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Georgia
Lurching to Democracy

From agnostic tolerance to pious Jacobinism:
Societal change and peoples’ reactions

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Foreword

The authors met at a conference organised by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Tbilisi in 1995. The idea of a joint study arose a year later at a colloquium on "Religion, Ethnicity and Politics" in Freiburg.

Dietrich Sperling proposed examining the chances of democratic coexistence under conditions of ethnic conflict and facilitated a study trip to Abkhazia. Ia Tikanadze provided contacts and organised our travel. Gisela Nauk assisted in numerous interviews with politicians in Tbilisi, Sukhumi, Batumi, Zugdidi, Tskhinvali and Akhalkalaki. Iago Kachkarashvili and the late Nugzar Kvachadze of the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development constructed the sample for the empirical survey, which they conducted with great diligence. Arda Inal-Ipa organised the parallel questionnaire in Abkhazia and Inga Kochieva that in South Ossetia. With his customary diplomacy and adroitness, the late Martin von Schumel brought together social scientists with very different political opinions to explore the opinions and attitudes of all conflict groups.

John Richardson translated a part of the text into English and edited the manuscript. Angela Herrmann prepared it for publication.

The authors thank all of them. Ghia Nodia wrote the first three and the final chapter and Theodor Hanf the others. They alone are responsible for the conclusions and any errors.

A Brief History of Georgia and Georgian Society

The field work for this survey was conducted in the sixth year of Georgia's independence following the break-up of the Soviet Union. Independence was preceded by three tumultuous years. Eight years of extremely rapid and intense developments wrought profound political and economic changes, which have caused dramatic shifts in the social structure of Georgian society. The psychological shock was all the greater for coming after decades of predictable routine under Soviet rule, the last twenty-five years of which were a period of stagnation.

Who are the Georgians, what collective memories, perceptions and myths shaped the national psyche, and how did history prepare them for a new and unexpected reality?

Pre-Russian Georgia

The Georgians are an ancient people. Two historical events underpin the uniqueness of their culture. The kingdom of Kartli, the predecessor of the modern Georgia, adopted Christianity as its official religion in 377, of the states in the region second only to neighbouring Armenia, Georgia's perpetual rival for past glories. The Georgian language is not related to any other written language, and its alphabet, created no later than the 4th century, is one of 14 written alphabets still in use today. Georgian history, however, goes back long before Christianity. By the end of the second millennium BC, two states, Colchis and Diaihi, existed on the territory of present-day Georgia, and many Georgians believe they are descended from these peoples. They are on more solid ground with two other states, Egersi, or Kolkheti, in the west and Kartli, or Iberia, in the south-east, which arose in the middle of the first millennium BC, and between which and modern Georgia there is more or less demonstrable continuity. The country is divided by the Surami Mountains, a range running from north to south. Politically and culturally, eastern Georgia has always been the Georgian heartland — indeed, Imereti, the name of the principal western Georgian province, means "the land across the mountains".

The 11th and 12th centuries were Georgia's Golden Age. Although there were efforts to unite the eastern and western parts of Georgia as early as the ninth century, unity was achieved only in the 11th century under David Aghmashenebeli (the Constructor), Georgia's greatest king. He turned Georgia into, to use modern idiom, a respected re-

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1 The Georgian language is a member of the Kartvelian family of languages, which includes other languages spoken in western Georgia and eastern Turkey, such as Megrelian, Svan and Laz. But no other written languages are related to Georgian. Popular, but unproved, hypotheses purport kinship between languages of Kartvelian and Circassian groups, or that between the Kartvelian and Basque languages.
gional power, or a small empire, that covered modern Georgia and large parts of what are now Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey.

The Golden Age did not last long. Most Georgians divide their history prior to annexation by Russia into two parts: the glorious Golden Age and the rest. "The rest" covers centuries of uneven struggle for survival against foreign invaders, occasional victories followed by periods of relative calm, and longer periods of turmoil, when invaders, often in alliance with local Georgian princes, invaded and ravaged the country. Save for a brief period in the 14th century, "the rest" was a time of disunity, the history of different Georgian kingdoms and feuds, uniting and splitting, constantly at war with one another and foreign princes. In retrospect, there was one advantage to this decentralisation: occupation of the capital did not mean subjection of the country. Each mountain valley had an independently minded prince who had to be defeated separately (though he too might serve as an ally against his neighbours). Medieval particularism may have undermined Georgia's resistance to expansionist empires, but it helped it to maintain its identity and culture.

One marker that divided "Georgians" from "foreigners" was religion. Georgians were Orthodox Christians, while those around them were not. Until the Byzantine Empire, the cradle of Orthodox Christianity, entered terminal decline, it played a role in Georgian politics, though relations were far from harmonious. After its collapse, Georgia was largely isolated from other Orthodox countries. Before the late 18th century, Russia showed little interest in Transcaucasia; Armenians practised a different form of Christianity (Gregorian or Apostolic) and lacked their own state; and the rest of the region was either Muslim or pagan.

The second important marker was language, which was closely tied to religion. In the mid-10th century, the Georgian hagiographer Giorgi Merchule formulated the medieval paradigm of "Georgia": "Georgia consists of those spacious lands in which church services are celebrated and all prayers are said in the Georgian tongue". Linguistically speaking, not all Georgians speak Georgian; some of them use Megrelian and Svan (other Kartvelian languages). But Georgian was the language of the church and the educated classes. In this respect, Georgian fulfilled a role not dissimilar to that of Latin in medieval Europe — with two important differences. Georgian was not a dead language: it was the vernacular, and, unlike Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity did not restrict access to the Holy Script so, Georgians did not need the equivalent of a Lutheran revolution to "bring the Bible to the people". Ethnic Georgians who converted to another religion were no longer considered "true" Georgians by Orthodox Georgians, even if they continued to speak a one of the Kartvelian languages, but known as Tartars (if they switched to Islam), Armenians (if they were baptized in the Armenian church), or prangi, "French" (if they adopted Roman Catholicism).

From the 15th to late 18th century, the Georgian principalities were under constant threat from two Islamic empires: the Ottoman and Persian. Whereas western and southern Georgia had to contend with the former, two eastern Georgian kingdoms — Kartli and Kakheti — fought to remain independent of the Persians. Georgians had a choice between resistance, with the consequence of almost permanent warfare and physical destruction, and appeasement and compromise, with the loss of honour and possibly identity. As the Georgian historian Zurab Avvalishvili (Avvalov) pointed out, the two eastern Georgian kingdoms in effect chose different approaches. Whereas one king bought a period of relative peace and calm by converting to Islam (though without taking all his people), the rulers of the other kingdom preferred to fight for their Christian faith. Which they did: glorious victories alternated with crushing defeats.

For the most part, the Georgian rulers kept their thrones, and most of the people their Christian faith. Ottoman Turkey succeeded in converting to Islam only the population of Ajaria in the southwest and Meskheti in the south. This was a consequence of the invaders' political structures. They ruled their own states through local princes, which gave Georgians some scope for political manoeuvre. But centuries of uneven and ultimately hopeless fighting devastated the region economically, politically, socially and culturally. An advanced state in the 11th and 12th centuries, by the end of the 18th century Georgia was hopelessly backward. European modernisation hardly reached obscure provinces of the Ottoman and Persian empires. The country was physically and morally exhausted. With no prospect of withstanding the Islamic assault, the only hope of salvation lay in a powerful protector.

The obvious choice was Russia, the expanding fellow-Orthodox country to the north. Since the mid-16th century, the eastern Georgian princes had sought its protection. Skeptical of ever having the power to resist their Islamic neighbours, they envisioned switching the suzerain, while retaining internal self-rule. Rather than be more or less autonomous vassals of Muslim rulers, they would offer allegiance to Orthodox Christian kings who shared their religion and would, they believed, be more benign. Russia viewed the situation very differently. Until the late 18th century, the South Caucasus was too far away to be of serious interest. But once interested in controlling this region, Russia wanted to subjugate it: the loose medieval system typical of the Persian and Ottoman empires was unacceptable to the strongly centralised Russian state. In 1783, Russia and the king of Kartli-Kakheti (eastern Georgia) signed the Treaty of Georgievsk, whose terms more or less reflected the Georgian position: Georgia would concede the conduct of foreign affairs, but keep its dynasty and control over internal policies. For Russia, however, this was only an intermediary step: in 1801 the Georgian signatory's successor died, leaving his kingdom in disarray, and Russia unilaterally annexed eastern Georgia as a province.

2 "Thanks to these semi-independent units, these fortresses in mountain gorges, these shelters hidden away in inaccessible locations, Georgian identity and religion could not be destroyed by the most consistent and stubborn of Georgia's invaders", Zurab Avvalov, Prizorodieniye Gruzii k Rossii (Russia's Annexation of Georgia), Tiflis, 1901, p. 20.

3 Ibid., p. 31.
In the following decades, Russia extended its hegemony over other parts of Georgia and divided the territory into the governorships of Tbilisi and Kutaisi and the administrative district of Sukhumi (subsequently the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia), all administered by representatives of the Russian Tsar. The Georgian gentry were granted the same rights and privileges as the Russian nobility; the hitherto autocephalous Georgian Orthodox Church was subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church; and Georgian peasants became Russian serfs. Initially, cultural Russification affected only the nobles, but became more aggressive in the course of the century. On the other hand, some Russian governors, e.g. vicerey Mikhail Vorontsov, helped to promote local culture and education.4

Medieval birthmarks and the encounter with modernity

This brief history is important because certain perceptions and interpretations of historical events – early conversion to Christianity, the Golden Age, wars with Islamic neighbours, Russian annexation – constitute the backbone of collective memory, the paradigms of contemporary Georgian self-awareness.

Between 1801 and 1991, Georgia was independent only for a brief period in 1917–21. This was too short to leave a lasting imprint on public consciousness, although it had an important impact on the elite, to which I shall return below. All mention of independence was suppressed under Soviet rule. Tales of heroic Georgian battles against Muslim invaders, however, were not erased from history and literature curricula, as they could be used to argue the benefits for Georgia of Russian rule. These accounts were a major inspiration of patriotism among young Georgians (whose conclusions were not necessarily those of the official ideology). When Soviet Georgians dreamed of independence (a dream that 170 years of Russian and Soviet domination failed to eradicate completely), the only concrete images they could relate to were medieval.5 Commentators on events in the 1990s have been fond of saying that Georgian political conduct was medieval in its character, that the “restoration” of independence implied the restoration of medieval habits and paradigms, and that post-Soviet political leaders have drawn on the Middle Ages for negative or positive examples. The 170 years of Russian rule are often treated as a void in Georgian history, a historical blackout: there was a Georgian Volkston (ethnic nation), but not a Georgian state.

