did not want to be minorities in the Georgian state because it did not correspond to their national project. Even highly nationalistic Georgians would accept a deal that provided for the usual package of minority rights (education in native language, freedom of cultural activities, etc.—that is, what is commonly referred to as "cultural autonomy") in return for giving up their project of political independence. This, however, was completely unacceptable to the Abkhaz and Ossetians.

One can argue that the Abkhaz and Ossetian minorities developed their claims in the first place because majority abuses left them no choice—from this perspective, nothing but complete political sovereignty could protect them from Georgian "oppression." In the Georgian media over the last ten years, one can find countless quotations to support the allegation that minorities had good reason to expect illiberal treatment in an independent Georgia. Neither did the Abkhaz or Ossetians have particularly happy memories from the period of Georgian independence in 1918-1921.

Nevertheless, it very difficult to demonstrate that the Abkhaz developed their national project *in response* to Georgian abuses—except for 1918-1921 and after 1992, there was no Georgian state to oppress them. Neither has anyone shown a correlation between "level of abuse" (whatever that means) and political claims. In fact, I would not be surprised if the correlation were actually negative—groups that have a distinct and legally-recognized status are usually better able to raise specific political claims than ones without legal and political shape.

Of course, minority rights are an extremely important problem for democracies (which must consider, for example, the danger of a "tyranny of the majority"). They are also a legitimate concern for the international community. But (exactly because this problem is so widely claimed) the "abuse of minority rights" (one of the many new names for good old-fashioned "oppression") is a term often used as an ideological tool rather than an honest description of reality. In reality, both Georgians and Abkhaz rooted the legitimacy of their claims in historical arguments. This land should be under the sovereignty

[14]See, for instance, Hurst Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty and Self-determination: The Accomodation of Conflicting Rights*, University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1993, p. 73

of Georgia or Abkhazia because *historically* Abkhazia has been (or has not been) part of Georgia. Modern students of nationalism may dismiss these "primordialist" arguments as irrelevant but this would not contradict the fact that both sides had certain understanding of fairness based on an idea of "historical correctness." Any observer who has spent even a little time with Abkhaz and Georgians, especially at earlier stages of the conflict, can confirm this.

During these contacts, however, not only westerners learned about the "demons of history" besetting post-communist tribes. Georgians and Abkhaz (as well as Armenians, Ossetians, and others) eventually understood that talking to Westerners (that is, representatives of the Ultimate Power) about ancient history is a waste of time. Clever consultants emerged who taught them politically correct language that was more likely to win over these strange people. Georgians learned to speak about "aggressive separatism" that is threatening international stability. The Abkhaz, Armenians, and others, on the other hand, mastered the "minority rights" language. Mountainous Karabakh should not be part of Azerbaijan not because Artsakh (the Armenian name for Karabakh) is an ancient Armenian land and *Miatsum* (unification) is a legitimate Armenian project, but because Azerbaijan allegedly mistreats its minorities. Similarly, Abkhaz claims to sovereignty are justified by the genocidal inclinations that Georgians allegedly display towards their minorities.

At the stage of the *unfolding* of a conflict, however, the majority-minority relations approach is more useful. From the Georgian perspective—as well as from the perspective of the international community—the Abkhaz were and legally still are a minority in the Georgian state, which makes the Georgians primarily responsible for the way the conflict developed. Greater political skills and greater sensitivity to Abkhaz problems by the Georgian elite would certainly have facilitated a mutually acceptable compromise—what has been said in this section is not intended to absolve the Georgians for misdeeds and mistakes. Rather, my intent is to prevent a mischaracterization of the fundamental nature of the conflict.

Group interests

Another popular way to understand these conflicts is to reduce them to a clash of "group interests" promoted by certain elites—in keeping with traditional Marxist sociology and other newer (and trendier) theories. Issues like self-determination, the historical right to a certain territory, or even minority rights are considered a "cover" that disguises "real" interests. A version of this reasoning has been popular in the Soviet and post-Soviet context—the local bureaucracy and/or the "Mafia" (one of the formative concepts of the post-Soviet mentality) was said to have had an interest in promoting ethnic conflicts. Given that any economic activity in the post-Soviet world is usually understood in "Mafia" terms (not without some basis), "Mafia interests" and "economic interests" are used almost interchangeably.

There are hardly any attempts to prove this point in detail or to demonstrate what specific interests of what specific groups would have benefited from a conflict between Abkhaz and Georgians. This theory is put forward just because "it must be so"—looking

for rational economic and power interests is assumed to be the only "scientific" way to describe social and political events. Another motivation may be to delegitimize nationalist claims by exposing their dirty hidden secrets. It is, however, very difficult to demonstrate in general why local elites would be interested in undermining the existing order of the Soviet nationality framework, but it is still commonplace to say that the interests of local bureaucrats were behind the "parade of sovereignties." What bureaucracy specifically? The established communist *nomenklatura* opposed nationalist movements—it had to do so because it was eventually ousted from power by new nationalist leaders. Later some communist functionaries embraced nationalism, but only after having understood that this was the only way to survive politically, not because they liked nationalism in the first place. Other communist leaders managed to regain power once they had lost it, while many middle and lower level bureaucrats never actually lost power at all. But one would have to ascribe an unbelievable foresight to people like Shevardnadze and Aliev to believe that they intentionally conceded their positions to nationalists in order to return triumphantly as reborn nationalists. As for local economic elites, they too had a great deal to lose from dismantling the common economic space, and they disliked nationalists no less than the communists. A few of them took advantage of the new situation and grew richer in the newly independent states, but again, could they have foreseen this and intentionally undermined their already established positions that guaranteed them reasonable prosperity? Finally, criminals are believed to be the most internationalist strata in the Soviet society, and they later benefited enormously from post-Soviet wars (if they were not killed in them). But this is not enough to say that they started the conflicts because they foresaw lucrative arms and drugs deals. Established elites (criminal or non-criminal) hated the new nationalist leaders, even if they sometimes had to use their slogans.

As is usually the case with nationalist movements, it was intellectuals, particularly young intellectuals, who played the leading role.[15] Representatives of the humanities (historians, philologists, philosophers) as well as film-makers and artists were the most actively involved professional groups. While this had an obvious impact on the character of nationalist movements, the impact is hardly reducible to rationally defined "group" interests. These are people who are usually the least aware of their economic interests when they choose to act. At the same time, intellectuals were possibly the biggest losers from the dismantling of communism, both in terms of economic income and social status. No wonder that nationalist movements, especially in the Caucasus, were notable for the consistent denigration of any economic considerations as "dishonorable."

The strongest case for "group interests" as a cause of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict may be made with regard to the Abkhaz ruling elite. According to the census of 1989, ethnic Abkhaz comprised only about 17 percent of the population of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic, with ethnic Georgians forming a plurality of 45 percent. Due to the Soviet-style quota system, however, the Abkhaz as the "titular" group received a disproportionate share of power positions. Naturally, the Abkhaz feared that the government of an independent Georgia would discontinue this policy on the grounds of general democratic norms. Thus the Abkhaz elite as a group obviously had something to fear, and one can hardly say that Georgians tried to alleviate those fears. As a result,

[15]See Hroch, *Social Preconditions*, op. cit., p. 129.

Georgians often argue that the Abkhaz "ethnocracy" fought for its own group interest, representing it as the Abkhaz national interest. This particular point—as well as ethnic demography in general—has some merit. But can we say that this was the decisive factor in explaining why the Georgian and Abkhaz visions of the status of Abkhazia were so different? In similar cases (Mountainous Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transdniester, etc.), secessionist groups comprised majorities on territories they claimed, but the patterns of conflicts did not differ specifically.

I have to make the same distinction here that I made in the previous section on minority rights. Specific political and economic interests of specific groups mattered a great deal in how the conflict *unfolded*. Certain groups clearly had vested interest in the radicalization of the conflict and in pushing it towards a violent end. Economic interests, like the arms and drugs trade, the embezzlement of state funds and humanitarian assistance, and so on, played an important role. Third force (Mafia) interests are another important part of the story. But though these people and groups made use of the *ongoing* conflict and helped push it in the direction they preferred, they did not and could not start it on their own.

The Formation of the Georgian and Abkhaz National Projects

As I explained earlier, I see the conflict primarily as a contradiction between the Georgian and Abkhaz national projects. I will now proceed to describe the Georgian and Abkhaz view of their rightful political status. In so doing, I will have to refer to some historical facts. However, since history is often used by both parties to justify or denounce certain political claims, I want to make it clear that I will only make my historical references in an attempt to *understand* why Georgians and Abkhaz developed the kinds of national projects that they did, and why their visions came into conflict. I will not, however, question the accuracy or legitimacy of the historical claims of either of them.

Modern Georgian nationalism started in the mid-nineteenth century.[16] Ilya Tchavtchavadze, who can be considered its founding father, tried to create a new vision of Georgia on the basis of European models of liberal nationalism. His slogan was *Mamuli, Ena, Sartsmunoeba* ("Fatherland, Language, Faith"). This represents both a continuity and a break with medieval Georgian tradition. In the Middle Ages, "Georgian-ness" was equated with being an Orthodox Christian. The Eastern Georgian kingdom of Kartli adopted Christianity in the fourth century, and after the religious split of the seventh century when Georgia became diaphysitic (that is, it shared Greek Orthodoxy, in contrast to the monophysitic faith of the Armenian Church) until the late eighteenth century when Russia became involved in the Caucasus, Georgians were the only Orthodox Christians in the region and were surrounded by a predominantly Islamic population. Those ethnic Georgians who adopted some other religion—even if they continued to talk in a Georgian tongue—were no longer considered Georgians by others. Instead, they were called Tartars if they converted to Islam, Armenians if they were baptized in the Armenian church, or even *prangi* ("French") if they adopted the Roman Catholic faith. On the other hand, the church

[16]There was an episode of aristocratic nationalism which expressed itself in an anti-imperial conspiracy of 1832, but it did not develop.

used literary Georgian for its services, so language became an important marker as well, though in conjunction with religion. In the mid-tenth century, the Georgian hagiographer Giorgi Merchule formulated what became the medieval paradigm of what "Georgia" means: "Georgia consists of those spacious lands in which church services are celebrated and all prayers are said in the Georgian tongue."[17] By putting "language" before "faith," Tchavtchavadze secularized Georgian nationalism, making it similar to other linguistic nationalisms of the nineteenth century and making it available to Muslim Georgians or Georgians of other denominations. In so doing, however, he also appealed to medieval tradition.

This way of reconstructing the medieval past in the modern Georgian national project helps explain important aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. In Ernest Gellner's terms, one can say that Georgia was defined as the realm of Georgian "high culture"—that is, as the area where Georgian was the language of literacy and elite culture.[18] This area naturally included Abkhazia as well. In this respect, the root of the conflict was in the discrepancy between Abkhaz high culture, which used the Georgian vernacular, and its folk culture, which used Abkhaz.

Gellner strongly warned against understanding the term "high" in terms of *value*: it only has the social implication as being related to the high classes. Ethnic Abkhaz are not ethnically kin to Georgians. Linguistically their language is part of the Circassian family which makes the Abkhaz kin to North Caucasian peoples such as the Kabardins and Adygeians. But the medieval Abkhaz kingdom was part of the Georgian cultural-political realm. The Abkhaz, unlike the Georgians, had no alphabet, so Georgian was the language of the Abkhaz gentry. Whenever Georgia, or Western Georgia, was a unified state, Abkhazia was part of it. In some periods, the whole of Western Georgia was unified under the name Abkhazia (Abkhazeti), while in other periods approximately the same territory bore the name of Egrisi (which means "land of the Mingrelians"). When Georgia disintegrated into smaller princedoms, these cultural ties between elites were preserved. This history made it natural for Georgians to believe that Abkhazia was a legitimate part of Georgia, despite the fact that the Abkhaz are ethnically unrelated to Georgians.

However, this inference from the way the idea of Georgia was reconstructed in the nineteenth century became important only later, when Georgian nationalism reached the stage of a political movement. In the beginning ("phase A" in Miroslav Hroch's classification)—that is, through early twentieth century —Georgian national ambitions were still quite modest, being directed mostly at culture, the preservation of the native language, and the like. Even the idea of limited autonomy within the Russian empire was not seriously entertained until Russia's 1905 Revolution. Georgian nationalism was not yet fully politicized until Georgia was forced to acquire full independence by the break-up of the Russian empire and later by the failure of the Transcaucasian Federation in 1918. This was when the paradigm of Georgian political nationalism was formulated, a paradigm that

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[17]Revaz Gachechiladze, *The New Georgia: Space, Society, Politics,* Texas A & M University Press: College Station, 1995, pp. 19-20.

[18]*Nation and Nationalism*, op. cit.. pp. 50-52.

was re-invoked almost without change by the national-liberation movement of the *perestroika* period.

Having had a brief experience with independence in 1918-1921 (interrupted by the Russian Communist invasion), nothing short of full independence could satisfy Georgian political ambitions. In 1989-90, there was therefore not a single political party or group in Georgia proper that did not include in its charter a demand for independence. Russia naturally filled the slot of "the enemy," and independence meant independence from Russia and the threat it presented of assimilation. This did not mean any particular emotional hostility toward Russia, much less towards Russians as an ethnic group—but this is a different story. In so far as the project of independence was concerned, the major obstacles were expected from the north. Turkey had been a threat in 1918-1921, and medieval recollections of Muslim invasions are still strong enough to encourage mistrust. But since today Turkey is a rival of Russia's, Turkey is now an ally for Georgia.

Neither Turkey nor any other regional country is *the* ally, however. Rather, the major protector and patron is believed to be "the West" (however realistic this belief). This is an extrapolation of the medieval paradigm when Christian Georgia, which was seen as under siege by Muslim countries, looked for help from the "big" Christian world. Culturally, Georgians find it difficult to say that "we are a Western nation" (though some would say that typologically, in their substance, Georgians are westerners who went astray under the influence of their unwestern neighbors). However, the fact is that in terms of orientation, since the nineteenth century the Georgian elite has been looking for models in the West. Democracy is considered a desirable political model not because Georgians are such committed democrats but because nowadays there is no other way to be western. Many supporters of the nationalist Georgian president, Zviad Gamsarkhurdia, said that in the case of a contradiction independence should take precedence over democracy. But after all, the nation-state is a western idea as well, and western nation-states have not always been democratic.

Since independence from Russia is the primary task of Georgian nationalism (and given the presence of Russian troops and the level of Russian leverage over Georgia, many believe that task has yet to be fulfilled), all other adversaries are viewed in light of this objective. Minorities who are not loyal to Georgia are therefore viewed as accomplices of Russia. Saying this does not imply that Russians did—or did not—support Abkhaz or Ossetian secessionists; it only explains why is it that from the Georgian perspective, any conflict with minorities make sense only in relation to its fight for independence from Russia. This seriously impaired Georgia's ability to assess the situation accurately, because although Russia did indeed support separatists in the union republics, this perspective prevented Georgia's elites from understanding the interests of the Abkhaz or Ossetians in their own right.

Two other features of Georgian nationalism are relevant here—it is non-assimilationist and non-imperialist. In relation to the first point, I will refer to a frequently made distinction between French and German nationalisms. In Rogers Brubaker's terms, the former is assimilationist, while the latter is exclusivist.[19] The French pursue the project

[19] *Citizenship and Nationhood,* Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass, 1990.

of assimilating their minorities, which makes them willing to accept them as "French" as long as they adopt French culture and agree to forget (or at least give secondary value to) their particular heritage. Ataturk's idea of Turkish nationalism also follows that pattern. The substance of Russian nationalism was never clearly formulated, but it tends towards the assimilationist model as well. In these cases, culture and language take precedence over "blood" and common ancestry. For German nationalism, on the other hand, it is "blood" that matters above all. The right to German citizenship is linked to blood. Germanized Turks who have lived in Germany for several generations still find it more difficult to attain citizenship than ethnic Germans from Russia or Kazakhstan who do not even speak the language and whose ancestors left their "historical homeland" centuries ago.

Following this classification, Georgians (like most other Caucasians, with the possible exception of the Azeris, who easily assimilate any Muslims) tend toward the exclusionist model. Though some representatives of minorities (especially Armenians and Ossetians) were quite happy to assimilate (after having made their names sound more Georgian), most Georgians resisted this and have had difficulty perceiving ethnic converts as "real" Georgians. After Eduard Shevardnadze came to power in 1992, there was a deliberate effort by non-governmental groups and by Shevardnadze's party, Citizen's Union of Georgia, to promote a sense of common citizenship rather than ethnicity. However, the effort was not particularly successful and never went so far as to endorse assimilationism explicitly—a position that would have been rejected by both ethnic Georgian and most minority communities.

Likewise, Georgian nationalism never had imperial-expansionist ambitions. The Abkhaz would obviously disagree with this—they see Georgia as an empire that wants to conquer "foreign countries" (e.g., Abkhazia). The great Russian democrat Andrei Sakharov once called Georgia "small empire" in one of his interviews, a line that is quoted in most Abkhaz and Russian accounts of the conflict. Of course, one can call any state with a multiethnic population an "empire," including Georgia (although this would mean that there are very few states today that are not empires). But if one defines an "empire" as a state whose national project is based on the idea of conquest and expansion (which makes sense to me and corresponds to the traditional use of the word), then Georgia is not an empire. The modern Georgian national project is that of a classical nation-state—it is based on the idea that "we only want what belongs to us, but what does belong to us, we will never give up." Abkhazia is part of Georgia because it was always part of Georgia when Georgia was united. Georgians cannot see Abkhazia as a "foreign" land that they once conquered, and thus the accusation of imperialism usually makes them angry. They also have quite a clear idea of what "our land" is—although "our land" is now equivalent to territory of what was the Union Republic of Georgia in the Soviet period. (Most Georgians believe that some historically "Georgian" land is now in Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, but even most radical nationalists understand that bringing this up would be impractical, and that it is therefore better to allow Soviet maps to define the image of "our land").

But once it *is* defined, nobody would consider claiming any territory that is not "historically ours." Georgians sometimes argue that they have a special role to play in the Caucasus, and the Iberian-Caucasian idea (based on the alleged kinship between Georgians and many North-Caucasian peoples, including the Abkhaz) was popular in Gamsarkhurdia's

time. This might be seen as a kind of proto-imperialism. But even the craziest Georgian nationalist would not contemplate annexing Chechnya or Dagestan.

In general, in as much as nationalism is oriented toward the idea of nation-state, it is incompatible with the idea of empire. There are other kinds of distinctions as well. For example, nationalists are usually selfish and self-centered, while imperialists are altruistic, cosmopolitan, and believe that they should try to improve the world (although they are also quite willing to impose "happiness" and "progress" by force). For good or ill, Georgians as a nation are not notable for the latter qualities.

As for the modern Abkhaz national project, its construction began at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.[20] But the initial ethnic-historical setting in which the Abkhaz elite had to do its job was different from Georgia's. Although Abkhazia had a history of statehood to which it could appeal, this history did not come with a relevant "high culture" and a tradition of Abkhaz literacy. The national project of the Abkhaz was also not directed primarily at political independence—rather, its main task was to ensure the survival of the Abkhaz as a distinct ethnic group. This was due to particular historical circumstances. Circassian tribes fiercely resisted Russian domination during the 19th century. As a result, in the 1870s a majority of ethnic Abkhaz was forced to move to Turkey (in what is called the *Mokhajirstvo*). The Abkhaz were nevertheless luckier than the Shapsugs and Ubykhs, their neighbors to the north of the Caucasus range who were entirely eliminated from their land (survivors also took refuge in Turkey). Being numerically small in absolute numbers, unprotected by a tradition of literacy, and becoming a minority in their own land, the Abkhaz faced the obvious danger of assimilation. One can say that the emotional cornerstone of the Abkhaz national project is not to repeat the fate of the Shapsugs and Ubykhs.

Following the above-mentioned duality of the cultural-political tradition, the Abkhaz national project started developing in two versions. Since ethnically the Abkhaz were kin to Circassian tribes, the logic of ethnic-linguistic nationalism naturally pushed them in the direction of seeking their identity within the pan-Circassian movement. After the Bolshevik revolution, this movement gave birth to the brief existence of the Republic of [Caucasian] Mountain Peoples. With the breakup of the Soviet Union, the same idea was revived in the form of a political movement—the Confederation of Mountainous Peoples of the Caucasus (later renamed the Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus).

On the other hand, it still mattered that the high culture and political traditions of Abkhaz statehood were traditionally Georgian (though later Turkish and Russian elements were added as well). The Abkhaz aristocracy was very close to Georgia's aristocracy, and cultural ties were still considerable. In the administrative sense, *Sukhumskiy okrug*—that is, Abkhazia—was affiliated with *Kutaisskaia guberniia* (that is, western Georgia). This was the basis for another Abkhaz movement that advocated an Abkhaz identity that was closely

[20]In this section of my paper, I partly depend on my notes from a lecture delivered by the Abkhaz-Georgian historian, Gia Anchabadze, at a conference organized by the Caucasian House and Heinrich Böll foundation in Tbilisi in September 1992. Of course, Dr. Anchabadze cannot be held responsible for my interpretation of his ideas. For understandable reasons, I feel less confident in my interpretation of the Abkhaz national project and would especially appreciate any criticisms and suggestions.

connected with Georgia through a special status. Of course, initially the movement was not about political status because Georgian nationalism itself was not still politicized. But translated into political terms, a "special status within Georgia" would probably be acceptable for this strain of Abkhaz identity. In both cases, however, the Abkhaz looked not for autonomy within Russia as a whole but for association with some larger cultural entity (e.g., Circassia or Georgia) within which it would have had a chance to retain its separate identity. To put it differently, Abkhazia's emerging nationalism defined itself not in relation to Russia as a whole but attempted to create a separate Abkhaz identity rooted in the western Caucasian region.

Both trends competed with each other, though the former appeared to be getting the upper hand. In the period of Georgian independence of 1918-21, the ethnic Abkhaz elite was divided, with opponents of unity with Georgia in the majority. However, the Georgian government was able to form an alliance with the pro-Georgian part of the Abkhaz elite and to apply military pressure to keep the province within the newly independent Georgia.[21] As a result, the Georgian constitution of 1921 defined Abkhazia as an autonomous unit within Georgia (the constitution was adopted only four days before Georgian independence was ended by the Russian invasion).

The attitude to the Soviet period is radically different in the Georgian and Abkhaz national visions. For Georgians, the independence that had been suspended in 1921 was symbolically continued after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Nothing that happened during the period of suspended independence could be called legitimate because everything had been imposed by foreign occupation. The same cannot be said for the Abkhaz. Since the 1921 Georgian constitution did not have time to be implemented, one can only speculate about what Abkhaz autonomy within an independent Georgia would have meant. As it turned out, modern Abkhaz statehood came into existence for the first time under Soviet rule. Although an administrative unit within the Soviet *matryoshka* system of nationalities can hardly be called a real "nation-state," Soviet national-territorial units were nevertheless accorded many symbolically important features that contributed to the development of a national-political consciousness. In Abkhazia's case, the territorial unit was actually called "Abkhazia," while the Abkhaz language had official status and became a language of "high culture," with all that this implies for the bureaucracy, educational policy, literature, and the like. Thus, unlike Georgians, the Abkhaz legitimate their post-Soviet claims by stressing particularly the Soviet period of their history.

The major change that occurred in the Abkhaz national project during the Soviet period was that Georgia and Georgians came to fill the slot of the "enemy image" exclusively. In addition, Russia became Abkhazia's chief protector against "Georgian imperialism." There were several reasons for this. Between 1921 and 1931, the administrative framework of nationalities in the South Caucasus changed several times, and with it the status of Abkhazia changed as well. Russian Bolsheviks encouraged ethnic minorities in Georgia to rebel against the central government, which would make a Bolshevik conquest of Georgia that much easier, and so the initially welcomed the proclamation of a separate Abkhaz Soviet Socialist Republic in March 1921 (when the

[21]See, for instance, Stanislav Lakoba, *Abkhaziya posle dvukh okupatsiy* (in Russian), Gagra, 1994.

Bolshevik military operation against Georgia was still under way). Later, Abkhazia was made part of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic, and in 1931 it became an autonomous republic within Georgia. If the republic proclaimed in March 1921 is taken as the reference point, then becoming an autonomous unit within Georgia was a demotion. What was especially important, however, was that these changes occurred when the Soviet Union was ruled by Stalin, an ethnic Georgian, who was later joined in Moscow by Lavrenti Beria, also an ethnic Georgian. This enables the Abkhaz to believe that the demotion of their status was really an expression of Georgian imperialism—Stalin did it because he was a Georgian.

From the Georgian perspective, however, the situation looks completely different. Georgians' attitude toward Stalin is quite controversial, but many Georgian nationalists consider Stalin to have been a Russian imperialist who actively sought to conquer Georgia in 1921, and they point out that his actions afterwards can be hardly explained by Georgian patriotism. Moreover, no people as small in number as the Abkhaz was granted the status of "full" union republic in the Soviet Union. That Abkhazia became part of Georgia can be fully explained by the general logic of Soviet nationality policy. Why should one believe that there was a specifically "Georgian" factor in this particular case? Georgians can also argue that while Stalin was indeed responsible for subordinating Abkhazia to Georgia in 1931, he was also responsible for separating Abkhazia from Georgia in 1921. Finally, if one insists that Stalin's actions were motivated by latent Georgian imperialism, Georgians as a people can hardly be held accountable for Soviet nationality policies, regardless of who carried them out—Georgians never elected those leaders and were never consulted about what they did.

Apart from this demotion in status during the Stalin era, Abkhazia witnessed a rapid increase of ethnic Georgian residents, many of whom were resettled from other parts of Georgia. In addition, during the period of "Georgianization" in the late 1940's and early 1950's, the Georgian language was imposed on Abkhaz students in schools and Abkhaz were forced to use a Georgian-based alphabet instead of a Cyrillic-based one (Georgian has its own alphabet). These policies threatened the Abkhaz with extinction as an ethnic group through forced assimilation. Again, the policies could be explained by the latent "Georgian imperialism" of Stalin and Beria or by another turn in the Soviet nationality policy. I believe that Beria, unlike Stalin, was more of a covert Georgian nationalist, and his nationalism might have had an impact on his decisions regarding Abkhazia (although such policies were hardly confined to Abkhazia). In any case, these changes in Soviet policy substantially increased Abkhaz animosity toward the Georgians. The fact that the policy changed again after Stalin's death, this time in favor of the Abkhaz, only reinforced the Abkhaz belief that the nationality of Stalin and Beria accounted for the deprivations suffered by the Abkhaz at that time.

Nor did the system of Soviet ethnic quotas help Georgian-Abkhaz relations. Certain bureaucratic offices were filled by ethnic Abkhaz only, which, given that they were a small minority of the population of the republic, was a serious impediment to the careers of the Georgians living there. Georgians resented the system, and some registered as ethnic Abkhaz, which increased the resentments of other Georgians even more. The Abkhaz, on

the other hand, saw the system, which was established and maintained by Russians, as the chief protector of their interests against a Georgian assault.