What birthmarks did this medieval experience leave on the “Georgian soul”? The most important is probably a mixture of pride and ambition, on the one hand, and a lack of confidence on the other. Stories of uneven battles with foreign invaders generated an

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5 Until 1801, Georgia's political, economic and social structures were effectively those of a medieval country. The collective memory keeps only the existence, but no specific images of its pre-medieval (or pre-Christian) history, save for the story of the Golden Fleece, to which modern Georgians hardly relate.

image of a small, vulnerable nation unfortunate to find itself in an unsettled region dominated by hopelessly alien people. With a heroic effort, it could probably survive, but on its own it would never prevail or secure a stable existence. The motivation to fight was a sense of uniqueness and memories of the Golden Age (“once we were great”), and the hope of finding a powerful, preferably distant protector (Russia).

Georgian pride and ambition, however, is curbed not just by the awareness of weakness vis-à-vis more powerful neighbours in a troubled region, but by stories of divisions and betrayals. “It is not just that we have powerful and committed enemies; but we are not good at taking care of our country, either.” There have been wild swings from self-glorification to self-denigration in the recent years, and medieval material provides lots of parallels. The story of Georgia’s annexation by Russia is probably the best known. One interpretation is that Georgians, physically exhausted and lacking moral conviction after centuries of fighting, simply surrendered and threw itself at the mercy of Russia.

The manner in which Georgia became part of and was rule by Russia, its designated saviour, left Georgians deeply ambivalent about their northern neighbour. This ambivalence, always present, eventually acquired shades of an obsessive love-hate relationship, one that in many ways is central to understanding contemporary Georgia. First of all, Georgians are undecided about whether they acceded in joining Russia or were conquered by it. It was something in between. Legally, it was a unilateral annexation. But it can also be interpreted as voluntary unification, inasmuch as there was no resistance, and in the 1783 Treaty of Georgievsk Georgia did relinquish essential elements of sovereignty. This was also the perception of most Georgians throughout the “Russian period” of Georgian history. Even the declaration of independence in 1918 referred to unification as voluntary. It is only in the post-communist era that nationalists have taking to labelling these events as annexation by force.

For Georgia, Russian rule brought three advantages: unity, security and modernisation. For the first time in centuries, the territory of modern Georgia was under a single political authority, ready to be politically mobilised using nationalist slogans. For the first time in centuries, Georgians felt secure from devastating raids by its neighbours – behind the range of friendly shkiks, as the Russian poet put it. Georgian supporters of unity with Russia are fond of saying “Russia saved us from physical extermination”, meaning that were it not for the Russian protection, the country would not have withstood persistent Islamic aggression. Regardless of one’s view on this, it is true that Georgia’s religious identity was no longer questioned.6 Last but not least, Russia broke Georgia’s developmental isolation and put it on the path to political, social and economic modernisation. The Georgian elite was quick to emulate its westernised Russian counterpart. Georgian youth could get an education first in Russian and then in European universities – or, if nobles, become officers in the Russian army, an institution far

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6 Lermontov.

7 The autocephaly of the Georgian Orthodox Church was abolished soon after annexation by Russia, which was a considerable blow to national pride.
more advanced than the militias of Georgian princes. Russian courts and administration were introduced – not the easiest bureaucracy to deal with, but much more modern than the systems of Georgian principalities. Though Georgia remained a largely agricultural country and was economically less developed than other parts of Russia, by the end of the century the country was starting to industrialise. Tbilisi, the capital, Kutaisi, Batum and a few other towns started to look more European.

Russia provided these benefits on its own terms. Georgia was deprived of any markers of political identity. Although some Georgian-language publications started appearing in the mid-19th century, Georgian could not be used in the civil service. It seemed that it was just a question of time before Georgians were assimilated by the larger and stronger fellow-Orthodox culture.

There were always people in Georgia who objected to the loss of political sovereignty. In the early 19th century there were several rebellions against Russian rule. In 1832, a group of young Georgian aristocrats were arrested for conspiring to restore independence. In the 1860s, a new generation educated at Russian universities brought back the message of European liberal nationalism. Its leader was Ilija Chavchavadze, a writer and banker – and the spiritual father of the modern Georgian nation. He and his circle began by promoting Georgian culture, motivating the elite to preserve and encourage the use of the Georgian language.

That said, the majority of the population felt that the benefits of Russian suzerainty outweighed the loss of political sovereignty. Nor did nationalism prevail among the liberal elite, either. The efforts of Ilija Chavchavadze and his circle, however significant, focused almost exclusively on culture and education. When it came to political programmes, the majority of young Georgians, exposed as they were to the fruits of Western Enlightenment, were attracted to different expressions of socialism and eventually Marxism. Georgian social democrats were influential in the all-Russian socialist movement and dominated local politics, although fiercely criticized by nationalists for ignoring the "nationality question".

Paradoxical though it might seem, it was the "rootless" socialists who were destined to create the paradigm of modern independent statehood for Georgia. The emergence of an independent Georgian state was a direct result of ideological disagreement. After the Bolshevik coup in St. Petersburg, Georgian social democrats refused to follow what they regarded as an extremist break-away group in Russia and proclaimed independence, first – together with Armenia and Azerbaijan – of the Transcaucasian Federation, and when this failed, of the Georgian Republic.

8 "Inspired by the liberation movements in Italy and Hungary, the more zealous among [the Georgian students studying in St. Petersburg] began wearing their hair like Garibaldi", Ronald Suny, The Making of the Georgian Nation, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1994, p. 126.

A new paradigm: the attraction of the west

This independent republic survived for less than three years: from May 1918 to February 1921. Once the Bolsheviks consolidated their power in Russia, they marched into all three South Caucasian countries. Georgians offered resistance but were defeated. An uprising against Soviet rule in 1924 was brutally crushed. The following wave of repression left little inclination to try again. The consolidation of the Soviet totalitarian system under Stalin, a Georgian, put an end to any idea of independent political activity for decades.

Three years may appear too short a period to dramatically affect a society's psyche. Changes that did take place were generally overshadowed by Soviet social reconstruction under Stalin. Unlike the Baltic States, which had also broken free in 1918, but managed to remain independent until World War II, Georgia lacked a generation socialised by independence that would take such status for granted. The "Menshevik" period was all but eradicated from Soviet history books. Independence was treated as a freak of history; Georgia was back in the fold; only the ideological labels had changed.

However, independence, and especially the way it was terminated, dramatically changed Georgians' self-perception. Although annexation in 1801 was not a voluntary act, it was not conquest, either, as Georgians has not offered any resistance. This time was different: communist Russia defeated democratic Georgia in a war and established its control over the country by force. The civilising aspect was no less important. In 1801, Russia came as a moderniser, as an advanced imperial power that brought Western civilisation to "backward", "Asian" Georgia. This time it was the other way round: Georgian social democrats, steeped in western social democracy, were leading the country to a western-style free and pluralist society, until stopped by a Russia in thrall to an ideological cult that had become a leading alternative and threat to progress and freedom. Earlier Russia had been a bridge to modernity; now it was a barrier separating Georgia from the world it aspired to join.

A medieval paradigm of seeking a powerful protector against an aggressive and barbarous neighbour was reinterpreted to fit a new reality. "Religious discourse" was replaced by what we shall call "modernity discourse". The fact that the bully happened to belong to the same religion was largely irrelevant in an atheist country (the suppression of religion was a relatively successful part of the communist project). What did matter was that the Soviet regime – i.e., Russia – represented an aggressive ideology whose values were alien to those identified with progress and modernity. Three years of parliamentary democracy in independent Georgia were enough for Georgia to feel "inextricably western", that it did not really belong to the "Asian despotism" represented by Russian communist rule, and that the West had a moral obligation to help it. A theory developed by Georgian intellectuals During and after independence Georgian intellectuals developed a theory to support this idea of "intrinsic westernness". Georgia's medieval social structure, unlike that of neighbouring countries, Muslim and Russian, was held to
be similar to those of western European societies — at least until the 12th century Mongols interrupted Georgia’s development — and Georgians were naturally individualistic, in contrast to Russian collectivists.  

Throughout the communist years, these ideas were shared — or at least articulated — only by a tiny elite minority; but when the dawn of Gorbachev’s perestroika breached the Soviet darkness, paradigms created by the brief intermezzo of independence resurfaced and defined political discourse. The decades of Soviet rule became years of non-historical void, just as the Middle Ages did for the ideologists of the Enlightenment. Truth and political legitimacy were to be sought before this night fell, i.e., in the independent Georgian Republic. The key word was restoration: Georgians did not fight to create an independent state from scratch, they simply had to remove (with the help of the West) the unfairness of the 1921 communist invasion and its aftermath. Indeed, Independence Day is celebrated on May 26, the day the declaration of independence was adopted in 1918; not many people know when Georgia proclaimed itself independent for the second time.  

The Soviet regime did not leave many outlets for expressions of political nationalism in Georgia. There were some illegal nationalist organizations — notably the Helsinki group established by Zviad Gamsakhurdia in the 1970s —, all of which were persecuted. But there were far fewer underground nationalist groups than in the Baltic States and Ukraine. Yet, Georgians staged what was probably the only nationally motivated successful mass rally in pre-Gorbachev Soviet history. On the 14th April 1978, thousands of people, mostly students and intellectuals, demonstrated against the removal of the clause that defined Georgian as the official language in the new draft of the Georgian constitution. After consultations with the centre, the authorities gave in and restored the clause. Protests against the bicentennial of the 1783 treaty with Russia did not have the same mass character, but they also prepared Georgian nationalists for the coming political battles.

**Ideology and reality**

Communist ideology may have been hopelessly divorced from social and human reality, and was defeated because of this. However, because of the repressive nature of the regime, any alternative ideology had to develop in the rarified atmosphere of elite discourse at private meetings rather than in public discourse. There is some truth in calling communist rule a "night", a void in history: people were prevented from autonomous action in the public realm — or civil society — for 70 years. But a lot did happen in and to Georgia in these years, and to understand why the Georgia that declared independence in 1991 was so different from the Georgia that declared independence in 1918 it is necessary to look at these changes.

One category of changes concerns modernisation. The communist project can be interpreted as an attempt at rapid modernisation to catch up with the West by focusing all resources of the state on specific priorities, such as heavy industry at the expense of agriculture (even if this meant mass starvation), universal literacy and the emancipation of women (especially in Muslim societies). The slogan of catching up with — and eventually overtaking — advanced capitalist societies was the core of communist propaganda from Stalin onwards. From this perspective, the most controversial element of this modernisation project was the simultaneous attempt to destroy the driving force of modernity: human autonomy, the human capacity for economic initiative and social self-organisation. In 1991, Georgians were, on the whole, more urbanised and industrialised than in 1917, but also more parochial and isolated from western civilization. Whereas in 1917 the Georgian elite had participated in contemporary western discourse, the discourse of the Georgian elite in the 1980s had little in common with that of their counterparts outside the communist world. In common with the whole post-communist world, Georgians felt that they had been thrown out of history — i.e., barred from participating in the historical and cultural experience of humanity — and longed to "return to normality", i.e., to become part of that experience again. Communism modernised Georgia economically but demodernised it politically — as it did other communist societies.