Soviet rule contributed in another way to the deterioration of Georgian-Abkhaz relations. As I noted earlier, the Abkhaz gentry was more likely than other classes of Abkhaz society to envision a future for Abkhazia in union with Georgia. However, it was exactly this group that disproportionately suffered from Communist repression. While this does not imply any intentional effort to worsen Abkhaz-Georgian relations, that was nevertheless the result.

By the end of the Soviet Union, there was only one element of the Abkhaz national vision that was unambiguous: Georgians were the enemy. The positive project of political status, in contrast, was not as clear. I see at least two reasons for this. First, as I said, the modern history of Abkhaz statehood began in the Soviet period, which limited the Abkhaz nationalist vision to a status within the Russian Empire/Soviet Union. Second, the Abkhaz had a much weaker starting point than Georgians—they were much fewer in absolute numbers, they were a minority in Abkhazia, and their status within the USSR was lower. That meant that, unlike Georgians who could (in practical terms, mistakenly) appeal to "international law" on the grounds that their independence had been illegally terminated by the Russian/Soviet invasion in 1921, the Abkhaz had to appeal to Moscow and to the Soviet period of 1921 - 1931.

In saying this I am not repeating the one-sided (and humiliating) argument put forward by many Georgians that the Abkhaz separatists are puppets of the Kremlin and have no agenda of their own. The reality is that as the Abkhaz formulated their demands they had to judge what kind of demands according to the possibility of gaining support from Moscow.

As a result, the substantive part of the Abkhaz political project varied according to changing circumstances. Nevertheless, there were two common underlying ideas: (1) guarantees of security for the Abkhaz as an ethnic community (preventing the Shapsug and Ubykh scenario); and (2) as much independence from the archenemy (Georgia) as possible. Different programs for achieving those goals included: (1) having equal status with Georgia within the Soviet Union (which of course meant separation from Georgia); (2) joining the Russian Federation with the same status that Abkhazia had in Georgia (autonomous republic); (3) full independence; (4) a federal/confederal relationship with Georgia based on a treaty between equals (which would in fact have meant something very close to independence but was in practice the least viable option). The first course is no longer realistic, while the other three are still discussed in Abkhazia and in negotiations between Tbilisi and Sukhumi.

The position of chief political patron/ally for Abkhazia is logically occupied by Russia. This alliance is purely pragmatic and is based on common interests in as much as both see the enemy as being Georgian nationalists, which gives them cause to coordinate their actions. Russians can use the Abkhaz (along with anybody else who is against Tbilisi), while the Abkhaz have only Russia to chose for a powerful ally. This is not a sentimental alliance, of course, and the Abkhaz have hardly forgotten their experience of *Mokhajirstvo* (which they cannot blame on Georgians) or the tragic story of the Ubykhs and Shapsugs.

(The more recent experience of Chechens did not particularly encourage Abkhaz love for Russia, either). It has also become quite evident to the Abkhaz that Russia is simply using them without being in any way committed to their security. Rather, their sentimental allies are their blood brethren in the Northern Caucasus—ethno-linguistically related peoples who showed their solidarity by actually spilling blood in the war of 1992-93.

These two alliances, however, contradict each other, and they often put the Abkhaz in an awkward situation. For example during the meetings of the "Confederation of the Mountain Peoples," while everybody else was involved in intense Russia-bashing, the Abkhaz had to say that Russia is not so bad and is sometimes even "constructive." Since the Chechen Republic now seeks active cooperation with the Georgians, Chechen officials have frequently renounced the Chechen involvement in the war with Georgia as a "mistake." For the Chechens, it is therefore evident that pragmatic considerations have to take precedence over the sentimental vision of a pan-Caucasian ethnic solidarity. This means that as long as its confrontation with Georgia continues, the Abkhaz have no other allies on whcih to rely, save Russia.

The Abkhaz cultural orientation is also dual. The awareness of kinship with the Circassian peoples is a natural ground upon which the Abkhaz can locate their cultural identity within the Caucasian realm. However, despite the relative popularity of the concept of a common Caucasian culture (a "Caucasian Home"), no one has conceptualized this commonality in a way that would make it fit into the modern world. "Caucasian-ness" is instinctively tied to ancient traditions of hospitality, ritualistic behavior, and the machoistic glorification of militancy, all of which have scant chance of surviving the corrosive effects of modernization. Chechens increasingly appeal to Islam, but this will hardly resonate with the Abkhaz. Ethnic Abkhaz include both Christians and Muslims, and most Abkhaz are either atheist or not very religious (this is true of most Georgians as well). Recently, an Abkhaz newspaper reported that the curriculum of the first private Abkhaz school in Sukhumi would include the study of Christian ethics—a development that is hardly compatible with an orientation to Islamic culture. [22]

Abkhazia was also very Russified during the Soviet period. Russian was the *lingua franca* of its multiethnic population, and the dominant position of Russian was exacerbated by the fact that Abkhazia was one of the most popular resort areas in the former Soviet Union. Abkhaz elites in particular are very Russified, and, despite recent disappointments, they remain culturally oriented towards Russia rather than the North Caucasus (in contrast to the Chechens).

The Abkhaz orientation to political models and ideologies is also contingent upon the political situation. In the last years of the Soviet Union, the Abkhaz sided with non-democratic forces that were struggling to preserve a unified Soviet state. When Georgian troops entered Abkhazia in August 1992, they destroyed not only the symbols of separate Abkhaz statehood, but statues of Lenin as well. Later, the Abkhaz tended to look for allies among Russian neo-Communists and nationalists. However, this does not mean that the Abkhaz are culturally less inclined to democracy than Georgians. It just so happens that anti-democrats in Russia are more anti-Georgian (hence pro-Abkhaz) than democrats. In

[22]"Private Schools Should Exist," *Respublika Abkhazia,* 15-17 January 1997, p. 3.

fact, many democratically-oriented Russians sympathize with the Abkhaz cause as well, but as a political force Russian democrats (or "so-called democrats") still tend to respect Georgia's independence and territorial integrity more than their opponents.

While not as politically ambitious as Georgian nationalism (that is, it is less insistent on full independence), Abkhaz nationalism seems to be stronger and more intense. This is mostly due to the fact that the Abkhaz face—or believe that they face—physical extinction. While Georgians have a recent record not only of fighting with the Abkhaz and Ossetians but also with each other, the Abkhaz have so far succeeded in keeping their political differences hidden due to the presence of a "common enemy." While Georgians have had their moments of weakness (in the wake of losing the war in Abkhazia they were close to giving up their independence in return for favors from Russia), the Abkhaz have so far expressed much greater firmness in their political stand.

Possible Scenarios of the Conflict Development

I have described the different perspectives of the political status of Abkhazia by both parties at length because I want to demonstrate two points. First, I want to show why a clash between both peoples was inevitable once the cultural and political elites of each side felt free to express their visions (which began around 1988)—the competing visions of sovereignty commanded human minds and meant that there were grounds for a serious conflict. On the other hand, I also want to demonstrate that this conflict was not doomed to lead to bloodshed.

Conflict was unavoidable because the sides had radically different answer to the fundamental question, "What is Abkhazia?" For the Georgian side, the answer was clear: "Abkhazia is Georgia." This was the slogan carried by demonstrators in March and April of 1989, when, for the first time during the *perestroika* era, the issue of Abkhazia became an object of mass politics. Its meaning was clear: "Abkhazia is an inseparable part of Georgia, just like any other Georgian province—Kakhetia, Imeretia, Mingrelia, etc." For the Abkhaz, on the other hand, it was equally clear that this answer was wrong. "Abkhazia is Abkhazia"—as Stanislav Lakoba, then the deputy speaker of the Abkhazian parliament (more precisely, its secessionist faction) entitled his article published in the West in 1995.[23] During the war, however, that was not in fact the only Abkhaz answer, as evidenced by another article published in the Russian press at the time by the influential representative of the Abkhaz nationalist movement, Zurab Achba, entitled "Abkhazia is Russia." This was an obvious attempt to attract Russian support and might not have expressed the true feelings of the Abkhaz. Nevertheless, it was possible for a prominent Abkhaz nationalist to say this in print. Anyway, one part of the Abkhaz answer was absolutely clear: "Abkhazia is not Georgia."

This was a fundamental conflict, and although one could fantasize about how the history of Georgia or the Caucasus might have been different if not for Russian involvement, the problem could not be explained away simply by pointing to a KGB conspiracy or a clash between selfish Georgian and Abkhaz "ethnocracies." The main conflict was between the different views that were held by the overwhelming majority of

[23] *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 14, No. 1, 1995, pp. 97-105.

Georgians and Abkhaz about Abkhazia's status. This is an issue over which it is very difficult to reach a compromise, and it allowed radicals on both sides to make the self-fulfilling prophecy that the problem could only be solved by the application of power (Russian, Georgian, or whatever) and not by agreement and compromise.

Still, I believe that if my interpretation of the two national projects is correct, there was considerable space for compromise. The Abkhaz did indeed see their primary enemy as the Georgians. Nevertheless, they did not insist on full independence. The bottom line for the Abkhaz was fear of extinction as a separate ethnic community. Georgians could have taken this as a starting point. A large majority of the Georgian elite recognized the "autokhtonous" status of the Abkhaz on their territory (aboriginal status is a very powerful category in Caucasian politics—however non-liberal and "non-constructivist" this may sound to outsiders, it matters greatly who was there "first," even if others arrived three, four, or even more centuries ago). It was widely accepted that the Abkhaz are the only ethnic group in Georgia (save for Georgians themselves) who have no other homeland, and that it is therefore legitimate for them to have some sort of special territorial-political arrangement that would guarantee the preservation of their identity. As I said, the constitution of independent Georgia adopted in 1921 provided such a status, and during the 1992-93 war, the Georgian parliament adopted a law proclaiming Abkhaz to be the second state language throughout Georgia. In addition, it gave immigrants the option to study either Georgian or Abkhaz in order to obtain citizenship.

Presumably, this contradicts a "pure" idea of the nation-state—if the Abkhaz are a separate nation, why not let them have their own nation-state? If Abkhazia is a legitimate part of Georgia, then why are the Abkhaz non-Georgians. Georgians usually respond by appealing to the above-mentioned tradition of political and cultural unity, and to the fact that ethnic Georgians have always lived in Abkhazia alongside the Abkhaz. Of course, there were more radical anti-Abkhaz sentiments as well, including calls for abolishing Abkhaz autonomy. But never—even during the war—were these sentiments reflected in official policy.[24] To account for this inconsistency—and to justify more radical claims—a different theory was invoked, based on the work of the Georgian historian Pavle Ingoroqua. According to this theory, the "real" or historical Abkhaz were a Georgian tribe. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Adygean tribes (self-named the "apsua") resettled from the North-Caucasus in Abkhazia, assimilated the "real" Abkhaz, and stole their name.

This theory was never accepted by a majority of Georgian historians. However, it was widely propagated by radical nationalist leaders such as Akaki Bakradze, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and others. This theory made everything very simple. As Gamsakhurdia said at many rallies, Abkhaz claims to self-determination were justified, but the territory was wrong—let them return to the North Caucasus and we will support their struggle there (just

[24]"The Georgian government and public has never questioned the status of Abkhazia. I am declaring this for everybody, for the whole world, for the Abkhaz: extensive autonomy will be guaranteed, the rights of every Abkhaz will be guaranteed" (Eduard Shevardnadze's speech to the joint sitting of the Defense Council and Council of Ministers of Abkhazia, 6 July 1993, *Sakartvelos Respublika*, 8 July 1993). One can argue that part of the Georgian public questioned Abkhazia's autonomy and that some government officials (such as the Minister of Defense, Kitovani) denounced the autonomy in personal interviews, but in principle Shevardnadze's statement (and there are many more statements like it) is correct.

as Gamsakhurdia later supported the Chechens' bid for self-determination). The Abkhaz claim to autonomy was thereby delegitimized. The argument was frequently reiterated by radical leaders and was often presented by the Abkhaz as the only Georgian position. In fact, most Georgian leaders did not take this attitude very seriously, although some thought it was a wise thing to say in order to counter the claims of Abkhaz radicals. Gamsakhurdia in particular frequently adjusted his assessments of Abkhaz history to the changing political situation.

To be sure, strong anti-Georgian feelings among the Abkhaz constituted a very important factor in the conflict. But since they were mostly rooted in the recollection of the recent Soviet past, there was always the possibility that the Abkhaz could be convinced (however difficult this might have been) that the policies of Stalin and Beria had nothing to do with the will of the Georgian people. Anti-Georgian feelings on the Abkhaz side were not mirrored by proportionate anti-Abkhaz feelings among Georgians—for the Georgians, the enemy was the Russians, not the Abkhaz. Georgians therefore felt threatened not by the Abkhaz *per se*, but by the prospect that the Abkhaz issue could be used by Russia against Georgia. Less than 100,000 ethnic Abkhaz could not be considered a serious security threat to Georgia on their own (at least, this was what Georgians thought), and introducing particular arrangements guaranteeing special rights for the Abkhaz as an ethnic community, as well as agreeing to a reasonable political status for Abkhazia as a territory—in return for giving up their pro-Russian tendencies —would have been quite acceptable to the Georgian public. It would probably have caused some discontent among ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia, but a clear and firm position by the Tbilisi government could have taken care of that.

Georgian willingness to accept a special status and preferential policies for the Abkhaz was influenced by the fact that Abkhaz autonomy in the Soviet period had in practice meant not "Abkhazianization" but Russification. There was no competition between the Abkhaz and Georgian languages in Abkhazia—the real competition was between Georgian and Russian. In Abkhazia, unlike the rest of Georgia, Russian was the *lingua franca*. In the 1970's, an Abkhaz university was opened in Sukhumi in response to Abkhaz demands, with separate Abkhaz and Georgian sections. However, the Abkhaz part was really a Russian-language university (save for a few courses in the humanities), while the Georgian part used the Georgian language. Little Abkhaz was taught in secondary and high schools as well.

Thus, in as much as Georgians saw the problem in the context of relations with Russia, the "Abkhazianization of Abkhazia" would reduce Russian cultural predominance and would thus be acceptable to moderate nationalists. There were projects to help the Abkhaz "Abkhazize" by translating and publishing Abkhaz language textbooks. Radical anti-Georgian Abkhaz saw this as a Georgian trick to alienate the Abkhaz from their Russian allies. There were some grounds for this view. But what, then, was the real Abkhaz project? Of course, the Abkhaz were free to choose Russification as their national project, but then all fear of an "Ubykh scenario" would lose credibility.

In short, the Georgians had room to persuade the Abkhaz to compromise. For the Abkhaz, of course, compromise would have been difficult because the image of "Georgian

imperialism" was so deeply rooted. Inevitably, certain tensions would have persisted for a considerable period. On the other hand, as much as the Abkhaz might have resented the Georgian plurality on Abkhaz territory, it was a reality they had to accept. Moreover, it seemed clear that Russian help was unreliable. If guarantees of the preservation of a separate Abkhaz ethnic identity was the real issue, then the Georgian argument that the Abkhaz would be no safer as part of Russia was quite credible. Of course, there were many disagreements over symbolic issues, particularly terminological ones—the Abkhaz, for example, happened to hate the word "autonomy," while Georgians found it hard to comprehend how a "republic" could contain another "republic." But political cunning could have helped overcome these obstacles to find a face-saving compromise that would not have challenged the fundamental aspects of each side's national project. It would not have been easy, and even under the best of circumstances finding a "final" model would have taken time. But provisional solutions during the negotiating process could have demonstrated the possibility and benefits of compromise.

Of course, this scenario would have required a very big and problematic "if"—the direct parties to the conflict would have had to be prudent, patient, rational, and sensitive to the concerns of the other. Moreover, the critical third party (initially the Soviet "center" and then Russia) would have had to abstain from manipulating the conflict in its own (real or imagined) interest. None of these preconditions was present, however. In fact, it would have required explanation if these new actors, freshly emerged from political nothingness, had actually displayed such qualities.

Why the war?

I am stressing these factors to make my main point: the emergence of nationalism—the idea of the nation-state as the universal model of state-building—was responsible for the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. But why this conflict led to violence is a different story and it requires a different *explananda*.

The explanatory factors here may be divided into two major categories. The first comes under the heading of "political immaturity" or "lack of political skills." The second can be described as "specific circumstances." I will start by listing some of the factors from the first category (although this is hardly an exhaustive list).

(1) G*iving precedence to ethno-historical over democratic legitimacy*. Both sides sincerely believed in the rightfulness of their respective claims, which they based on their visions of history (as outlined above). In as much as ethno-demographic changes resulted from "illegitimate" acts of conquest or imperial conspiracy, the interest of real people who might have been living on a specific territory could be easily discounted. This was the Georgian attitude to Ossetians, who had become a majority in the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast, and especially its capital Tskhinvali, thanks to Soviet policy. The Abkhaz viewed Georgians living in Abkhazia in the same way. The Abkhaz problem became an issue of mass politics in Georgia after February 1989, when most ethnic Abkhaz in Abkhazia gathered in the village of Lykhny to demand separation from Georgia and unification with Russia (then the RSFSR). It was taken for granted that the wishes of the Abkhaz ethnic community could be presented as the wishes of Abkhazia as a whole,

because regardless of the current ethnic-demographic situation, the historical rights of the Abkhaz should have taken precedence over the will of the entire population living in the territory of what, after all, was called "Abkhazia." Later Abkhaz leaders began to emphasize the multiethnic character of their national movement, but in reality this multi-ethnicism was a rather successful attempt to forge an "everybody against the Georgians" alliance.

Of course Georgian nationalists, especially in the Gamsakhurdia period, were far from sensitive to minority issues. According to many accounts, "Georgia for the Georgians" was Gamsakhurdia's slogan, which in fact is not true. I personally never heard anything like this slogan at his rallies and have never seen anybody cite a source for it. But it probably expressed his true attitude. Moreover, one can find many truly racist quotations in the Georgian press in that period. However, the difference between Georgian and Abkhaz ethnic nationalists was that Georgian nationalists could at least rely on the democratic legitimacy of majority rule, which the Abkhaz could not. As a result, Georgian nationalists did not have to rely on purely ethnic arguments.

(2) *The revolutionary-confrontational mood of the early nationalist movements*. Georgia's nationalist movement was probably the most radical in style in the former Soviet Union, at least among the movements at the union republic level. However, this radicalism was primarily targeted at the imperial "center," not ethnic minorities. It implied a symbolic rejection of cooperation with "occupational forces"—hence the refusal to take part in "Soviet" elections. "Compromise," "concession," even "realism" were treated as dirty words equivalent to "cowardliness" at best or "betrayal" at worst. Even if some Georgian nationalists wanted to cut deals with rebellious minorities, they found it difficult to overcome this attitude and to sell any compromise to their supporters. Nor were the Abkhaz immune to this glorification of radicalism.

(3) *A single enemy image as the exclusive point of reference*. The world image articulated by mass nationalism in its heroic-revolutionary stage is usually very simple: everything is reduced to a single confrontation—"our enemy against us." For Georgians, the Abkhaz problem did not exist on its own—it was merely a corollary of the problem of "the empire vs. Georgia." When the Abkhaz raised any claims that were not acceptable, they had to be treated as puppets manipulated by the Russians. The fact that the Abkhaz did in fact look for an alliance with Russia gave credibility to this reasoning. Rather than portraying the aspirations of the Abkhaz as inspired by Russia, it would have been in Georgia's interest to win over (or "seduce") the Abkhaz by more attractive proposals. But the art of political seduction was not something that Georgian radicals mastered or even thought necessary to learn. Many Abkhaz, in their turn, seemed equally blinded by a single enemy image of "Georgian imperialism" or "Georgian fascism."

(4) *Lack of willingness to take responsibility for the problem and reliance on a third party*. Simplistic images of the world promoted by radical nationalist ideologues are the result not only of their simple mindedness, but also of their reluctance to take responsibility for real problems. Explaining away the very existence of the Abkhaz problem by blaming it on a Russian conspiracy, and portraying Abkhaz nationalists as nothing but Russian puppets, was a way to avoid reality. Obviously, however, a refusal to face a

problem reduces the chances of solving it. After the end of the war, Georgia's new political course, which aimed at solving the Abkhaz problem through cooperation with Russia, showed an increase in political pragmatism in principle (the necessity to reach some kind of compromise with Russian power was acknowledged). But the old pattern of avoiding the problem continued nevertheless. The deal with Russia, as seen by the ruling part of the Georgian political elite, may be summarized as follows: We will accept the disgrace of giving up substantial elements of our sovereignty, but you have to solve the Abkhaz problem for us. Georgians did not seem to think much about the specifics of how this would happen—rather, they assumed that if the Russians were responsible for the mess in the first place, they would know how to clean it up.

The Abkhaz, on the other hand, did not have the luxury of blaming their Georgian problem on somebody else. "Georgian fascism" was an evil in itself, and they therefore had no choice but to deal with it. But they also found it difficult to accept that they had to deal with it on their own. Many steps taken by the Abkhaz government, especially before the war, were reckless provocations to Georgians, and it is hard to imagine that the Abkhaz would have taken these steps had they not hoped for Russian help.[25] One can argue now that their gamble paid off, but there were no guarantees of this in the beginning. And what was at stake was the very physical existence of the Abkhaz nation.

(5) *An "anti-political" attitude and lack of political confidence*. This may be an overarching argument, although it is not easy to formulate briefly. Despite their insistence on political independence and readiness to fight and sacrifice to achieve this goal, the Georgians were also deeply skeptical about government (even if it was their own). This anti-political mood was hardly limited to the Caucasus, and it is far beyond the scope of this paper to judge how much of this is the *Zeitgeist* of our time and how much is the legacy of the communist totalitarianism. It is clear, however, that Georgia's recent history presents numerous examples of this attitude. In the military domain, it was expressed by the total inability of Georgia to build a regular army. As a result, the fate of the war—and the country—depended upon the enthusiasm and political preferences of irregular voluntary groups, which were not controllable by central authorities. With an "army" like this, military operations quickly deteriorated into sprees of abuse, looting, and ethnic violence—as was the case in many post-Communist countries.

A deficit of political confidence stemming from a lack of political experience is another explanation for the same phenomenon. Georgians were fervent nationalists, but they were not very confident about their ability to build a state and pursue their objectives through consistent political work directed at long-term objectives. This lack of confidence showed itself, especially in the first stage of the independence-movement, in a propensity to impulsive and theatrical actions rather than systematic efforts. In this Georgia presents a stark contrast with the Baltic states, whose people showed a much greater ability to organize politically and to engage in systematic political action. Higher political culture in a normative sense—whether explained by a different civic culture in general or recent political

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[25]The actions of the Abkhaz government are described in Svetlana Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow*, Glastonbury, England: Gothic Image Publications.

experience—may account for the success of the Baltic political elites in preventing their "ethnic conflicts" with ethnic Russians from becoming violent.

It has to be pointed out that under the traditions and circumstances fostering this anti-political mood, the smaller group, which feels that its very existence is endangered (the Abkhaz, Chechens, Kosovo Albanians, etc.), has a paradoxical advantage. In the absence of a common state-political tradition or respect for formal order and discipline that could lead them to share a common citizenship, the smaller group finds it easier to foster group solidarity and fostering a siege mentality by stressing the threat from the larger goup.

However, post-communist political culture should not be treated as a constant. The political elite and public on the both sides were not entirely lacking in common sense and learned from political experience. Georgian nationalists understood quite clearly that internal conflicts in Georgia diminished the prospects of the Georgian national movement in its fight for independence from Moscow, and at least some factions tried to avoid direct confrontation with minority separatist movements and/or attempted to reach some kind of compromise with them (albeit not always skillfully). Some politicians, including Gamsakhurdia, willingly played the ethnic card because doing so paid political dividends. But other leaders sharply criticized him for doing so, and many even argued that his methods of inciting ethnic sentiments was proof that he was a "Moscow agent."

When the same Gamsakhurdia actually became the leader of Georgia, however, he too became much more pragmatic. For a brief period before the elections of 1990, he even reversed his demand for the abolition of South Ossetia's autonomy, even though, unlike the case with Abkhazia, most Georgians did not consider South Ossetia's autonomy to be legitimate. His pragmatism proved to be too late, however. The Ossetians conducted elections just a few days after the Georgian elections and proclaimed their independence. In response, Gamsakhurdia could think of nothing other than abolishing Ossetian autonomy, which exacerbated the conflict. But with Abkhazia, Gamsakhurdia was much more cautious. He never questioned Abkhazia's right to autonomy once in power, and in 1991 he actually reached a compromise with the Abkhaz that included concessions that were quite significant from the Georgian perspective. This agreement was based on an electoral law that provided for de facto ethnic quotas. The Abkhaz ethnic community (17 percent of the population) received 28 seats in a 65-seat Abkhaz parliament, while ethnic Georgians (45 percent) received only 26 seats. The rest of the population (almost 40 percent) were allotted only 11 percent of the seats. A two-thirds majority was required for making decisions on constitutional issues, which created the necessity of agreement between the two principal communities. In the fall of 1992, a new parliament was elected under this system.

This agreement, which embodied the "consociationalist" principles recommended by some Western political scientists for "deeply divided societies," did not survive—indeed, it was hardly viable in the long run.[26] Especially in Georgia, it was later very strongly criticized as an "apartheid law." But the fact was that the Georgians and the Abkhaz, represented by such strongly nationalistic leaders as Gamsakhurdia and Ardzinba, reached a

[26]Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.

compromise, and they did so without any direct external pressure or third-party mediation (perhaps the mess in Moscow after the August putsch allowed them to reach the agreement). The agreement was based on exactly the same political principles that I outlined above. The Abkhaz agreed to have their fate resolved within the framework of the Georgian state, while Tbilisi recognized the special rights of the Abkhaz as the only minority in Georgia that was "autochthonous" and had no homeland elsewhere. No one was entirely happy with the arrangement, but this can be said of all political compromises. The ethnic Georgian community in Abkhazia in particular had good cause to be displeased by their political underrepresentation in Sukhumi.

Had Abkhazia, with its ethnic demography of 1991, become an independent country, this arrangement would probably, sooner or later, have led to a Lebanese-type conflict between ethnic communities. But Abkhazia was not independent, and with "normal" developments in Georgia proper, there was no reason that the agreement had to unravel. Tbilisi, having a clear interest in stability in one of its provinces and in legitimizing the agreement, could have mitigated the discontent of ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia and eventually gained the trust of the ethnic Abkhaz community.