This demodernisation is evident if we compare the state of political and civil society in Georgia before the first and the second independence. By 1917, Georgia had political and civil societies that had been developing for several decades. There were several political parties with clear ideological profiles, and the strongest one, the social democratic party, was widely popular and ready to exercise political power. Leaders of major parties were well-educated and well-travelled people with first-hand knowledge of modern political realities. For decades independent media functioned as forums for vibrant public discussion, public societies pursued different causes, etc. Though Georgian political and civil society had not prepared themselves for independence in 1917, they were still better prepared for it then than in 1991, when the slogan of independence completely dominated political discourse.

In 1991, Georgia was not only a different kind of society, but also a different kind of nation. It had been conditioned by the political structure of the Soviet Union. In contrast to the centralism of tsarist Russia, Georgia under communist rule became an administrative entity known as the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. It had its own constitution, which defined it as a "sovereign state" and the right to secede from the Union. There was an ostensibly elected legislature (Supreme Soviet) and many other formal at-
tributes of independent statehood, including a ministry of foreign affairs. In reality, power was exercised by the centrally organised pan-Soviet Communist Party, a guarantee that the right to secession would never be exercised, and that only candidates pre-selected by the Party would be "elected" unopposed to the Supreme Soviet. As a democratic facade, these institutions were shallow; but as the facade of a potential nation-state, they were less so.

Communists believed that nations were doomed to wither away as the international proletariat went from strength to strength. This may explain why they organised the Soviet Union as a quasi-federation of quasi-nation-states. From their perspective, it was a cunning tactic: paying lip service to a popular principle of "self-determination" was a short-term concession to nationalism, a ploy that would win over some backward people who might otherwise fall prey to nationalist slogans. Similarly, bogus parliamentarism could be tolerated to pacify some people who believed in the pretence of "bourgeois democracy". As the Communist Party had historical truth and political power on its side, these concessions were deemed to be unimportant.

Whatever the calculations of communist ideologists and state-builders, the communist quasi-nation-state of Georgia did what nation-states usually do - and independent Georgia had not had the time to do: it consolidated the construction of the modern Georgian nationhood. Georgians got used to identifying themselves with specific pattern on the map, which they could legitimately refer to as "Georgia". A national system of education in the Georgian language was created on all levels, from elementary to post-graduate education. Normative Georgian grammar, normative history and textbooks in the Georgian language were introduced with state backing. Pre-communist attempts in this direction paled against the systematic application of the communist authorities. In schools, Georgian children were indoctrinated with communist ideology, which included ideas of proletarian internationalism and the withering away of nations, studied the history of the Soviet Union (in effect, Russia) rather than history of Georgia, and were taught to identify with the grand Soviet project - but all in the Georgian language. Apart from this, lessons on Georgian literature introduced them to tales of the glorious deeds of medieval Georgians against foreign (usually Muslim) invaders. The media were tools of communist propaganda, but they too used the Georgian language. The fact that Georgian was also the medium of instruction in universities encouraged the development of a national scientific terminology.

In particular, as a result of the Soviet cadre (personnel) policy, the local bureaucracy, despite all ideological rhetoric, identified itself with Georgia rather than the Soviet Union. At first, the Soviet Union was ruled by an ethnically diverse group of people. But under Stalin Soviet policy gradually reverted to "national cadre" approach (korenizatsiya). In practice, this meant that the all-Union leadership was mainly ethnic Russian, while representatives of other ethnic groups had career opportunities within their respective republics. Exceptions were extremely rare. A young Georgian who chose a career in the Communist Party could, for all practical purposes, only count on being promoted on the home turf, i.e., in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. This was a classic case of building national awareness through "bureaucratic pilgrimage" - to borrow Benedict Anderson's term for analysing nation-building in Latin American societies. Newly created ethnic Georgian elites were pushed to identify themselves with Georgia, not with the whole Soviet Union, because it was in Georgia that they had material opportunities of advancement. This was not true for Russians, another reason why Russians, unlike other "major" Soviet nationalities - i.e., those with their own administrative units - identified themselves with the whole of the USSR. In contrast to Anderson's case studies, in the communist state the bureaucracy controlled everything: the economy, science and culture. National institutions that drafted maps of bureaucratic pilgrimage included not just local branches of the Communist Party, but also, for instance, national Academies of Science and Writers' and Composers' Unions.

As a rule, Soviet quasi-nation-states did not pursue another interest of most nation-states: ethnic homogenisation of the population. The Soviet Union encouraged ethnic mixing through population resettlement, especially from Russia proper to industrialising areas on the periphery. This was especially true of the Baltic States and Central Asia, where the ethnic balance shifted dramatically in favour of Russians at the expense of the indigenous ethnic groups. This was partly balanced by the trend towards "indigenisation" of the bureaucracy, as representatives of "titular" nationalities in each republic had more opportunities to make a career locally than elsewhere and, thus, a greater incentive to stay put, and minorities with "their own" Soviet republics or autonomous regions had better chances of promotion there. Other factors also played a role, for instance, the expulsion of certain "unreliable" ethnic groups from western provinces mainly to Central Asia, including the deportation of Muslim Meskhetians and most ethnic Germans from Georgia. On the other hand, hundreds of thousands of Russians fled to Georgia in early 1930s to escape the famine caused by Stalin's collectivisation policy. As a result of interplay of those different factors, ethnico-demographic trends did not always develop in the same direction. In Soviet Georgia, the share of ethnic Georgians fell before and immediately after World War II, but then rose steadily; overall, the proportion of ethnic Georgians oscillated in the vicinity of two-thirds. Particularly telling was the dramatic change in the ethnic demography of Tbilisi. In the 19th century, Tbilisi was a Caucasian city, residence of the Russian viceroy (from

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15 Georgians constituted 66.3% of the population in 1897, 66.8% in 1926, 61.4% in 1939, 66.8% in 1970 and 70.2% in 1989. Cf. Revaz Gachechiladze, Population Migration in Georgia and Its Socio-economic Consequences, UNDP-Georgia, Tbilisi 1997, pp. 9-17.
the 1890s, the governor-general), with a large Armenian, Russian and Georgian population. The Armenian community, which was traditionally more entrepreneurial, dominated commerce. Russian was the principal language of communication, especially among the elite. This changed dramatically during the Soviet years, when heavy migration of ethnic Georgians from rural areas turned the capital into a Georgian city. This also meant that Tbilisi played an important role as nation-builder. In medieval Georgia, regional identities (comparable to those of German Länder or Italian provinces) were stronger than Georgian identity. This was still true in the late 19th century, one reason why Ilia Chavchavadze and other fathers of the modern Georgian nationhood attached such importance to overcoming kakhkhooba - "parochial regionalism". Two of these regional groups - Megrelians and Svans - even used a vernacular related to literary Georgian, but incomprehensible to others, which distanced them even further from eastern Georgians, who constituted the core around which the modern Georgian nation consolidated. 20th-century Tbilisi became a melting pot from which a general Georgian identity emerged and a reference point for residents of the Georgian provinces: it was "the city", the symbol of modernity, the goal for ambitious young people.

On the other hand, Tbilisi developed more rapidly than other parts of the country. By 1989, 22.8 percent of the total population lived in the capital, although Georgia was otherwise not exceptionally urbanized: in the same year, 56 percent of the population lived in towns. Not only was Tbilisi too large for the country; being Tbiliseli, an inhabitant of Tbilisi, was disproportionately prestigious: only Tbiliseli were close to the sources of power and privilege, and only Tbiliseli could be really modern and educated.

Second-grade nations and minorities: the Soviet matryoshka system

The preceding discussion applies primarily to ethnic Georgians, the dominant ethnic group. But according to the most recent census (1989), they make up just over 70 percent of the total Georgian population. This figure has probably risen since independence, as minorities, especially Russians, have emigrated in disproportionately large numbers. However, Georgia is still a multietnic country.

Soviet "nationality policy" was notable for two features that had a substantial impact on ethnic relations. First, it was completely divorced from citizenship. Nationality re-

ferred to ethnic affiliation. It was officially registered in all state documents. As a rule, children automatically took the nationality of their parents, or, in the case of mixed marriages, chose one or the other. Citizenship, on the other hand, was the same for everybody in the Soviet Union. Georgian citizenship as such did not exist: the Soviet Georgian constitution stipulated that all Georgian citizens were Soviet citizens, but did not define Georgian citizenship.

Although this system of registering nationality could be used to discriminate against minorities, it was highly cherished by almost all non-Russian nationalities, which resisted calls for its removal in the perestroika years. The reason for this lay in the official ideology of proletarian internationalism and the withering away of nations, which gave rise to fears of assimilation. Non-Russian nationalities saw in the system of nationality registration a surrogate recognition of nations (in lieu of official nation-states) or a surrogate national citizenship. No Georgian was registered as a citizen of Georgia; the only official recognition of Georgianness was the nationality entered in a Georgian's passport. The removal of this entry was considered a serious step towards assimilation.

This meant that the state left no space for civic or territorial nationalism: words like "nation" and "nationality" referred only to ethnic communities, not to people with ties to specific territories. This also precluded a natural process of assimilation. Not only was it very difficult technically for people to change nationality, but ethnic majorities did not want others to assimilate: ethnic purity was an important marker of nationhood. This does not mean that people who were nationalists in the sense of wanting an independent Georgia did not view nationality primarily in terms of citizenship rather than ethnicity, but they were the exceptions, found among the educated elite. The Soviet system of nationality registration cannot be held solely responsible for the ethnic element in Georgian nationalism - ethnic nationalism is common elsewhere - but it reinforced it.

The system not only deepened the cleavages between ethnic communities, but also contributed to their internal consolidation. As mentioned, even in the 19th century sub-regional identities still competed with a Georgian national identity, to the chagrin of proponents of a united and independent Georgia. The nationality registration system considerably strengthened national identity: Georgian became an officially fixed identity, whereas regional identities acquired the status of historic relics. This is not to say that they faded away, or that fears that at some point they could endanger national unity again completely disappeared. Even in the strongly centralized Soviet administrative system only natives of each region had a realistic chance of being appointed to positions of local leadership in that region; outsiders would hardly be able to rule effectively. Yet, this system planted in people's minds a sense of belonging to a Georgian nation, i.e., the community of people registered as Georgians.