Of course, this rosy scenario can never be verified. It could be argued that the fragile 1991 agreement was doomed to end in a bloody clash anyway. But although I am not very sympathetic to political arrangements based on ethnic quotas, I still think that the symbolism of having reached an agreement was very important in itself, and that the agreement could therefore have been the basis for further progress even if that particular arrangement was unlikely to survive. But the reality was that developments in Georgia were far from "normal" (which was what I meant by "special political circumstances"). In December-January 1991-92, the authoritarian, allegedly mentally unstable, and obviously politically incapable Georgian president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was deposed by a strange coalition of nationalist military insurgents, liberal democrats, and communist nomenklatura. This led to a long period of political uncertainty and disorder in the country. Several months after the coup, the former communist leader in Georgia and foreign minister of the Soviet Union, Eduard Shevardnadze, was invited back to help restore order in Georgia. He was reasonably successful, but restoring order took a good deal of time and ended up costing Georgia the loss of Abkhazia.

Whatever the reasons for Georgian's turmoil, it endangered the precarious political balance in Abkhazia and helped contribute to a deterioration in relations between Tbilisi and Sukhumi.[27] There were several reasons for this.

(1) The new Georgian authorities had no interest in supporting the Georgian-Abkhaz agreement that had been reached by Gamsakhurdia. The delegitimization of Gamsakhurdia was an urgent political task, and because the ousted president accused Shevardnadze of being Moscow's man, Shevardnadze's supporters had to counter these accusations by showing that it was Gamsakhurdia who had failed to protect Georgian national interests ardently enough. The Georgian-Abkhaz agreement, which discriminated against ethnic Georgians on the "apartheid" basis, was their obvious target. The new government did not openly state that the agreement should be revoked and was in fact no

[27]See my "Georgia's Identity Crisis," *Journal of Democracy*, 1995, no. 1, pp. 104-16.

more anti-Abkhaz or anti-minority than the previous one (quite the contrary, it accused Gamsakhurdia of "parochial fascism" and wanted its minority policy to be much more liberal and citizenship-oriented). Nevertheless, the new government's criticism of the agreement served to erode its legitimacy.

(2) While Gamsakhurdia's credibility as a nationalist leader had allowed him to make the concessions he did to the Abkhaz, the legitimacy of the new Georgian authorities was much more limited, especially before new elections were carried out in October 1992. Although Shevardnadze was formally the leader, he did not really control the government or the armed forces. The new government could not, therefore, make any important decisions on Abkhazia, much less reach important compromises—it was too afraid of endangering the fragile pro-Shevardnadze coalition.

(3) Most ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia supported Gamsakhurdia rather than Shevardnadze. Several districts adjacent to Abkhazia were actually controlled by pro-Gamsakhurdia groups that were openly hostile to the new government. (The population of these districts, as well as most ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia, were Mingrelians, a distinct sub-ethnic group in Georgia to which Gamsakhurdia also belonged and which was more supportive of Gamsakhurdia.) This, naturally, diminished Tbilisi's ability to influence Abkhazia. At the same time, it increased the maneuverability of the ethnic Abkhaz faction of the Abkhaz government. The Georgian faction, although it was for the most part loyal to Tbilisi, was also confused and did not know how to handle the situation. The Abkhaz parliament divided into two factions: a pro-Abkhaz faction and pro-Georgian faction (with 34 and 31 members respectively, after deputies from a third party chose to join one of the two ethnic factions). Both factions were unwilling to cooperate.

(4) The open challenge to the Georgian-Abkhaz agreement came, however, not from the Georgians but from the Abkhaz. The ethnic Abkhaz faction led by Ardzinba saw a window of opportunity in the breakdown of authority and legitimacy in Georgia. Georgia was weak and divided, its new government lacked both popular and formal legitimacy, and Abkhazia was separated from the territory under the control of Georgian authorities by what Abkhaz strategists called the "Mingrelian pillow" (regions controlled by pro-Gamsakhurdia forces). On the other hand, they also felt that they had to take advantage of time because the situation in Georgia would eventually improve. The ethnic Abkhaz faction, which constituted a small majority of MPs, decided to ignore both the agreement and the ethnic Georgians in parliament (the leaders of the latter could not think of anything to do in response except boycott parliamentary sessions—but it had few options anyway). The ethnic Georgian Minister of the Interior was forcibly removed from his office and replaced by an ethnic Abkhaz (the distribution of major positions in the executive had also been part of the agreement).

The most provocative decision came in July when the ethnic Abkhaz faction of parliament, again using its slim majority, restored the constitution of 1925, according to which Abkhazia was no longer part of Georgia. (The text that was adopted was in fact a draft that had been rejected in 1925, but this is a detail.) The legal pretext for this was that Georgia's parliament had formally restored the powers of the 1921 Georgian constitution, thereby supposedly abolishing Abkhaz autonomy. This decision of the Georgian Parliament

had definitely been a mistake—it had been taken to appease radical-nationalists who wanted to emphasize the legal continuity of the new regime with the Georgian Republic of 1918-21. In fact, however, the restored constitution actually included provisions for Abkhaz autonomy as well. Nevertheless, the decision made by the ethnic Abkhaz faction meant the final collapse of the Georgian-Abkhaz agreement of 1991, the essence of which had been that no constitutional changes could be made by simple majority—that is, without the consent of the two communal factions. (The arcane Abkhaz justification for this step was that only the adoption of a new constitution, not the restoration of the old one, required a two-thirds majority.)

This open rejection of the 1991 agreement by the ethnic Abkhaz parliamentary faction implied a *de facto* restoration of the notion that the historical right of the ethnic Abkhaz community took precedence over the democratic rights of the current population of Abkhazia. It amounted to a latent declaration of war on the Georgian community in Abkhazia and Tbilisi, and significantly strengthened the position of those factions in the Georgian leadership that believed that military methods were needed to deal with Ardzinba. Saying this does not imply that starting the war was a good idea for Georgia. However, this extremely dangerous gamble by Ardzinba's government brought an important element of legitimacy to the Georgian military effort.

Did Ardzinba deliberately try to provoke a violent reaction from Georgia? This is plausible in view of the pre-war ethno-demographic situation in Abkhazia in which ethnic Georgians outnumbered the Abkhaz by two-and-a-half to one. It was this imbalance that concerned Abkhaz nationalists most of all—indeed, the demographic situation was considered the most dangerous manifestation of "Georgian imperialism," and war was the only way to change it. If post-communist ethnic wars are about ethnic cleansing, then in this case it was the Abkhaz who could benefit from it. (In the South Ossetian case, on the other hand, it was the Georgians who needed to change the ethno-demographic balance, and hence, according to this logic, it was the Georgians who were interested in starting the war.) In addition, promises of military help from Russia made the project look promising. If Ardzinba really believed that Georgians were an inherently genocidal tribe, as he often claimed, then living together with the Georgian plurality was a bleak prospect for his people. This makes his desperate gamble, which would bring about either final victory or final destruction, psychologically understandable.

A confident answer to this question would require much more thorough knowledge of the situation in Abkhazia and the mood of the Abkhaz leadership before the war. My preliminary hypothesis is based on the observation of other post-communist leaders—clear and coherent calculation of different scenarios that might result from their actions is not their typical feature. Put differently, rational choice theories are not necessarily applicable here. The crisis in Georgia might have created a mood of "now or never" among the ethnic Abkhaz leadership, and their actions were quite consistent with this sentiment. Instinctively, they might have been driven to a violent outcome. But this does not mean that they had a clear and coldly calculated plan to provoke a war.

The War and Its Results

How and why the war in Abkhazia started in August 1992 and why it ended the way it did in September 1993 is an important topic with many political and military aspects. A number of mysteries about the period may remain unsolved for a long time, if not for ever. I will only share my observations about some key issues.

The beginning of the war

Officially, Georgian troops entered Abkhazia to guard highways and railways. However, because they encountered resistance from the Abkhaz militia, they had to fight the militia and depose those who inspired this resistance—the separatist Abkhaz government led by President Ardzinba. Even if this official justification was a pretext, it was a fair one. The situation on the railways and highways was truly desperate due to the subversive activities of pro-Gamsakhurdia guerrillas, and since some of them were operating from Abkhazia, the military operation had to enter Abkhaz territory to be effective.

But how should one view the "Georgian government" at the time, and who really controlled the Georgian army? The real decision-making body in Georgia at the time was the four-member "Presidium of the State Council," which consisted of Shevardnadze, the two warlords Kitovani and Ioseliani, and Prime Minister Sigua, who routinely sided with Kitovani. We will likely never know what exactly happened at the meetings of the State Council or whether the actions of specific leaders followed collective decisions adopted there or not. Shevardnadze's supporters have always said in private that Shevardnadze really did not want the war, and that it was the result of unauthorized actions by Kitovani, which he had later to legitimize. Shevardnadze's public speeches are not always shining examples of lucidity and consistency, but, especially since Kitovani and later Ioseliani were removed from power and eventually put in jail, the Georgian president retrospectively tends to put the responsibility for starting the Abkhaz war on them.

There are good reasons to believe that Shevardnadze did not, in fact, want the war to start. He is an extremely able political schemer, but military-strategic planning is hardly his strong point, as became clear during the war. The war strengthened the warlords, thus diminishing his personal power. He brought the war in South Ossetia to an end as soon as his limited power allowed him to do so (in July 1992), which led to almost open discontent from some military leaders. During the Abkhaz war, he pushed for cease-fires and agreements even though they later proved to be militarily disastrous. And neutral observers who saw him in the first days of the war have reported that he was personally devastated by the outbreak of fighting.

Nevertheless, on the eve of the Georgian military operation Shevardnadze went on Georgian television to announce the plan. Of course, he only spoke about guarding highways and railways, which was a perfectly constitutional matter, and his threats at the time could be interpreted as being aimed at the Zviadists (Gamsakhurdia's supporters) rather than the Ardzinba government. But he certainly understood that it was quite possible that the Abkhaz would offer resistance to Georgian troops entering Abkhaz territory. He claimed that the plan to carry out the Georgian military operation had been cleared with

Ardzinba, which the latter denies, but again, there is no way to check either claim. Moreover, even if Ardzinba had accepted the plan, how could he be trusted? On the other hand, how could Shevardnadze's own warlords be trusted?

I can only build a hypothesis based on the general situation then and my understanding of Shevardnadze's character and priorities. His attitude was very ambiguous. He did not want a war in Abkhazia, but he was in a desperate situation in western Georgia where the Zviadist militia had humiliated the government and virtually controlled the railway. They had also taken several high officials from Tbilisi as hostages. Nor was there any prospect of improvement in sight. As a result, he had to do something resolute, and he was under strong pressure from military leaders who were demanding determined action against the Zviadists. He succumbed to this pressure, probably after receiving a promise from the military that it would not be involved in direct hostilities with Ardzinba and his forces. It might had been reckless to believe in this promise, but he probably did not have the power to stop them if *both* military leaders (Kitovani and Ioseliani) supported military action. The only other option might have been resignation, which would have been a noble but extremely irresponsible act at such a moment.

Once the military operation started, however, he completely lost control of it, at least initially. Later he tried to regain control, and he managed to stop Georgian troops from attempting to take Gudauta, where Ardzinba's government had taken refuge—Kitovani, the head of the military operation, later openly complained that "the parties" (his euphemism for civilian politicians supporting Shevardnadze) had "caught him by both hands" and would not let him march on Gudauta. Shevardnadze had two different explanations for why he stopped the troops from marching on Gudauta. First, he referred to humanitarian considerations, arguing that if Georgian troops occupied Gudauta, which was the region of Abkhazia most densely populated with ethnic Abkhaz, there would be a humanitarian disaster. He also believed that even if Gudauta were taken, there would be continuous guerrilla warfare, which he wanted to avoid. He might still have believed that some kind of deal with more moderate Abkhaz leaders was possible (erroneously). The second explanation is simpler: the Russian military detachment stationed in Gudauta openly warned Shevardnadze that they would stop the Georgian troops by force, if necessary, which induced Shevardnadze to back off. The two explanations do not contradict each other.

Of course, once the war was under way, Shevardnadze tried to take advantage of the situation in his fight against the "Zviadists." His success in this was only partial. Mingrelian regions where Shevardnadze's propaganda could not reach still supported Gamsakhurdia. But when Georgian television broadcast meetings of North Caucasian leaders discussing military help for the Abkhaz with Gamsakhurdia present and taking part in the discussion, viewers naturally started to question Gamsakhurdia's patriotism.

Shevardnadze's ambiguous attitude towards the war continued throughout the fighting and constituted, I think, one of the reasons for Georgia's military defeat. The Georgian leader displayed great personal bravery, appearing at the most dangerous spots and winning popularity among the Georgian soldiers. He probably did what he believed was the best for what he repeatedly called a "dignified end of the war." But he also saw that the war was strengthening the warlords, thereby not only endangering his own position

but also the prospect of enforcing law and order throughout Georgia. One can argue about whether he was afraid of strengthening the army, but the fact is that he did not try very hard to mobilize the resources of the country on the military's behalf. On the other hand, like most Georgians he believed that the war was really with Russia, and he therefore repeatedly asserted that its outcome would be determined in Moscow. Hence he did not really believe in Georgian military efforts because he did not believe that Georgia could win a war with Russia. The war in Chechnya had not yet broken out, and there was still an irrational awe of Russian military prowess in Georgia. As a result, he believed that the war was a doomed effort, which meant Georgia should withdraw from it as soon as possible through some kind of deal with Russian guarantees to back it up (which is why he preferred to speak not about "victory" but about a "dignified end" to the war, whatever that meant).

Shevardnadze wanted a Moscow-brokered end to the war so badly that he deceived himself by signing deals that proved disastrous for Georgia. The agreement of September 1992, which seemed to be so favorable for Georgia, led to Georgia losing Gagra and the Abkhaz taking control of the border with Russia. Similarly, the agreement of July 1993 led to the loss of Sukhumi. With all due respect to the heroic efforts of the Abkhaz militia and its supporters, the two most important military successes of the Abkhaz (the seizure of Gagra and Sukhumi) only occurred after Shevardnadze trusted Russian guarantees and ordered the withdrawal of most Georgian forces from those cities.

It would be unfair to put all the blame on Shevardnadze personally, however. The belief that the war was really a war with Russia was shared by the great majority of Georgians, as was the hypnotic spell of Russia's military power, which was imagined as being infinitely superior to Georgia's. What was called the Georgian army was really a collection of self-ruled (that is, generally unruly) "battalions" with poetic names of both romantic patriots and thugs. Their activities were only loosely coordinated, and while they were able to conduct heroic deeds sometimes, they refused to carry out orders they did not like. Their continuous abuse of civilians (and not only ethnic Abkhaz but others as well) alienated the local population (Georgians included) and significantly undermined international support for Georgia. But many post-communist wars are fought by spontaneously created militias, which are never well-behaved and noble, and some of them are still victorious. As in most wars (the Russian-Chechen war is the best example), losing the war was a function of losing nerve—he who blinks first loses—and in this war, it was the Georgians who blinked first.

In contrast, the Abkhaz, who were objectively in the more difficult position (especially at the beginning of the war), did not blink. Russian military support, even though its role is often overestimated by Georgians, accounted for a lot, but it would not have been enough on its own. The Abkhaz believed that their very existence as a nation at stake, and this led to the dramatic consolidation of the Abkhaz people. Most neutral observers with whom I have spoken agreed that the military detachments fighting on the Abkhaz side were much more organized and combat-ready than the Georgian ones. However paradoxical it may sound, even the Russian military seemed to be more motivated when they fought for the Abkhaz than when they fought against the Chechens.

One has to add something here on public attitudes toward the war. Unlike the Russian-Chechen war, when a substantial part of the Russian public did not support the war

and after which most Russians would probably be happy to be rid of Chechnya altogether, for the Georgian public, to fight a war to retain Abkhazia as part of Georgia was clearly a legitimate exercise. Moreover, efforts to keep Abkhazia a part of Georgia continue to be an important element of the political agenda in Tbilisi. This difference may be explained by the fact that popular attachment to Chechnya as Russian territory is weak—if it exists at all. Georgians, on the other hand, consider Abkhazia an "inalienable" part of Georgia for which it is natural that Georgia will fight. Few liberal-pacifist voices are audible in Georgia. The only significant opposition to the war came from the supporters of Gamsakhurdia, for whom Shevardnadze was a Russian agent and the war was a Russian provocation aimed at removing Abkhazia from Georgia. Such beliefs were reinforced by the results of the war. The same people, however, later opposed peace in South Ossetia because the war was started under Gamsakhurdia and was stopped by Shevardnadze. They probably would have endorsed a military operation in Abkhazia had it been Gamsakhurdia's idea. While the legitimacy of the war in principle was very rarely questioned, its *expediency* was, especially after the war began and, naturally, after the defeat. Yes, in principle it was right to fight a war for what is an inalienable part of Georgia, but was the war necessary? Was it not a miscalculation? While most people will say now that it was a mistake, that was not true at the beginning of the war.

It is an entirely different question, however, whether individuals were willing to fight. As noted earlier, most of the ethnic Georgian population of Abkhazia supported Gamsakhurdia and thus did not believe in the war. This led to a paradoxical situation in which those Georgians for whom the stakes were highest and who had to fight for their own homes (and actually lost everything as a result of the war) did not want to support the war. Here Gamsakhurdia's propaganda worked well—as many refugees later reported, he sent a message that, following his agreement with Ardzinba, his supporters would not be harmed by the Abkhaz.

For the majority of those people who did fight, the territorial integrity of Georgia was more a political principle than a matter of personal interest. But because of the anti-political mood described above, the moral obligations of nationalism did not translate into specific duties of military service. Many young Georgians merely followed a romantic patriotic urge when they went to the war, but whether they would go and stay was considered by them to be a matter of personal choice, not an obligation. In practice, loyalty to their friends and particular commanders mattered much more than abstract patriotic duty. An attempt to build military detachments through a regular draft proved unsuccessful. Nor did the ambiguous and half-hearted attitude of the Georgian government itself (as explained above) promote patriotic enthusiasm. Many fighters questioned (as was often reported by the Georgian media, and as I learned in conversations myself) whether the war was real. "Does our government really want us to win this war?" they asked.

I have much less information about the Abkhaz side, but it seems that the level of unity in Abkhaz society excluded any discussion of the legitimacy of the war. Ardzinba's leadership portrayed the war as one for the physical survival of the Abkhaz nation, which excluded the possibility of an ambiguous stand. However, it is widely known that at the beginning of the war, ethnic Georgian and Abkhaz village communities (living in the same villages or adjacent ones) made a kind of "separate pact": this war was started by politicians

who have an issue with each other, they said, but we have lived peacefully together for a long time and should not take part in it. As the war continued, and mutual atrocities or rumors of atrocities mounted, these pacts fell apart. Substantial numbers of Abkhaz left (mostly to Russia), but one can only guess whether they fled for their lives or because of disagreement with Ardzinba's radicalism (I am not familiar with any attempts to research this).

The main *result* of the war was not just the fact that the Georgian army was defeated and driven out of Abkhazia—rather, it was the dramatic change in the ethnic-demographic balance. Although some Georgians remained (mostly Gamsakhurdia's supporters), they were a politically insignificant number. More than two hundred thousand Georgians were driven out. Statistics on both sides are quite unreliable, and it is still unclear whether ethnic Abkhaz are now a majority in Abkhazia, but the former ethnic balance that was considered so dangerous by the Abkhaz no longer exists.

Russian involvement

The extent of Russian involvement in the war may be the most controversial aspect of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Obviously, careful analysis should find a middle ground between blaming all the problems of the Caucasus on a malevolent Russian conspiracy on the one hand, and saying that the Russian impact on the region was only marginal or even stabilizing. But where exactly does this middle ground lie?

One can say with certainty that Russia has been, and still is, the most important, although not necessarily reliable, ally of the Abkhaz in this conflict. Though the Abkhaz may be far from happy with Russia's behavior at particular times, they do not have any politically important ally other than Moscow. As a result, even after the CIS agreed in March 1997 to change the mandate of the Russian (formally CIS) peacekeeping force in the conflict zone, despite the objections of the Abkhaz, Ardzinba still had to reiterate that he accepted Russia as the principal peacekeeper and that Russia should continue its mission (presumably, however, under the old mandate).

The real question is, what are Russian motives and how far does Moscow's support for the Abkhaz go? I will start by repeating the now almost commonplace argument that Russia has no coherent policy in the Caucasus.[28] In part, this is due to the fact that there is no single center in the Russian government that can define Russian policy in the region (as is often said, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense have different agendas, while economic interest groups represented by Chernomyrdin, Berezovsky, and the like have still other interests).[29] On the other hand, it must also be admitted that Russia

[28]This is usually admitted by most Russian scholars. See, for instance, Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Security Interests and Policies in the Caucasus Region," in Bruno Coppieters (ed.,), *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, VUB Press: Brussels, 1996, pp. 91-102.

[29]"Indeed, in the beginning of 1997 there were at least six key actors in the Russian foreign policy-making process: (1) Yeltsin himself and the extensive presidential apparatus; (2) The Foreign Ministry led by Primakov; (3) Lukoil, Transneft, Gasprom and other energy conglomerates linked to the Russian Prime Minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin; (4) the Defense Ministry led by Igor Rodionov; (5) the Atomic Energy Ministry led by Viktor Mikhailov; and (6) the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations, led by Oleg Davydov, and the Rosvooruzheniye state-owned arms exporting company which is subordinate to the

faces objective difficulties and challenges in the region that account for much of its controversial and contradictory policy.

When there is no coherent and rational policy, instincts take over, and this instinctual behavior may be quite consistent in its own way. In relation to the Caucasus, the Russian instinct was to retain as much power and influence as possible, and a military presence was believed to be the major means for accomplishing that end. It was correctly assumed by Russian strategists that if Russia's southern neighbors—Georgia and Azerbaijan—were allowed to have their own way, they would try to conduct independent foreign policies and find alternative partners to Russia. Georgia is usually oriented to the West, while Azerbaijan saw independence as an opportunity to establish a close partnership with Turkey and with Western oil companies. How could Russia counter these tendencies? It was too weak and internally divided to become a strongpoint of attraction for its new neighbors (the so-called "near abroad"), or at least it did not believe that it had the ability to become such a magnet without some kind of military pressure. The most efficient way to maintain influence in the Caucasus appeared to be through the manipulation of ongoing conflicts there, so this became the main direction of its policy in the region. The only way to stop these countries from drifting away was to exacerbate their internal difficulties—being weak and divided, they would have much less opportunity to resist Russian influence.

The foremost material expression of this influence was assumed to be Russia's military presence there. In addition, the military was extremely influential in defining Russian policy in the "near abroad." Indeed, in the first years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, a *de facto* division of labor was established in which the Foreign Ministry dealt with the "real" abroad, while relations with the countries of the former Soviet Union were taken care of primarily by the Ministry of Defense. Many Russian civilian politicians, although not necessarily its extreme nationalists, shared the military's attitude towards the Caucasus.[30]

On the other hand, Russia had other "real" interests in the region as well. The North Caucasus is part of Russia, and maintaining stability in this region was and is of utmost importance for the country. The Chechen problem was already serious, and in 1992 there were serious fears in Russia that the Chechen precedent could cause a domino effect leading to the further disintegration of the country. In this regard, instability in the South Caucasus, particularly in Georgia, was not necessarily in Russia's best interest. The Abkhaz problem was legally analogous to the Chechen case, and supporting separatist tendencies in Abkhazia was therefore not logical for the Russians, while violence in the South Caucasus could have spilled over into Russia, at least in the form of a flood of refugees. There was also a contradiction between geopolitical and economic interests, a contradiction that

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ministry." (Robert O. Freedman, "Russian Policy Making and Caspian Sea Oil," *Analysis of Current Events*, vol. 9, No. 2, February 1997, p. 6). The list of agencies would likely vary from one expert to another (for example, one could add the Border Troops Department led by General Nikolayev) and their weight has changed over time, but the assessment that there is no single foreign policy-making center in Moscow is widely shared by experts on Russia.

[30]A liberal member of the Russian Duma said in an interview in 1994 that an overwhelming majority of the Duma Committee on Relations with the CIS countries believed that Georgia should be kept weak and divided in order for Russia to dominate it. The Chairman of this Committee, Konstantin Zatulin, publicly stated, "Georgia should become our satellite or die."

manifested itself most obviously in relation to Azerbaijan's oil—while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tried to prevent Azerbaijan from extracting oil from the Caspian, Russian business circles, represented politically by Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, wanted to participate in the oil boom (later, actual shares of Azerbaijani oil projects were acquired by Lukoil). But in relation to the Abkhaz problem, this kind of contradiction did not play much of a role—the economic importance of Abkhazia was marginal.

The violent stage of the conflict in Abkhazia also coincided with a sharp polarization within Russia between "democrats" led by president Yeltsin and neo-communists/nationalists (the "red-brown coalition") who fervently opposed him. Abkhazia became one of the issues over which the two forces confronted each other. In general, Yeltsin's allies tended to support Shevardnadze and Georgia's territorial integrity, at least in principle. The communists/nationalists, on the other hand, openly supported the Abkhaz and called for Russia's annexation of Abkhazia. In his turn, Shevardnadze throughout the war emphasized the difference between "democratic" and "reactionary" Russia and used every opportunity to express his support for Yeltsin.

The line dividing "democratic" and "reactionary" Russia, however, was not as clear as Shevardnadze made it out to be. Minister of Defense Grachev was Yeltsin's man, but by-and-large the Russian military sided with the Abkhaz. Obviously, good relations with his own military was much more important for Yeltsin than support from Shevardnadze or Georgia's territorial integrity (whatever the repercussions for Chechnya). He therefore refused to risk his own position by restraining the Russian military too vigorously. And since keeping the South Caucasus under control was considered to be an important priority across the political spectrum, there was no real pro-Georgian faction within the government. And because the Russian political elite did not take the Georgian state seriously, they found it difficult to put the Abkhaz and Chechen problems at the same level. Russia, they believed, would eventually resolve its Chechen problem without great effort, so why not manipulate the Abkhaz conflict in order to restrain Georgia? This did not necessarily mean support for open military intervention in Georgia or for allowing the military to show too much independence from civilian authorities. But independence-minded Georgia, which refused to join the CIS, was annoying. At the same time, a number of liberal politicians and intellectuals (including Galina Starovoitova and Yelena Bonner) argued that Georgia was a "small empire" and chose to support Abkhazia on moral grounds. If Russia let Georgia go, they argued, why should Georgia not let Abkhazia go?

Another "objective" reason why the Russian government was reluctant to withdraw its support for Abkhazia was fear of alienating other North Caucasian autonomies. Paradoxically, and maybe unexpectedly for Russian politicians, the crisis in Abkhazia helped redirect the growing energy of nationalist sentiments in the North Caucasus, sentiments which might otherwise have exploded in Russia's face (or at least Russia feared that might). The leader of the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus, Musa Shanibov, openly threatened that if Russia supported Georgia in the war against Abkhazia, the North Caucasian republics would follow the Chechen lead and declare independence from Moscow.