The second important feature of the Soviet Union's nationality policy was the so-called Matryoshka system of nationalities (named after a Russian set of dolls in which smaller dolls fit inside larger ones). The 15 constituent republics of the Soviet Union

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[16] Whereas in 1801 nearly three-quarters of the city's 20,000 inhabitants were Armenian (74.3 percent in 1803) and less than one-quarter Georgian (21.5 percent), by 1897 the percentage of Armenians had dropped to 38. By the end of the century Russians made up 24.7 of the city's 159,000 inhabitants and Georgians 26.3 percent, Ronald Suny, The Making of the Georgian Nation, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1994, p. 116.

[17] According to the 1926 Population Census, 6% (112,000) of all ethnic Georgians lived in Tbilisi. The 1989 Population Census shows that 26% (824,000) of all ethnic Georgians lived in Tbilisi; Gachechiladze, op. cit., p. 23.

[18] Other groups include the Armenians (8.1%), Russians (6.3%), Azeris (5.7%), Ossetians (3%) and Abkhazians (1.8%).

were quasi-nation-states. Some of them included distinct administrative divisions for ethnic groups, i.e., quasi-nation-states of the second order. There was also a hierarchy of administrative units ranked by symbolic attributes of statehood and the privileges of the local bureaucracy. Autonomous Republics ranked higher than Autonomous Regions, and the latter higher than National Districts. Georgia included three such units: the Autonomous Republics of Abkhazia and Ajaria and the Autonomous Region of South Ossetia. Ajaria, located in south-west Georgia on the Turkish border, was unique in that it was the only confessionally based autonomous division in the former Soviet Union. Ajarians are Georgians, but they are also Muslims, and were subjects of the Ottoman sultan until 1878. The Abkhazian and Ossetian ethno-linguistic groups are not related to Georgians; they are North Caucasian peoples. Abkhazians are related to the Circassians, and Ossetians, who are divided administratively into the South Ossetian Autonomous Region in Georgia and the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic in the Russian Federation, are an Iranian people.

The existence of ethno-nationally based territorial autonomies within nation-states is not peculiar to the Soviet system, and is a sensitive issue wherever nationalities feel that ethno-territorial autonomy will be used as a base for future secession. In the Soviet case, these sensitivities were considerably aggravated by the existence of three rather than two layers: autonomous status is not a compromise between a majority and a minority, but part of structure imposed by a third party, viz. the imperial centre. Hence, the minority is afraid not so much of the minority with special status, but of the powerful third party, the arbiter that created the status in the first place and may use it against them. A minority, in turn, considers its special autonomous status not as a settlement reached with the majority, but as a favour granted by the third party. Thus, the majority is viewed as a potential aggressor, against whom privileges have to be protected, primarily by appealing to the third party.

This was the case in Georgia, although autonomous status for Ajar and Abkhazia was provided for in the constitution that independent Georgia adopted in 1921. This, however, is generally forgotten by Georgians and Abkhazians, partly because knowledge of that period of independence was suppressed in Soviet Georgia, but mainly because it contradicts the stereotype described above: autonomous status is perceived as a creation of communist Russia against the will of the Georgian people.

There were also differences in Georgians' attitudes towards these autonomous administrations. The autonomy of Abkhazia was generally considered as legitimate in principle, because the Abkhazian people were indigenous and had no other homeland. But another view held that the ancestors of the Abkhazians came from North Caucasus a few centuries ago, which, according to the supporters of this view, rendered Abkhazians ineligible for autonomy.20 As for South Ossetia, it did not exist as an administrative unit before 1921, when it was created by communist Russia. Hence, not only its existence, but also the name of "South Ossetia" was considered unacceptable, because the name could legitimate a claim to unification with "North Ossetia". As for Ajaria, its autonomous status was perceived as strange and abnormal precisely because it was confessionally rather than ethically based. Although these issues could not be discussed publicly under Soviet rule, they were common among the elite, and resurfaced as soon as the regime started to liberalize under Gorbachev.

Privileged "autonomous" minorities were only a small part of ethnic minority population. Other minority groups could be classified by prospective threat to Georgian unity. The second most serious threat was posed by the ethnic Armenians and Azeris. Not only were they numerous, but many of them lived close to the borders with Armenia and Azerbaijan, respectively. Hence, they might have grounds for claiming territorial autonomy. Reportedly, groups occasionally petitioned Moscow for this, or, even worse, for unification with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Azeris were also feared because their birth rate was much higher than that of ethnic Georgians. The next in the hierarchy of perceived threats were the Russians. They represented the empire, but the empire was identified with the communist state, not with Russians living in Georgia, who did not occupy leading positions in any spheres of life. Finally, there were minorities whose "historic homelands" were outside the Soviet Union, such as Greeks, Jews and Kurds. They presented little danger, as they could not possibly have any territorial claims in Georgia; hence they were the most acceptable of the minorities. The position of the Georgian Jewish community in particular was noteworthy. Although attitudes towards it are not necessarily free from prejudice, Georgians traditionally like to boast that, unlike Jews in many other countries, Jews in Georgia have never been persecuted and are a model loyal minority with whom Georgia has never had any problem.

This political classification reflects the extreme importance these issues acquired in the years after independence. In addition, there were communal and economic dimensions to ethnic relations that did not necessarily correspond to political perceptions. There was no research on this subject under Soviet rule, but if one tries to assess the level of communal animosity between different ethnic groups on the basis of anecdotal evidence, Georgians felt very little animosity towards Ossetians, whereas mutual animosity between Georgians and Abkhazians ran much higher. That said, wars were fought with both groups after independence.

Of the other minorities, the Armenians constitute a special case. In the Caucasus, they have always had a reputation as a trading nation, so that Georgian kings occasionally even invited Armenians to settle in Georgia in order to encourage trade. Georgians, on the other hand, were almost exclusively farmers; very few Georgians lived in towns, which were dominated by either Muslims or Armenians throughout the Middle Ages. After serfdom was abolished in the Russia empire in 1861, the Georgian nobility rapidly

lost its economic significance, and failed to seize the opportunities provided by capital-
ism.

As a result, prior to the Bolshevik revolution the Armenian community dominated
the Georgian economy, especially in Tbilisi. Economic dominance also meant political
dominance in Tbilisi. Georgians felt threatened by this, a cause of some communal ani-
mosity.21 This animosity lingered on in the Soviet years, though its significance gradu-
ally declined. The Communist Revolution levelled former economic disparities and cre-
cated new ones based not on enterprise but on bureaucratic seniority. This had significant
ethnic implications: whereas previously Armenians had controlled commerce, Georgi-
ans came to dominate the bureaucracy.

Paradoxically, in the Soviet state Georgians began to develop entrepreneurial abili-
ties. Of course, as free enterprise was officially outlawed, one could be entrepreneurial
only unlawfully, i.e., in the underground economy. Officially, Georgia was one of the
less developed areas of the Soviet Union, but it also had a reputation for a flourishing
parallel economy. While ethnic Armenians and others also played a role, Georgians
dominated the black economy, because it could not survive without links to the bureau-
cracy. Accordingly, ethnic stereotypes of Georgians changed dramatically in the Soviet
Union, where they came to be considered a very entrepreneurial people who only paid lip
service to communist prohibitions.22 This led many outside observers to believe that
Georgians would be better prepared for the advent of capitalism than other Soviet peo-
ples. However, it is not so simple. The fact itself that entrepreneurial activities took
place outside the law established in commercial reality and public perceptions a link
between business and crime, a link that proved extremely enduring in the post-
communist era. Whereas Russians may have thought of Georgians as traders, Georgians
themselves still did not regard trade as a respectable occupation. Many Georgians were
troubled by this reputation and—perhaps not without reason—claimed that a Georgian
tendency towards flamboyancy and ostentation was more widespread than involvement
in the underground economy. Still, imperfect though they were, habits developed in the
Soviet parallel economy left Georgians much more confident and better prepared for the
second advent of capitalism, and this time there was no danger that they would be
squeezed out by any other ethnic group.

What is lacking in this picture is religion. In a reversal of its position in tsarist Rus-
sia, the Georgian Orthodox Church regained its autocephaly after the Bolshevik revolu-
tion. Theoretically, an important step towards independence, it was largely irrelevant in
the Soviet era, because the communists were remarkably successful in Georgia—and all
other countries that practised Orthodox Christianity—in secularizing society and bring-
ing the church under state control. The state successfully persuaded most of its citizens
that religion was a relic of the past and that churchgoers were typically old and less

25–40.


Married to the Conqueror: How Georgian was Joseph Stalin?

Apart from their earlier adoption of Christianity and a unique language and alphabet,
Georgians have another, more controversial distinction: one of their own was the great-
est communist dictator, Joseph Stalin (born Ivdashvilii). While this fact should not be
overestimated, it did colour Georgians’ attitudes to communism and the Soviet Union.

Before the revolution, Stalin and as his radical fellow-Bolsheviks played no role in
Georgian politics, which were dominated by Mensheviks, the more moderate socialists.
His career in the Bolshevik party and rise to power occurred outside Georgia. As one of
the communist leaders responsible for the Russian nationality policy, he was involved in
the decision to invade Georgia and later to formally incorporate it into the Soviet Union.
During the discussions about the terms of Georgia’s incorporation, he was the leader of
the group that pressed for greater centralization and the least possible autonomy for
Georgia (and other reconquered republics). He was opposed in this by leading Georgian
communists, on the one hand, and his boss, Vladimir Lenin, on the other.23 Later, as
leader, Stalin seldom favoured his compatriots and never stressed his Georgian heritage;

However nationalism is not logical. Georgians reacted extremely negatively to de-
Stalinization—the official denunciation of Stalin’s personality and politics by his suc-
cessor Nikita Khrushchev in 1956. On 6–9 March 1956, thousands of people rallied in
Tbilisi to commemorate Stalin’s death in an apparent protest against Khrushchev’s de-
Stalinization policies. The demonstration was bloodily suppressed and the number of
victims was never disclosed. Georgians remained extremely critical of Khrushchev, while Stalin remained a popular figure, contrary to official party policy. Georgian drivers, barbers and shoemakers were notorious for exhibiting Stalin’s portrait at their workplace, and few traditional Georgian supra (wine party with lots of toasts) would end without toasting him.

Stalin’s personality may have become the major psychological mediator between the Georgians and communist rule. When their attempt to create a nation-state failed, Georgians opted for quasi-representation by their unenthusiastic compatriot, who became one of the most powerful, and one of the most feared, men in the world. He seemed to provide a peculiar compensation for centuries of humiliation and weakness: “We may be worthless as a nation, but one of our men keeps our conquerors under his thumb, and the whole world respects him and is afraid of him”. The Soviet Union was, of course, a totalitarian regime based on repression rather than popular acceptance, but kinship with the dictator seemed to have contributed to the legitimacy of communist rule for most Georgians.

If this is so, de-Stalinization of the Soviet Union destroyed this relationship between Georgians and the regime. Georgians did not rebel against the system, but grew extremely cynical about it. It was after de-Stalinization that they started seizing whatever opportunities of enrichment communism offered them. In Georgia, de-Stalinization, the rejection of Stalin by Russians, turned Stalin into a kind of national hero. For many people in the Soviet Union, reverence of Stalin usually meant nostalgia for “real” hard-line communism in the years of the softer, but also more corrupt version under Khrushchev and Brezhnev. But in Georgia, this was not necessary; one could be an anti-communist and still revere Stalin. Here, Stalinism was more of a nationalist than an ideological issue, but it was a spontaneous nationalism, not ideologically reconstructed and streamlined by elite discourse.

Stalin’s popularity among Georgians was never a topic of public discussion. This was impossible under communist rule, and after it people had other concerns. In the heyday of nationalism (see below), Georgian nationalists denounced Stalin as a traitor and a Russian imperialist. The arrival of a genuinely nationalist agenda undermined the surrogate nationalism of popular Stalinism. Even after the triumph of political nationalism, Stalin was not demonized as thoroughly as less important communist figures such as Sergei Orjonikidze or Pielie Makharadze. After a disappointing government performance by nationalists, Stalin’s popularity resurfaced, and monuments to him were reerected in some Georgian towns.24

One reason for the failure to discuss the issue of Stalin is that the elite was embarrassed by Stalin’s genuine popularity among the less educated "masses", and reluctant to further imperil national unity by raising a sensitive subject. Whether at the centre of

24 The monument to Stalin in his native town of Gori even survived the period of virulent anti-Stalinism. Akhali Tavisuplebis newspaper reported plans for a monument to commemorate Stalin’s death, 11 December 1998.
The Second Independence and Its Challenges

The last ten years have been the time of dramatic change in Georgia. First, Georgia's status has changed: it is no longer a part of the Soviet Union, but an independent state. Second, the communist political system has been replaced by a democracy (however imperfect). Finally, central planning has given way to a market economy. Each of these transitions on its own would be a fundamental change; together they have resulted in an unprecedented overhaul of Georgian society. Moreover, these changes came unexpectedly, as nobody had predicted the swift collapse of communism. Profound as these changes were, they were aggravated by worse political turmoil than occurred in other post-Soviet states. The country experienced two wars between the government and ethnic secessionist minorities, a military coup followed by episodic civil war, and a period of warlordism, when state institutions seemed to have collapsed.

Before discussing the effects on Georgian society, I shall briefly outline and interpret the major events following the break-up of the Soviet system.

The national independence movement

It seems natural to start this exercise with an analysis of the Georgian reaction to 
perestroika and glasnost, i.e., the attempt to liberalise the Soviet political regime initiated by the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985. Gorbachev's reforms introduced an element of change, and hence uncertainty, and the different union republics of the Soviet Union, launched, without realising it, on their way to independence, reacted each in its own way. In Russia, the intelligentsia grasped perestroika as a chance to gradually broaden the limits of public debate. In the Baltic States, perestroika brought about broad social consolidation on promoting the agenda of national independence that included most of communist elite and a considerable part of the Russian-speaking minority. There was broad consolidation of society in Armenia as well, though with a different agenda: Armenians saw perestroika as an opportunity to regain, with the support of the new leadership in Moscow, their "lost historical territories", viz. the mountainous Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region in Azerbaijan. In the Central Asian states, both society and the ruling elite pretended that nothing was happening - until they discovered that the Soviet Union no longer existed and they were now independent states.

In Georgia, perestroika polarised society. The Georgian communist leadership, under Jumber Patashilvili, the successor to Eduard Shevardnadze, who had become Soviet foreign minister in 1985, was hard-line. While Moscow newspapers and journals burst with sensational revelations of past Soviet crimes, nothing happened in Georgia. The established intellectual elite, which enjoyed a certain moral authority in the late communist era, was expected to take the lead in exploring new possibilities - as in Russia or the Baltic States - but was bewildered and paralysed. In this vacuum, a small but active group of former political prisoners that had returned thanks to Gorbachev's liberalisation, grabbed the initiative. Although in the Soviet era there was less dissonance in Georgia than in Russia, Ukraine or the Baltic States, nowhere else were anti-communist dissidents as conspicuous in post-Soviet political life as in Georgia. In 1987, they founded the Ilya Chavchavadze Society, which drew support from students and young intellectuals in particular. The Society split almost immediately, the first in the series of divisions, coalitions and realignments that has characterised Georgian political life ever since.

This fractiousness defined the Georgian political landscape as extremely polarised. In Russia, political change was initiated from above by liberal reformers in the communist leadership with the support of the established intelligentsia. Thus, initially the cleavage was between reformers and hard-liners within the ruling elite. Only later did outsiders (non-establishment intellectuals) start to exert an influence on political developments and gradually radicalise the political agenda. In the Baltic republics and Armenia, a high level of national consensus was swiftly established around nationalist slogans. In Georgia, the agenda was set by a small radically anti-communist group that attracted support outside of the elite, thus putting both the government and the established intellectual elite on the defensive. Whereas elsewhere reformists stepped up their demands only gradually, in Georgia the opposition radicalised very quickly, almost immediately demanding independence and an end to communism. The established media were ignored, and radicals used street rallies, leaflets and posters to set the political agenda. Those who did not subscribe to this radical philosophy were soon branded as "traitors to the national cause", and calls for tolerance or compromise were dismissed as cowardice and weakness.

Most the opposition labelled itself "irreconcilable" by the following logic. Communist rule had been established in Georgia by a Russian Bolshevik military invasion that crushed the independent Georgian Republic that had existed from 1918 to 1921. Hence, the communist authorities were "occupational forces". Accordingly, an attempt to gain power by participating in official elections was "collaboration". In this, the Georgian radicals differed from the Baltic Popular Fronts and other opposition movements in the Soviet Union, whose strategy was to win election to the Supreme Soviets, constitutionally the highest organ of state power in each republic, but in reality ceremonial bodies. Being "irreconcilable" did not imply violent struggle - which no Georgian political group favoured - but assumed that the only acceptable method of politics was acts of civil disobedience, such as rallies, hunger-strikes and sit-ins. "Irreconcilable" strategists borrowed from Mahatma Gandhi, among others. Central to the radicals' strategy were unofficial popular elections to a National Congress, a body untainted by any legal conti-
nuity with the Soviet system. This National Congress would negotiate terms of deoccupation and decommunisation with the authorities in Moscow (rather than their Georgian "puppets").

The first rallies in 1988 concentrated on issues like protection of cultural monuments and the environment (a thin disguise for nationalist slogans), but in November a mass political rally was held in front of the government building in Tbilisi, and continued round-the-clock for several days. It protested against proposals to restructure the Soviet constitution that were intended to limit the powers of the Union Republics. An appeal by Gorbachev and Shevardnadze calmed the situation; but the opposition had tasted power. In April 1989, another round-the-clock rally was organised to protest against actions of the regional authorities in the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic, where a movement for secession from Georgia had been formed (see the section on ethnic territorial conflicts below). However, the rally developed into an openly anti-Soviet protest; allegedly Moscow was behind the separatist movement in Abkhazia. This time the authorities took resolute action: early on 9 April, Soviet troops dispersed the protesters using poison gas and shovels, leaving 20 people dead, most of them young women.

This was the turning point. The communist government lost all legitimacy, and moral authority passed to the leaders of the opposition. A period of de facto dual rule started. Although the communists retained formal power – Patashvili resigned and was succeeded by Givi Gumbasidze, a leader who was flexible to the point of never taking a stand on anything at all – the opposition dictated major decisions. The media, still formally government-controlled, denounced the Kremlin and communism, but did not dare criticise nationalist leaders.

The massacre of 9 April not only rallied society behind independence, but also raised doubts – especially among the young – whether it was wise to limit oneself to peaceful methods of struggle. Various paramilitary groups began to form, some of them affiliated to political parties. These militia groups did not fight for independence – i.e., they never confronted Soviet troops – but they played a major role in ethnic territorial conflicts and in-fighting in Georgia.

As the opposition moved towards real power, competition within it intensified. More moderate forces were impressed by the Baltic Popular Fronts and tried to establish a similar organisation in Georgia in summer 1989, but after a series of splits it degenerated into another small grouping among others – leaving the political arena to the radicals. The latter united under a "National Forum" and started preparing elections to the National Congress, and succeeded in forcing the government to postpone the official elections scheduled for March 1990. However, a split in the movement that April dramatically altered the political landscape. The most charismatic radical leader, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, broke with the Forum. He and a group of supporters formed a Round Table coalition, which declared that it would participate in the official elections and denounced the National Congress. Paradoxically, this break with the "Irreconcilables" enhanced Gamsakhurdia’s popularity, presenting the staunch nationalist as a man of political wisdom and flexibility. Many other people in opposition who had not belonged to the Radical group joined the Round Table, which was favoured to win the elections scheduled for October. The standing of the die-hard "Irreconcilables" plummeted. Moderate and liberal opposition groups did not enjoy enough support to affect the result.

The start of ethnic conflict

Relations with secessionist minorities were a parallel plot in the unfolding Georgian political epic. According to the 1989 census, ethnic minorities made up just under 30 percent of the population of Georgia. Armenians, Russians and Azeris were the largest groups. Difficulties arose, however, not with them, but with the Abkhazians and Ossetians, because of their status in ethnically defined autonomous units, within the “Matrosikha” system of Soviet nationality discussed above. When the Georgians demanded independence from the Soviet Union, the Abkhazians and Ossetians wanted to improve their status as well. In practice, however, this could only mean secession from Georgia, and Georgian reaction was extremely sharp. There were also problems with the third autonomous unit, . Georgians resented its existence as the only confessionally defined autonomous unit in an officially atheist state. But never demanded a change in status, and relations between it and the centre never came close to open conflict.

The situations in the two secessionist units differed from each other. In the Soviet hierarchy of national autonomous units the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic had a higher status and greater powers than the South Ossetian Autonomous Region. This administrative difference was less relevant than ethnic demography, though. Ethnic Ossetians made up more than two-thirds of the population in their autonomous region (most ethnic Ossetians in Georgia lived outside this unit26 – but this was another matter). Accordingly, they could base their claim to self-determination on democratic principles, and their problems lay primarily in their relations with Tbilisi rather than within the region itself. Ethnic Abkhazians, however, made up only 17% of the population of Abkhazia, and ethnic Georgians 45.6%. But as the “titular” group, they had special quotas in the state bureaucracy and offices of economic management. Majority democracy threatened these privileges, which created problems not just between Abkhazia and Georgia, but also between the ethnic communities within Abkhazia. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Georgians’ attitudes to these two issues differed: the autonomy of Abkhazia was much more acceptable to them than that of South Ossetia.