As a result, while the nationalist/communist opposition backed the Abkhaz openly and consistently, the government and its supporters in the democratic camp were much less

coherent. In practice, this meant that Yeltsin barely even tried to keep the Russian military in Abkhazia in check, although he would occasionally reiterate his general support for "the territorial integrity of Georgia." The fact that both parties to the conflict (as was the case with all parties to all other post-communist wars in the Caucasus) were supplied with arms from the Russian military can be explained by the Russian desire to keep the war going. In addition, Moscow could not stop the lucrative arms trade that enriched its military. Different political or military groups supported different parties in the conflict, and the Russian government could not make up its mind whom to support and changed its policy in this regard from time to time. Again, these explanations do not contradict each other.

Russia's attitude to Abkhazia may be considered a particular case of its general attempt to use internal conflicts in the "near abroad" to its advantage. But there were some specific considerations as well. Abkhazia was one of the most popular resort areas in the former Soviet Union, so many Russians, especially the elite, had sentimental recollections of it. This made the idea of the annexation of Abkhazia to Russia, or at least of maintaining Russian control of the region in some form, especially attractive. Moreover, some representatives of the Russian elite (including some generals) as well as various Russian governmental agencies owned property there, which created a specific economic interest in controlling the region. Finally, the Russian military's hatred of Shevardnadze for his role in dismantling the Soviet Empire was another specific but possibly quite important motive as well.[31]

How decisive was Russia's military and economic support in the Abkhaz victory? An answer to this question requires greater military expertise than I possess, and any assessment would be hard to verify in any case. However, after the Chechen defeat of the Russians on their own, one can plausibly argue that the Abkhaz could also have beaten the Georgians without any external help, especially in view of the disorganized condition of Georgia's troops, the disunity of the political elite in Tbilisi, and the lack of confidence of Georgia's political leadership. However, the help, which was considerable, was there.

Without attempting any conclusive answer, I will make the following observations. First, the Chechens indeed shattered the myth of the invincibility of the Russian army in the Caucasus. However, during the Abkhaz war this myth was very much alive. The very fact that Russian officers (retired or not) fought on the Abkhaz side and Russian planes shelled Georgian positions and civilians (these two facts are rejected by no one) significantly eroded the morale of the Georgian army and convinced the political leadership that the war was unwinnable.

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[31]In his interview to "Moscow News," Sergey Leonenko, a retired sub-colonel of the Russian army who was fighting in Abkhazia, listed hatred of Shevardnadze as the primary reason why the Russian military (that is, the regular force deployed in Abkhazia) was supporting the Abkhaz. He also said that the Russian military believed that by supporting the Abkhaz, they were promoting the national interests of Russia. When asked about specific forms of support, he said that he could not say everything because there was an official order to stay neutral, but he admitted that the Abkhaz could always get from the Russian army a "fully elaborated plan of combat operations." "The success of the Abkhaz army confirms this," he continued, "but the battle for Sukhumi will be prolonged, because the army lacks people who are capable of properly carrying those plans out. Now it is our urgent task to fill positions on the management level, predominantly at the expense of retired Russian officers." ("Za Pravoye Delo?" *Moscow News*, 18 July 1993).

Second, it is true that both sides fought with Russian arms, but it is also evident that the Russian military sympathized with the Abkhaz rather than the Georgians. This suggests that the Abkhaz received preferential treatment in arms supplies. Insofar as arms supplies were politically dictated, Russia could supply Georgians with enough arms to keep the war going and weaken Georgia further, but never enough to allow Tbilisi to actually win.

Third, it cannot be assumed that the military prowess of the Chechens was shared by the Abkhaz. The Chechens are a mountainous people with very strong military traditions, which is not true of the Abkhaz. The latter are largely urbanized, and wide-spread involvement in tourism hardly promotes a warrior tradition.

Fourth, I have already made the paradoxical claim that the morale of the Russian military in Abkhazia seemed to be higher, maybe even considerably higher, than in Chechnya. Many of those Russians who actually took part in combat operations were retired officers—that is, they were people of quite a high level of military competence—in contrast to the inexperienced youngsters who did not know why they were fighting in Chechnya. Financial interest was evidently part of the motivation of these retired officers, but as far as one can judge from their interviews in the Russian media, idealistic considerations also played an important role. All of them believed that they were fighting for the national interests for Russia and were taking revenge on Shevardnadze, the traitor of Russia's national interests. (Shevardnadze was a much more obvious target of their anger than people like Dudaev or Maskhadov.) Fighting together with the "oppressed" Abkhaz against "Georgian imperialists" also relieved them of any imperial guilt. This combination of logistical and material support from regular Russian detachments with a high level of professionalism and motivation may well have made an important difference.

Finally, Russian support boosted the confidence of the Abkhaz, not only during but before and after the war as well. An important question (the answer to which is impossible to check) is whether Ardzinba would have adopted the same risky and confrontational policy before the war had he not expected Russian support. The hope that Russian nationalists and communists—who were much more friendly to the Abkhaz, at least while they were in opposition—would come to power in Moscow also made the Abkhaz government much less likely to accept any compromises after the war.

Prospects for a Settlement

Georgia's humiliating defeat in the war led to a dramatic change in Tbilisi's relationship with Russia. Since the defeat was considered primarily a defeat by Russia, Georgia behaved accordingly. Joining the CIS was understood to be a symbol of capitulation (of course, there was also a great overestimation of the significance of the CIS, but symbols have always played an extremely important role in Georgian politics). However, the people expected to be rewarded for signing this act of capitulation by peace, stability, improved conditions, and solutions to internal problems. Now that Georgia has once again accepted Russian domination, they assumed, Russia would help Georgia solve its problems.

Initially Georgia did benefit. The Zviadist insurrection in western Georgia was swiftly and relatively painlessly defeated, which marked a turn toward internal stabilization. The Russian military barely took part in the hostilities, but its show of support for

Shevardnadze's government was enough to guarantee a sweeping victory for the latter. Such an easy solution of the Zviadist problem, which had been haunting the new authorities for almost two years, looked like a miracle, and it therefore created an expectation of further miracles.

Having an opportunity to reverse the military defeat in Abkhazia was one of the major hopes—or illusions—of the new policy. Georgia agreed to Russia's military presence in Georgia in three forms: (1) as peacekeepers in Abkhazia; (2) as border troops along the Georgian border with Turkey; and (3) in military bases in different parts of Georgia. As compensation, Georgia expected Russia to "return Abkhazia"—that is, to help restore Tbilisi's *de facto* control in the region. Of course, this was never written into any official agreement, although the version of the agreement on Russian bases that was initialed in the spring of 1995 included an appendix stating that the treaty would not be valid until after the restoration of Georgian jurisdiction over Abkhazia. While this phrase was excluded from the appendix of the agreement Shevardnadze signed in October 1995, Shevardnadze has since reiterated in public many times that restoring Georgia's territorial integrity was implied in the treaty, which has yet to be ratified. Nevertheless, the details of *how* the actual restoration of Georgian control over Abkhazia would take place were never specified, although the return of refugees under the protection of the Russian army was assumed in Georgia to be a first step. Russian Defense Minister Grachev made informal and at least general promises in this regard in front of witnesses.[32] As a result, on several occasions there were serious expectations from people close to the Georgian government that "something" was going to happen soon that would begin the process of returning refugees. Georgia's most recent diplomatic victory in this regard came at the March 1997 CIS summit, when the area of peacekeeping operations was extended deeper into Abkhazia to facilitate the return of Georgian refugees to at least the southern part of Abkhazia. The Abkhaz leadership, however, refused to allow the mandate to be expanded without their consent and threatened to demand the withdrawal of Russia's troops altogether if the CIS agreements were implemented. As a result, nothing happened except for consultations in May on how to carry out the results of the CIS summit.

Nothing followed from the consultation, however, and Russia's policy toward the conflict continues to be ambiguous. It seemed obvious that Russia's support for Abkhazia was merely an instrument to punish—and influence—Georgia. Now that Georgia has agreed to be influenced, why not reward her by reversing this support? This is logical but too simple. The experience of the last three years has shown that Russia is neither willing nor capable of changing the situation. Perhaps Russia would like to change the current impasse, but any attempt to do so would require too much effort and be too great a risk. Moreover, Russia is reluctant to help solve the Abkhaz conflict (assuming that it could if it wanted to) because it is afraid of losing leverage over Tbilisi. Russian politicians think—correctly—that Georgia will never be happy under exclusive Russian geopolitical domination and will resist unless strong and consistent pressure is applied.

Keeping the Abkhaz conflict unresolved seems to be the only way to keep Georgia in check, even to a degree. On the other hand, the Abkhaz seek Russian help because they

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[32]See Ghia Nodia, *Waiting for the Russian Bear*, "War Report", June 1995, No. 34, pp. 39-40.

have no choice. But neither are they Russia's puppets, and even if Russia wanted the Abkhaz problem to be solved in a manner that was satisfactory to Georgia, political or even economic pressure on the Abkhaz would hardly be sufficient. After the war in Chechnya, even the most naively pro-Russian Georgian politicians now understand that Moscow is extremely unlikely to spill Russian blood in Abkhazia for the sake of Russian bases in Akhalkalaki or Batumi. But without spilling blood, dramatic change can hardly be expected. On the other hand, especially given the situation regarding the status of Chechnya, solving the problem by annexing Abkhazia to Russia is an option only for the most extreme Russian nationalists.

In short, the current situation in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict may be characterized as the volatile stability of an impasse. Both Georgia and Russia are using the uncertain situation as leverage against each other, and they continue their futile attempts to outsmart each other in pursuing the unattainable "Abkhazia for military bases" deal. (This situation reminds me of the negotiations between the two crooks in the popular Russian comic novel, *12 Chairs:* "Money First, Then Chairs. No, chairs first, then money.") Each side cannot have its own way, but neither can they relinquish each other. Georgians are afraid that Russia will lift all restrictions on Abkhazia and become openly pro-Abkhaz, which will make any compromise by the Abkhaz unrealistic, while Russia is afraid that Georgia will lose its last elements of awe for Russia and will start to openly oppose the Russian military.

Georgia occasionally makes noises about restoring its control over Abkhazia by force, but it is not really trying to create a viable army and is reluctant to become involved in another uncertain adventure. Every instance of prolonging the mandate of the Russian peacekeepers (which happens twice every year) leads to another round of pressure and negotiations, but nothing important ever happens. The Abkhaz have no option but to wait and worry about a possible Russian-Georgian deal at their expense. In the meantime, they are trying to enjoy their de facto independence. Nobody is happy, but nobody is terribly unhappy either. Life goes on—Georgia builds a pipeline, the Abkhaz have elections and state holidays, and the Russians sign agreements with NATO. This situation can last for a long time (the "Cyprus model" is a popular phrase when talking about the Abkhaz situation). A resolute attempt to change the situation dramatically in one's favor might undermine the existing fragile balance and boomerang against the initiator, so everybody is cautious. The only people who are really unhappy are the refugees, but we know from the Middle East and many other places that refugees may have to wait.

Is there a way out of this impasse? What kinds of profound changes can one imagine? I will list several conceivable options.

(1) *A dramatic change in Russia's position*. The Russians may accept the reality that there is no way to keep Georgia and Azerbaijan within the zone of exclusive Russian domination. Keeping Russian frontier guards on the Georgian-Turkish border and military bases elsewhere is an unreasonable waste of economic resources and political capital, both of which are in short supply in Russia now. The pending reform of the Russian army requires resources that are not compatible with paying for the ethnic Armenian and Georgian soldiers who comprise the bulk of "Russian" military personnel in the South Caucasus. The popular Russian argument that if not for Russian military involvement, the South Caucasus would be in turmoil, and that this would undermine the stability of the

North Caucasus, might have been credible in 1992-93 but is no longer so. Moreover, it is unlikely that either Georgia or Azerbaijan will become Russia's adversary and try to undermine its stability because there are enough common interests even now, and if the Russian economy starts picking up, it will become an extremely strong magnet for the South Caucasus.

Nor has Russia's military pressure helped Moscow achieve its objectives in the region—on the contrary, it has been counterproductive. Abkhazia is the best example of how Russia cut itself off from the South Caucasus economically. If Russia needs stability in the South Caucasus—the one item on the list of its "national interests" in the region that may be respected—then increasing Western involvement in the region has a stabilizing effect, and its expansion can only be welcome.

If I were a Russian political strategist, I would therefore advise President Yeltsin to withdraw Russian troops from the South Caucasus, starting with Georgia. (Armenians want the Russian troops to stay, so that is a different issue.) I would tell him that this would make Georgia much friendlier to Russia overnight, and that it eventually might even increase Russian political and economic influence in the country. The Russian military would not be happy, but most Russians would support the idea.

Is this realistic? I believe my advise is rational from the standpoint of Russian national interests. However, I am not Hegelian enough to believe that whatever is reasonable will necessarily become real, and Russians themselves love to say that reason does not always apply to them ("You cannot understand Russia by reason," as the Russian poet Tiutchev put it). At the least, however, a change in Russian policy is conceivable, and I would not be very surprised if a change in Russian policy occurred in the not too distant future (maybe Tiutchev was exaggerating?).

What would the consequence of this change be for the Georgian-Abkhaz problem? I will leave this question unanswered for the moment, but I will say that neither the Georgians nor the Abkhaz have even considered this possibility. Both have become used to living within the Russian political universe for so long that it is hard to imagine how it could be otherwise. But I think it would be wise for both Abkhazia and Georgia to take this option seriously.