The Georgian nationalist movement did not have a clear idea of how to deal with the problems of the autonomous units. The Soviet government in Moscow was considered the main adversary, and the minorities’ problems were only seen in the context of this presumably more important struggle. The nationalists saw the conspiratorial hand of

26 According to 1989 census, there were about 165,000 ethnic Ossetians in Georgia, of which only about 60 thousand lived in the Autonomous Region.
Moscow behind any minority claim, and were not consistent in their attempts to establish a dialogue with minority representatives, though meetings did take place. But even if the new Georgian elites had shown greater willingness, it would probably not have been easy to reach a compromise, as the radical spirit of non-compromise dominated not only in Tbilisi, but also in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, the capitals of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, respectively. Their emerging nationalist movements also needed a foe — which had to be Georgia. Moscow, concerned about rising nationalism in Georgia proper, had vested interest in encouraging and supporting anti-Tbilisi movements within Georgia; suspicions of a Moscow-organised conspiracy were not unfounded.

Open conflicts between Georgian nationalist forces and the secessionist regions broke out in 1989. In February, a mass meeting of ethnic Abkhazians in the village of Lykhny, attended by a considerable part of the ethnic Abkhazian population, issued an appeal to the Soviet authorities to detach Abkhazia from Georgia and place it under the direct rule of Moscow. Tbilisi responded by encouraging mass protest rallies. The episode ended with a reshuffle in the Abkhazian communist leadership. That summer, the first blood was spilled. Abkhazian radicals assaulted Georgian applicants to the Sukhumi branch of Tbilisi State University, which they saw as a stronghold of "Georgian imperialism". Several people were left dead on both sides, and occasional disturbances continued for some time.

Ossetian nationalists publicly expressed their solidarity with the Abkhazian cause, which caused grave concern in Tbilisi. Because Georgia's position in South Ossetia was weaker, Georgian nationalists felt that it was more important to restrain Ossetian separatists. Georgia planned a huge rally as a show of force in Tskhinvali in November 1989. Thousands of people from Tbilisi and other parts of Georgia started to converge on Tskhinvali on buses, but were stopped on the outskirts by Ossetian activists. An exchange of fire, followed by bloodshed, opened low-scale partisan warfare between militia groups, which gradually escalated.

Most Georgian nationalist leaders believed that Moscow provoked the ethnic territorial conflicts, and the best approach was to avoid or ignore ethnic issues as far as possible. By contrast, Zviad Gamsakhurdia blatantly played on ethnic sentiment to enhance his personal popularity, persistently referring to "ungrateful minorities" that threatened the integrity of Georgia and berating minorities that did not profess loyalty to the Georgian state. This kind of populist rhetoric heightened the concerns of minority groups and gave secessionist movements greater legitimacy than they might otherwise have had. But it also helped Gamsakhurdia to emerge as a national leader. Explanations about international law and the need for a clear break with the communist past carried less appeal than emotional calls to protect Georgia's sacred soil and fellow Georgians under threat in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Gamsakhurdia: the failure of democratic transition

In October 1990, the Round Table won over 50 percent of the vote and a strong majority in the first free multiparty elections to the Supreme Council of Georgia, and Zviad Gamsakhurdia was elected chairman. The communists, with about 30% of the vote, were the only other party to exceed the 4% cut-off for party lists. In the Supreme Council, however, they hardly acted as an opposition, agreeing with the majority for the most part. A handful of MPs who were elected in single-mandate constituencies and did not belong to either of the large groupings later formed a small but active opposition faction called the Democratic Centre. In the first presidential elections held on 26 May 1991, Gamsakhurdia crushed his five opponents, winning 87% of the vote.

Initially, Gamsakhurdia acted with relative moderation. The Georgian parliament voted for a transition period before independence, rather than declare independence immediately, as Lithuania had done, and made some symbolic changes to the constitution, such as removing "the Soviet Socialist" from the name of the country and restoring the flag and hymn of the independent Georgian Republic. Georgia would move towards independence gradually and avoid doing anything that would destabilise relations with Moscow.

Gamsakhurdia also tried to show greater restraint with regard to ethnic minorities. Shortly before the elections he dropped his demand for the abolition of South Ossetian autonomy, and in 1991 reached a compromise with Abkhazia on an electoral law for its Supreme Council. Under the agreement, the Abkhazian community in Abkhazia would have 28 seats in a 65-member Supreme Council, Georgians would get 26, while the rest of the population (about 38%) would be represented by 11 MPs. Changes to the Abkhazian constitution would require a two-thirds majority, i.e., consensus between the representatives of the different ethnic groups. Thanks to this arrangement, Gamsakhurdia's term in office was notable for the lack of tension in Georgian-Abkhazian relations.

The same was not true of South Ossetia. Soon after the parliamentary elections in Georgia, and while fighting continued in parts of the region, elections were held for the South Ossetian Supreme Council without consulting Tbilisi. On 9 December 1990, the newly elected body proclaimed the South Ossetian Republic. This could be interpreted as, at the very least, a step towards secession from Georgia. The Georgian Supreme Council voted unanimously to abolish South Ossetia's autonomy. The attempt by the central government to reassert control over the region by military means was unsuccessful, but led to an escalation of hostilities and new waves of refugees. The war in the troubled region continued throughout Gamsakhurdia's term of office and contributed to tensions in Georgian society proper. Loyal ethnic Ossetians were expelled from other regions of Georgia, the most obvious abuse of human rights under Gamsakhurdia. References to "conditions of war" were routinely used to curb the activities of the opposition. Allegations that Moscow was backing the Ossetian separatists exacerbated ten-
sions with the Soviet government. In these circumstances, the gradualist course was dropped and the Supreme Council proclaimed Georgia independent on 9 April 1991.

Gamsakhurdia's greatest problem, however, was not Moscow or ethnic separatists, but his internal opposition. The radicals carried out their project of electing a "National Congress", which, while not actually claiming power, refused to recognize the Supreme Council. Although the "National Congress" was not very popular, it was backed by Mkheidzishvili, the most powerful of the paramilitary groups, led by Jaba Ioseliani, a flamboyant character who started life as a brilliant criminal, but later became a playwright and professor of arts. In February 1991, Gamsakhurdia crushed Mkheidzishvili with - the irony of it! - the help of the Russian army and arrested its leaders, including Ioseliani.

In the meantime, his relations with the more moderate opposition deteriorated on account of his authoritarian style. Always domineering, he interpreted his popular mandate as granting him more or less unlimited authority and the licence to silence his opponents. Some recently founded independent newspapers were shut down and others harassed. The state-run media denounced virtually all his opponents as agents of the Kremlin and traitors. He refused to introduce economic reforms, as a state-controlled economy was easier to direct. His wild statements, often insulting to the opposition and ethnic minorities, created terrible publicity for a country trying to gain international recognition. Suspicions about his mental health grew and rumours resurfaced that he might have been a secret Soviet collaborator (in 1977 he had disgracefully recanted his dissident activities on Soviet television). The fact that his political actions contributed to the escalation of ethnic violence in Georgia, already widely believed to be a Moscow conspiracy, lent support to these allegations.

Rifts appeared in his governing coalition as supporters started to doubt his fitness to lead the country to independence. The final straw was his ambivalent reaction to the August 1991 coup in Moscow. He not only refused to unequivocally denounce the hard-line communist conspirators, but also appeared to try to appease the Soviet military authorities. The newly created National Guard led by Tengiz Kitovani broke ranks and set up camp outside Tbilisi, and Prime Minister Sigua and other key figures in the executive and ruling parliamentary faction joined the opposition. After the police fired on an opposition demonstration in Tbilisi in early September, there was a wave of protests demanding the resignation of the president.

September to December 1991 was a period of great uncertainty. Gamsakhurdia did not have the power to neutralise the mutineers. The loyalty of the police - the largest armed force - was uncertain. The country was irreconcilably divided between Gamsakhurdia's supporters and opponents. His supporters, known as Zviadists, camped outside the government building to protect the president, while the opposition tried to hold rallies as close to the government palace as possible. There were several clashes between the two groups.

In this period, a heterogeneous coalition of anti-Gamsakhurdia supporters formed under the leadership of defectors from the Gamsakhurdia camp, such as Kitovani and Sigua. Anti-Gamsakhurdia nationalists denounced him for his failure to build bridges to the West and as a possible Russian agent. Liberal democrats were scared by his autoritaric style and thought that if he succeeded in defeating his armed rivals he would establish a dictatorship and repress all his opponents. They were also embarrassed by the terrible international publicity that he was causing Georgia. They were instrumental in creating an ideology and a measure of legitimacy for the anti-Gamsakhurdia rebellion by defining Gamsakhurdia's regime as parochial fascism and the fight against it as a democratic revolution or popular rebellion against tyranny. Although many former communists held top positions in Gamsakhurdia's government until the very end and approved of Gamsakhurdia's authoritarian methods, the majority of the former communist elite had lost their positions and legitimacy and wanted to get rid of an unpredictable leader. It was at this time that Eduard Shevardnadze's name, until then taboo in Georgian politics, began to surface as a possible alternative. Not all of the opposition approved, but they were preoccupied with the fight against the regime and preferred to postpone the issue of alternatives until later.

The division had important social implications as well. The opposition's slogans of democracy and of political rather than ethnic nationalism were more acceptable to educated Georgians. Furthermore, even though the new authorities had not introduced radical changes, they threatened many established positions and reputations, especially among intellectuals. Both factors inclined elite groups to support the opposition. Gamsakhurdia's crude nationalism, on the other hand, appealed to the less-educated section of society. Recognising this, Gamsakhurdia manipulated popular resentment against the establishment, bussing in supporters from the provinces - the capital versus the rest is an important social divide in Georgia. The opposition coined the phrase of "black pantyhosers" to describe middle-aged women who idolised their leader and physically assaulted anybody who disagreed.

Matters came to a head on 22 December 1991. The National Guard entered Tbilisi and demanded the immediate resignation of Gamsakhurdia. He refused. The rebels and the government fought it out for two weeks in the centre of Tbilisi, while the country watched. After the rebels succeeded in freeing Jaba Ioseliani and some of his lieutenants from prison, Mkheidzishvili reformed and helped decide the president's fate. According to some sources, the rebels received arms from the Russian troops deployed in Tbilisi at a crucial moment. On 7 January 1992, Gamsakhurdia and his supporters, who were held up in the government palace, fled to Armenia and then to Chechnya.

Post-coup turmoil

Kitovani and Ioseliani, militia leaders with a common interest in removing Gamsakhurdia, though subsequently rivals, formed a Military Council which assumed control over the country. Tengiz Sigua was reinstated as prime minister. This was a fragile arrangement, and the writ of the new rulers did not extend much beyond Tbilisi. Several pro-
Gamsakhurdia demonstrations in Tbilisi were fired on, but the military leaders were restrained by their claims that they had "rebelled for democracy against tyranny" - and by the necessity to maintain the support of political parties. Though many appreciated Kitovani and Isoseliani for removing Gamsakhurdia, they did not necessarily accept them as legitimate rulers. The ousted president still enjoyed significant popular support, especially in his region of Megrlia, which remained a Zviadist stronghold for the next year and a half. His supporters called the new authorities a "juanta" and pledged to restore the "legitimate government". Local chieftains and warlords established control over their particular territories. Gamsakhurdia's credentials may have been dubious, but those of Kitovani and Isoseliani were hardly better, and Gamsakhurdia was at least a popularly elected leader. The chances that the new authorities would achieve internal stabilisation and international recognition seemed slim.

In March, Eduard Shevardnadze was invited to lead the country. Kitovani and Sigua were reluctant, but Isoseliani and most political parties favoured this step, and the overwhelming majority of the non-Zviadist population welcomed Shevardnadze as a saviour. It was a risk for the military leaders to invite back a shrewd and popular politician, but they hoped to prevent him from establishing a strong local power base, while he would provide internal and external legitimacy for the new regime. Shevardnadze's first step was to create the State Council, a civilian quasi-parliament of which he became chairman, while Kitovani, Isoseliani, Sigua and he together formed the Presidium of the State Council - presumably the real decision-making body.

International recognition soon followed in the form of visits from western friends Shevardnadze made as Soviet foreign minister, his former German and American counterparts Hans-Dietrich Genscher and James Baker. Membership of UN and CSCE (later OSCE), as well as considerable amounts of foreign humanitarian aid soon followed. But re-establishing order within the country was an enormous task. There were several layers of resistance to overcome: ethnic separatists; Zviadist insurgents; warlords - on whom Shevardnadze depended for the moment, but who ultimately hindered the establishment of a civilian order - and various political groupings, many of which harboured little enthusiasm for Shevardnadze. He had no other option but to try playing one force against the other.

When Shevardnadze returned, the conflict in the Tskhinvali region of South Ossetia had not ended, and it escalated in the late spring and summer. It was obvious that the Ossetians had Russian backing. The Russian vice-president Rutskoi even threatened publicly to bombard the Georgian forces. In July, Russian President Yeltsin mediated a cease-fire agreement with the separatist forces. Effectively, the region was removed from Georgian control, save for ethnic Georgian villages. A tripartite body of Georgian, Ossetian and Russian forces would monitor the cease-fire. It was generally agreed that this was Shevardnadze's first major success.

Western Georgia was more of a problem. Military expeditions to reassert control over Zviadist-held regions turned into punitive actions against the local population, which alienated it further and strengthened support for the former president. Zviadist control of main roads to Russia and the Black Sea caused enormous economic losses. Abkhazia found itself separated from the Georgian central government, and the secessionist element in its government tried to exploit this situation. In July, a slender majority in the Abkhazian Supreme Council (in the absence of a pro-Georgian faction) restored the draft Abkhazian constitution of 1925. This constitution did not treat Abkhazia as a part of Georgia, which caused grave concern in Tbilisi. The central government's position in the region was further weakened by the fact that the majority of the ethnic Georgian population in Abkhazia supported Gamsakhurdia. Hence, whenever an expedition from Tbilisi sought to establish control over Megrelia, the Zviadist militiamen would move to Abkhazian territory.

The Tbilisi government was desperate to cut the Zviadist-Abkhazian knot. On 19 August 1992, Georgian troops entered Abkhazia with the announced aim of guarding the railways and highways. The Abkhazian militia offered military resistance. The Georgian forces took control of the Abkhazian capital, Sukhumi, and the Abkhazian section of the Georgian-Russian border. The separatist leadership moved to the town of Gudauta. War had started in Abkhazia.

The August military operation turned out to be a grave mistake by the Georgian leadership. Shevardnadze's supporters later maintained that he did not want a war but could not control his warlords, in particular Kitovani. The war was a humanitarian disaster for the multi-ethnic population of Abkhazia and a military and political defeat for Georgia. The Georgian so-called troops were in reality poorly coordinated militiamen with little discipline and less morale. They soon resorted to looting and to abusing the civilian population irrespective of origin, thereby alienating even those who were not initially inclined to fight on the Abkhazian side. The Abkhazians received support from their ethnic kin in the Northern Caucasus (Chechen fighters received their initial military training in Abkhazia) and Russian troops deployed in the region. The Georgian government was separated from the zone of military operations by the region controlled by the Zviadist forces.

In these circumstances, the war seemed hardly winnable - but politically the government could not afford to simply withdraw, either. With the mediation of the Russian president, Shevardnadze tried to reach a quick cease-fire in early September, under which the central government agreed to withdraw some of its forces from Abkhazia. The result was a further escalation and the loss of control over the strategically important border with Russia.

Elections in October 1992 gave the new authorities some democratic legitimacy. A new, extremely fragmented parliament included representatives from 26 parties as well as many independents. Shevardnadze was elected chairman by direct popular vote. Parliament gave him the additional title of head of state with de facto presidential powers. He was restricted in his use of these powers, however - not by law, but by his warlords. While fighting in Abkhazia, he tried to broaden his power base in Tbilisi at the expense
of those who carried out the anti-Gamsakhurdia coup. In March 1993, Tengiz Kitovani was dismissed as minister of defence. In August, Prime Minister Sigua was forced to resign.

Most importantly, in September 1993 Shevardnadze took control of the ministry of internal affairs, which had been headed by one of Isoseliani’s lieutenants. He was now in charge of the police, the largest and most disciplined (though very inefficient) force in the state. This small coup d’état precipitated an extremely dramatic, indeed melodramatic episode: Isoseliani withdrew his support for Shevardnadze in the face of the insurrection in western Georgia, after which the head of state had no other choice but to resign. Several thousand people came to the government office to ask Shevardnadze to reconsider, at one point actually going down on their knees. Shevardnadze returned, and Isoseliani, faced with the loss of all support, had to swallow the bitter pill and stand by him for another year and a half. But he had a good reason to worry: in the police the head of state had a real power base, which he could gradually expand at Isoseliani’s expense.

The results of September 1993 "coup" only became apparent later. The fall of 1993 was probably the blackest period in Georgia’s post-Soviet history. First, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the ousted president, returned to Megretia, which was a signal for an offensive against the government in Tbilisi. Several more districts fell to Gamsakhurdia, who continued to advance eastwards. More or less simultaneously, the Abkhazian separatists broke another Russian-brokered cease-fire after Georgia had withdrawn most of its forces and in a matter of days had taken control of the whole region, creating more than 200,000 refugees, most of them ethnic Georgians. Remnants of the Georgian army had to flee through Zviadist-controlled territory, handing over whatever arms they still had to their adversaries.

The very existence of the Georgian state seemed threatened. There was almost no army to curb the Zviadist offensive, though the forces of the latter were not impressive either. Gamsakhurdia was extremely unpopular in eastern Georgia, including Tbilisi, and it was inconceivable that he could regain and hold power over the whole country. Georgia appeared to be sliding towards civil war.

Enter Russia. Georgian foreign policy after Shevardnadze’s return consisted of frantic, often contradictory attempts to accommodate Russian interests to some degree while building bridges to the West. Nobody in Georgia doubted that Russia helped Abkhazian separatists in order to punish Georgia for declaring independence and force it back into the Russian fold. (The Russian military’s hatred of Shevardnadze for his role in dismembering the Soviet empire made them all the more willing to act). But a considerable part of the political elite and the public would not accept making any concessions to Russia that compromised Georgia’s independence. The opposition, with references to Shevardnadze’s communist past, accused him of harbouring a hidden pro-Russian agenda, so he had to be cautious to do nothing that could be interpreted as too conciliatory. In the days when the Abkhazian forces were storming Sukhumi, Shevardnadze rejected the Russian proposal of help in exchange for concessions, saying that Georgia would not kowtow.

A couple of weeks later, faced with the disintegration of his country, he did exactly that by joining the Commonwealth of Independent States. Although this post-imperial organisation has not become an effective integrative instrument, at that time it was still seen as a tool of reintegration, i.e., restoration of the Russian empire in a new guise. It was assumed that if Russia helped Shevardnadze to resolve his most urgent problems, other, more substantial, concessions would follow.

One has to bear in mind that the Georgians had an almost irrational awe of the Russian military power. In 1993, the Chechen war, which demonstrated to amazed Georgians that the Russian army was not invincible, still lay in the future. It was still taken for granted that the Russians’ military power was infinitely greater than that of anybody else in the region; if the Russians chose to use it, they could easily get what they wanted.

This awe is reflected in the way the Russians helped to solve Shevardnadze’s most pressing problem, the Zviadist revolt. They did not need to actually fight, but just to demonstrate their support for Tbilisi government, in particular, by sending a couple of warships to the harbour of Poti and some tanks with paid Russian drivers to join government troops. This proved to be enough to intimidate the Zviadist militias. A few days later they withdrew from the towns they held and retreated to the woods, from where they were gradually squeezed.

This was a real turning point. One vital problem seemed to have been solved, and Shevardnadze rather than the warlords could take credit for this.

The Shevardnadze stabilisation

Shevardnadze used the momentum to expand his power. In the fall of 1993 his party – the Citizens’ Union of Georgia – held its founding congress. It was a broad, amorphous coalition that he hoped would become his power base. The police, the only armed force he trusted, launched a campaign against crime through a series of round-ups that started by neutralising petty local warlords controlling various towns and villages. This soon bore fruit. In the two years after the coup Georgians had got used to shooting in the streets, so that nobody paid attention to gunfire after dark. But by spring 1994 shooting had become rare, and crime, previously rampant, began to fall. The power of Mkhedronti, now formally institutionalised as the Rescue Corps was still considerable and potentially destabilising, but at least major roads were no longer controlled by modern highwaymen, and commerce started to revive.

Russia’s help against the Zviadists led Shevardnadze to hope that further deals with Russia would help him to resolve other major security and economic problems. In 1994, a number of agreements were reached that regulated three aspects of the Russian’s military presence in Georgia: they could maintain several military bases in different parts of Georgia, they would serve as peace-keepers in Abkhazia (formally under aegis of the
CIS), and they would guard the border with Turkey (a so-called external border of the CIS). A former general of the Russian army was appointed Georgian minister of defense, while Igor Giorgadze, a former KGB serviceman, became the head of the security service (reportedly at the insistence of Moscow). It was believed that the primary allegiance of these people was to the respective Russian agencies rather than Georgia. In the eyes of the Georgians, their country had become a strategic satellite of its northern neighbour, retaining only symbolic independence. In return, Shevardnadze expected from Russia (a) active assistance in regaining control over the break-away territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; (b) help in building up a Georgian army; and (c) substantial economic assistance. Georgia still had some cards: the agreement on the military bases would only be ratified by parliament after Georgia restored its jurisdiction over Abkhazia, while the mandate of the peace-keepers had to be renewed every six months by the CIS summit.