(2) *Much deeper involvement by the West and international organizations*. Shevardnadze's strategy has always been to encourage as much Western involvement in the effort to reach a settlement with Abkhazia as possible. The Abkhaz were very suspicious of Western involvement, however, because the West recognizes the territorial integrity of Georgia and because Sukhumi's principal allies were anti-Western Russians. However, this does not mean that the Abkhaz are anti-Western in principle.

The principal reason for Georgia to get the West and international organizations (Georgia never really distinguished between the two) more closely involved is to counterbalance Russia's influence, and in this regard Georgia's efforts are of course understandable and legitimate. So far, Georgian success in this regard has been very limited. Indeed, the UN Security Council has refused to provide the CIS (in fact Russian) peacekeepers with a UN mandate, and it has accepted exclusive Russian participation in the peacekeeping operation, with the function of UN military observers (UNOMIG) being

limited to monitoring the situation and reporting back to UN headquarters. With this exception, Western involvement to date has been on the humanitarian level only. Nothing even remotely similar to NATO's role in the former Yugoslavia has occurred in Abkhazia.[33]

Georgia's leaders occasionally express the hope that once the West is less busy in the former Yugoslavia it will be able to commit more attention and resources to the problems of the Caucasus. This is unrealistic. Moreover, the West's ability to solve these problems is greatly exaggerated. Russia is hardly objective and may be pernicious, but at least it has real interests in the region and can be ruthless enough to enforce its will. It also has ability to do so (the Russian language does not distinguish between peacekeeping and peace making—the more frequently used word, *mirotvorchestvo*, means "peacemaking" in a literal translation).

In addition, Western countries and especially highly bureaucratized international organizations (and Western countries prefer to work through these organizations) do not apply real pressure in these kinds of conflicts unless they have a strong political interest in doing so and there is no demonstrable threat to international security. Given that there is no war in Abkhazia and that there is no immediate danger of a renewal of hostilities, no resolute measures are likely. Abkhazia is not on any real or even projected pipeline route, and oil is currently the only issue which makes the Caucasus really interesting for the rest of the world.[34] Abkhazia's geographic position makes it vitally important for Russia's relations with Georgia and the South Caucasus in general, but it is not enough to make it significant for the West.

This is not to say that Western participation might not be valuable. Contacts with Westerners help Georgians and Abkhaz understand modern political thinking, and it helps rid them of illusions that would distract them from searching for realistic solutions on their own. Western interest in the region may be limited, but the West's desire for a peaceful solution may be genuine, so if the parties want to achieve a compromise they will have a greater chance of doing so with Western mediation. But the last option would require a profound change in the attitude of the direct parties to the conflict. The illusion that the West will one day *impose* a "just" solution (whatever "just" might be) only postpones a change in attitude.

(3) *Changes within Georgia and Abkhazia*. As I tried to show in the previous sections, both the outbreak of the war and its military outcome were predominantly caused by Georgia's internal turmoil. What influence can the change from turmoil to stability in Georgia proper have on the prospects for a settlement with Abkhazia? One of the possible strategies for the Georgian political elite (which is rarely expressed in the form of a coherent

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[33]See S. Neil MacFarlane, Larry Minear, and Stephen D. Schenfield, *Armed Conflict in Georgia: A Case Study in Humanitarian Action and Peacekeeping*, Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, Occasional Paper #21, 1996.

[34]As this paper was being written, the idea of putting Abkhazia on the map of oil pipeline networks began being discussed, and the issue may have been raised during the meeting of Ardzinba and Shevardnadze in August 1997 in Tbilisi. This appears to be based on the notion that economic incentives should be created for co-opting Abkhazia rather than on any economic rationality of the project itself. It therefore probably has an even lower chance of materializing than the idea of a "peace pipeline" through Mountainous Karabagh.

doctrine, but appears to be gaining influence anyway) is that once Georgia picks up economically (it already had the highest growth rate in the CIS in 1996), while the situation in politically and economically isolated Abkhazia continues to deteriorate, the Abkhaz will be more likely to accept a compromise. Supposedly, the Abkhaz will then agree to unify with Georgia. In the meantime, recollections of the cruelties of the war will fade, making reconciliation psychologically easier.

While this scenario is plausible, there is also a danger of overestimating economic factors or "rational" considerations. The Abkhaz quest to separate from Georgia was not dictated by economic considerations, and economic considerations alone cannot reverse it. It is difficult for me to judge the dynamics of the situation in Abkhazia because there are few credible sources. But it is also hard to imagine that disorder and impoverishment in Abkhazia would induce the Abkhaz to make serious compromises. The economic blockade has never really been enforced by Russia, and presumably there will always be some influential forces in Russia that will help Abkhazia survive (which is made easier by Abkhazia's small size). Moreover, Abkhazia's land is fertile enough to prevent real starvation. And because traditions of militancy are not as strong in Abkhazia as in Chechnya, there is probably less chance of public order being disrupted by clashes between warlords—at least so far there has been little evidence of such trends in Abkhaz society. Under these conditions, isolation and external pressure alone may help to further radicalize Abkhaz society rather than to increase its propensity to compromise.

Stabilization and economic growth in Georgia might also give rise to a different trajectory as well. Georgia could take advantage of time to build a strong army and prepare for a military *revanche*, an option that is sometimes referred to as the "Croatian scenario." This is a real possibility and should not be discounted. As I said, a majority in Georgia considers preserving the territorial integrity of the country to be a legitimate cause for using military force. Indeed, there is still a widespread belief that at the end of the day the conflict will be solved by military means, particularly since the current political situation makes it possible to create a more professional and disciplined army. If Chechnya seeks closer contacts with Georgia (and many Chechen leaders have already denounced Chechen participation in the war against Georgia), the level of military support for the Abkhaz from the North Caucasians might also diminish.[35] Tbilisi may also conclude that the Russians have learned their lesson in Chechnya and therefore will not help the Abkhaz again. The Georgian Minister of Security stated in the spring 1997 that his troops alone could retake Abkhazia if necessary.[36] This may be mere bluff, but how to know without trying? At the least, it suggests that the level of militancy in Georgia is growing, as is pressure from the

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[35]According to an interview with a Georgian Member of Parliament, Valeri Giorgobiani, even Shamil Basaev, the commander of the Chechen fighters in Abkhazia, says that his participation in the war was a mistake and that they were deceived into participating in the war by Russia ("Kartvelebi tsin tsadit da chechnebi mogqvebit ukan—atsxadebs shamil basaevi [Georgians, lead the way and we Chechens will follow you—says Shamil Basayev]", *Akhali Taoba*, 6 January 1997.
[36]*Georgian Chronicle*, March 1997.

refugee community—indeed, every now and then rumors spread in Tbilisi that a renewal of hostilities is imminent.[37]

The military option is there and the probability that Georgia will use it may increase. But at the moment, I do not think that the probability of renewed warfare is as high as it sometimes appears. The military coup of late 1992-early 1993 is still a recent event in Georgia, and Shevardnadze does seem to be trying to build up a strong army, as suggested by the fact that he has kept his politically weak and isolated Minister of Defense, Vardiko Nadibaidze. Nobody believes that Nadibaidze can build a viable army, but neither is he politically dangerous for anybody (least of all for the Abkhaz). Countries preparing for war do not act in this way. The economic turnaround has only started and has yet to prove sustainable, and most of Georgia's political and economic elite would hate to gamble Georgia's future once again on another war. On the other hand, the behavior of the Russian military is far from predictable. The people who currently dominate Georgian politics are highly pragmatic, while radical romantic nationalists are hopelessly marginalized. The current political elite would only start a war if it were a sure bet, and while the public would not accept Abkhaz secession and would possibly support a military solution to the conflict in principle, nobody wants to fight. The period of military enthusiasm is over, having been discredited by the disgraceful defeat in September 1993.

(4) *A New Georgian-Abkhaz Dialogue.* Since the summer of 1996, direct dialogue between Georgians and Abkhaz, which until then had been virtually non-existent, has been intensifying. Several meetings at a non-governmental level have taken place, and politicians have shown greater interest in direct contacts without Moscow's supervision. In October 1996, a confidential visit of the Abkhaz Foreign Minister to Tbilisi made headlines the next day, and in January the Georgian Foreign Minister reciprocated by visiting Abkhazia. Although nothing important was achieved, the tendency is notable. I do not have any explanation for this other than that both sides are beginning to pin less hopes on Russia. Earlier, the parties seemed to believe that in the final analysis, Russian power would impose a solution, so that talking to each other was only a ritual ("we want peace"). What mattered was persuading Russia to take the "right" position. Whatever the turning point was (Georgia had a series of disappointments, while the Abkhaz might have been overly optimistic about the victory of communists in Russia's presidential election), the Abkhaz and the Georgians are no longer sure that they can attain their goals through Russia alone. Russia, of course, continues to be an important player, but at least both parties now believe the possibility of finding a common language with each other should be investigated.

This is still very far from actually finding a common language, however. A number of very difficult steps need to be made before discussing specific solutions make any sense. I will mention just two points that appear to be most problematic. First, it seems to me that the most difficult point for Georgians to comprehend is that—to rephrase the title of Stanislav Lakoba's paper—"the Abkhaz problem is the Abkhaz problem." That is, the

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[37] As recently as April 1997, Radio Liberty's expert on the Caucasus, Elizabeth Fuller, was writing, "Politicians and political commentators in both Russia and Georgia predict that fighting between Georgia's central government and its breakaway Black Sea region of Abkhazia may soon break out again" ("Is Russia's Peacekeeping Force in Abkhazia a New Casus Belli?," *RFE/RL Newsline*, vol. 1, no. 21, 29 April 1997.

Abkhaz problem is not a Russian problem and it can only be solved with the Abkhaz, not the Russians. Whatever one thinks about Vladislav Ardzinba, he is at least the legitimate representative of the Abkhaz as an ethnic community. He may have allied himself with the Russian forces that are the least friendly to Georgia, but in this he only followed his understanding of Abkhaz national interests. Calling him or other Abkhaz leaders "Russian puppets" leads nowhere. If you deal with the Abkhaz, it is up to the Abkhaz to decide who their leaders are.

This would require a radical change in Georgian mentality.[38] Above all, it means commitment to some abstract notion of "respect for the Abkhaz." It is about taking full responsibility for the problem. Blaming everything on the Russians—or, if you wish, pinning illusory hopes on the intervention of the international community—is a way to avoid responsibility, which is the most powerful legacy of communist-type thinking. If Georgians want Abkhazia to be part of Georgia, Georgians should accept that Abkhazia is a Georgian problem, not something invented or inflicted on them by third parties. The failure to solve the conflict is primarily a Georgian failure. It is true that Russia manipulated the Abkhaz problem in its own interest, but it is also true that Russia was invited by Georgia (sometimes deliberately, sometimes unwittingly) to manipulate it.

Second, the most difficult point for the Abkhaz to accept is that the ethnic Georgian population of Abkhazia—including those who are now refugees—has a legitimate right to take part in the solution to Abkhazia's legal status. Without taking into consideration their views, the current Abkhaz government cannot claim to be the legitimate representative of the people of Abkhazia. This includes those who fought in the war of 1992-1993. If people on the Abkhaz side fought for their country and their homes, so did people on the Georgian side. The fact that many ethnic Georgians were resettled in Abkhazia when Stalin was the Soviet dictator neither increases nor decreases their rights. This is not only an issue of the return of refugees—the argument that the mass return of all refugees to the entire territory of Abkhazia will lead to a resumption of hostilities is quite reasonable and deserves to be respected. But insisting that the current population of Abkhazia, whose composition is the result of the war and ethnic cleansing, is fully entitled to define the status of Abkhazia by itself, and that the Georgian government should accept this, will never bring international legitimacy to the Abkhaz government. It is therefore a recipe for continuing international isolation of the Abkhaz regime.

Of course there are many other obvious obstacles as well, such as the deep mistrust and memories of recent violence and mutual atrocities between the two communities. There are also different visions of historical fairness, which cannot be discounted either. It would therefore be hypocritical to say that the current "cold war" between Abkhazia and

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[38] A poll conducted by *Kavkasioni* newspaper in September 1996 showed that only three percent of Georgians thought that direct negotiations with the Abkhaz were the most efficient way to settle the conflict. Six percent still hoped for Russian involvement (which is a dramatic decline in itself), 27 percent pinned their hopes on Western mediation and international organizations, and 23 percent thought that the problem would be solved by military power. One cannot be sure how representative this poll was, but the general trend is still clear (*Kavkasioni*, 24 September 1996).

Georgia cannot last for a long time, or that these kinds of problems cannot be solved by military means—they can. In fact, I am not particularly optimistic about the chances for a political solution in the near future, and I am afraid that the conflict will continue to be discussed in terms of power politics for a long time to come. Georgia will not accept any solution that in practice means the legitimization of the results of the war, and it will continue to insist that the refugees be allowed to return to their homes. At the same time, it will be difficult for the Abkhaz to succumb to political pressure after their victory in the war. To date, their concessions have been symbolic, like using the word "federation" instead of "confederation."

A political solution based on compromise is especially difficult because it requires acceptance by a majority of society, and this kind of acceptance will require a profound change in public attitudes—something that is very hard to bring about. That is why military solutions or solutions imposed by third parties are so attractive—acquiescing to superior force is easier than making a difficult decision yourself. But if discussing the prospects of political solutions make sense at all, it should take place at the level of society first, and not left just to the politicians. Georgia and Abkhazia may not be deeply democratic societies, but they are democratic enough to make it impossible for politicians to impose solutions that are absolutely unacceptable to their people. Unfortunately, no discussion in Georgian Abkhaz society about a compromise settlement is going on today, which is why the dialogue of politicians has so far amounted to nothing but linguistic games.