These deals — strongly opposed by pro-Western nationalists but welcomed by the majority of the exhausted and impoverished population — did not achieve their aims, though. It soon became clear that Russia had hardly anything to offer in the economic sphere. Russia did pass on some military equipment to Georgia that was proudly presented at military parades, but qualified by experts as junk. To train Georgian cadets, Russian military schools would charge money, which was not what Georgia expected (“if they want us to be their satellites, why do not they at least train us for free?”) or could afford. And, most importantly, Russia could not or would not help Georgia in Abkhazia. Initially, Russia exerted some pressure on the Abkhazian leadership during negotiations that it mediated and observed the economic sanctions against the separatist regime imposed by the CIS. But Russia did not go further, and official Russian pressure was partly balanced by the activities of more pro-Abkhazian Russian forces, in particular in communist and nationalist camps.

Russia did not derive many advantages from the deal either. The military establishment might have been pleased to extend Russia’s military presence, but it failed to promote Russia’s political influence or economic interests in the region. Frustrated by Russia’s failure to deliver, Georgia started seeking partners and assistance elsewhere. From about 1995, Georgia cautiously but fairly consistently started to look to the West.

The first step was economic. As restoring economic links with Russia soon proved to be a futile economic strategy, Georgia accepted the package of reforms proposed by the IMF and the World Bank and backed up by their loans. For the first time since independence, the country had a relatively coherent macro-economic policy, and the results were quite successful. By the beginning of 1995, the government had managed to stabilise the currency. Later that year it introduced a new Georgian currency, the lari, which remained stable until late 1998. The introduction of lari was a very important psychological turning point, as people began to use their currency instead of Russian roubles. Inflation was tamed and large-scale privatisation got underway. In 1996-97, annual eco-
not recognised by the vast majority (only 16.7 percent believed that life had improved in the past year, against 42.1 percent who believed that it had got worse). There is profound mistrust of state institutions (only 12.1 percent hoped for a fair court trial – which meant that the courts are trusted far more than the police, from whom just 1.7 percent expected any fairness).

New challenges

Developments in the last two years showed that public scepticism was not unfounded. If the turmoil of early 1990s is taken as a reference point, signs of recovery are undeniable. But developments in 1998-99 raised new doubts about whether Georgia would make steady progress towards stable democracy and a prosperous market economy.

Several events in 1998 tested the political stabilisation achieved so painstakingly. On 9 February, as President Shevardnadze and his escort were returning to his residence, they were met by machine-gun fire and anti-tank missiles. Again, he narrowly escaped (two bodyguards were killed). But the political implications of the incident were dramatic. Whereas the 1995 assassination attempt helped Shevardnadze to get rid of his most dangerous adversaries and launch a period of recovery, the 1998 episode was the first in a series of events that exposed the weakness of the Georgian state. The attackers appeared to be Zviadists with Chechen support. Several were soon arrested, but others took six UN military observers hostage later in the same month and demanded that the "legitimate" (Zviadist) government be restored. The hostage crisis was resolved peacefully six days later, and the hostage-takers’ leader was later killed in a shoot-out with the police.

Much greater trouble came in May, when militia forces of self-proclaimed Abkhazia responded to activity by Georgian guerrilla fighters with a sweep operation. In a six-day war, several hundred people were killed, and 30,000–40,000 Georgians who had spontaneously returned to the Gali district in southern Abkhazia were forced to flee again, and many Georgian houses were burned down. Georgian government forces tried to help the guerrillas at some point, but soon retreated, afraid of being drawn into a new protracted war. Apart from causing further deaths and another humanitarian crisis, the episode exposed the weakness and lack of control by the Georgian government, which was seen as provoking Abkhazians by covertly supporting the guerrillas, but failing to do anything in the moment of crisis. In Abkhazia, where Shevardnadze’s government had never popular, a fresh wave of resentment built up against Tbilisi. In addition, the de facto buffer zone that existed between Abkhazia and Georgia proper was destroyed, and skirmishes continued all summer on the both sides of the control line. Ghosts of the early 90s started to wander in western Georgia.

Matters came to a head on 19 October, when Akaki Eliava, an erstwhile fighter of the Zviadist militia who was ostensibly reconciled with the government and became a colonel in the Georgian army, started a mutiny with the support of about 100 people in the town of Senaki in Abkhazia. The mutiny was defeated that evening and most participants were arrested in the following days. Eliava and a small group of supporters hid in the woods for several months, as the government avoided attacking him openly for fear of stirring up new tensions in Abkhazia.

This string of alarming episodes after a period of relative stability exposed how fragile the foundations of internal stability in Georgia still were. But it also showed that both society and the ruling elite had changed profoundly and were much less inclined to approve of violent struggle. Although people in Abkhazia still harboured considerable resentment against the government, they did not support Eliava’s mutiny, preferring to express their disapproval through recently introduced democratic channels, such as voting against the ruling party. Moreover, after a series of negotiations with the separatist Abkhazian leaders between August and November 1998, terrorist activity in the conflict zone returned to a level that did not pose a direct threat to overall stability. The government, despite its substantial weaknesses, was still prudent enough to avoid new cycles of violence in the volatile region.

The new challenges to internal security were accompanied by a severe fiscal crisis. In the aftermath of the six-day war in May 1998, the government tried to prevent new unrest in Abkhazia with loads of humanitarian aid – and emptied its treasury. But the main reasons for the slowness of Georgia’s recovery from the crisis were general administrative mismanagement and corruption – apart from the Russian economic crisis. Budget targets for 1998 and 1999 were not met owing to the poor collection of tax and customs, which meant that the large part of the population that still works for the state were not paid. Economic growth also slowed to 2.9% in 1998 from over 10% in 1996 and 1997. This increased pressure on the Georgian currency, the lari, whose stability since 1995 was a matter of pride for the Georgian government. It was allowed to float freely in December 1998, and immediately depreciated by some 40-50%.

In a democratic system, these developments would increase the opposition’s chances of winning power. In local elections in November 1998 – the first since 1990 – the ruling Citizens’ Union of Georgia won about 30% of the vote and more seats than any other party. In most regions, however, opposition parties managed to form coalitions that left CUG in a minority. The Labour Party, an unknown force, surprised observers by taking second place. With populist rhetoric it attracted the greatest number of protest votes from both the neo-communist and nationalist (Zviadist) fringes. The message for the opposition was clear: unite and you may defeat CUG in the parliamentary elections scheduled for October 1999. The opposition did unify, but in an unexpected way. The coalition was created around Aslan Abashidze, the autocratic leader of, and Batumi emerged as the second power centre. After lengthy negotiations, five parties – socialists, traditionalists, a group of moderate Zviadists, the Popular party (a splinter group of the National Democrats) and Abashidze’s Union of Democratic Revival – officially announced their coalition under the name Revival in summer 1999. This was a purely
pragmatic alliance with no common ideological ground, and its members had fought on
different sides in previous political struggles. Abashidze was the undisputed leader. La-
bour, which had been in an earlier coalition with Abashidze, quarreled with him and
decided that it was now strong enough to stand on its own. The Popular Party also de-
cided to stand on its own (presumably it could not negotiate enough seats in the coal-
iton list), but coordinated with Revival in single-mandate districts.

The Revival coalition underscored the weakness of the Georgian party system: par-
ties can only unite around an existing power. The coalition was united only in its op-
position to the government. But it had good reason to hope that popular resentment would
be strong enough for people to vote for any alternative. The perception of relative sta-
ility in and the experience of its leader, Aslan Abashidze, in government were sup-
posed to be positive factors. Jumber Patiashvili, the leader of the Georgian Communist
Party in 1985-89 and Shevardnadze’s main challenger in 1995 elections, also joined the
Batumi coalition.

The emergence of serious opposition to the ruling party lead to political polarisation
of a kind not seen in Georgia since the 1990 elections. This ultimately worked in favour
of CUG. In summer 1999, the chances of the parties seemed equal, but as election day
approached the ruling party pulled ahead. Voters dissatisfied with the government rea-
ised that by not voting for the ruling party they might help Aslan Abashidze to power,
and victory for his coalition might be considered as a green light for him to run for
president in April 2000, a prospect that scared many voters. CUG successfully con-
vinced voters that Abashidze was a pro-Russian candidate unacceptable to the West
who would abandon the government’s pro-Western policies and establish a personal
dictatorship like that in in Georgia as a whole. Shevardnadze’s active campaigning on
behalf of his party made a very important impact as well. Voters were scared that an
abrupt change of power might undermine overall stability in one way or another and
were unwilling to take chances. Several groups – National Democratic Alliance, La-
bour, and the new Industry will Save Georgia – each sought to present themselves as a
third force running against two corrupt ruling parties, but most of the electorate saw the
elections as a two party race. CUG won about 41 percent of the vote, while Revival got
only 24 percent. The only other party that managed to surmount the threshold – raised to
7 percent – was “Industry will Save Georgia.” This gave CUG a comfortable majority in
parliament.

The elections also showed that Aslan Abashidze would be no match for Eduard
Shevardnadze in 9 April 2000 presidential poll. Jumber Patiashvili, who got 19% in the
1995 elections, was again put up by the opposition as his main – but hopeless – candi-
date. After Shevardnadze and Abashidze had reached a surprise backstage deal few days
before the voting, the latter withdrew his candidacy in favor of the former. Ironically,

27 The Georgian media did not publish serious polls, because media organisations did not have the fin-
cancial sources to fund such research. The author used his personal contacts with leading polling or-
ganisations.
Profile of Social Change in Georgia

It is clear that Georgian society has changed in many ways in the nine years since the break-up of the Soviet Union. However, nobody has yet tried to conceptualise and summarise this development.

This book and the research on which it is based may be a step in that direction. However, before we analyse the empirical data, it will be useful to make a few brief general observations of the social structure of Soviet society — better: late Soviet society, which was different in many respects from the heyday of communism under Stalin. They will provide a context for the discussion of the problems and peculiarities of transition. Accordingly, I shall stress features that contrast with modern western societies, for the latter represent "normality" in the sense that in discourse in post-communist societies they are understood as the "final destination" of transition, and features that appear to be important in the context of further social and political processes. From this it should be clear that the focus of this discussion is features relevant to Georgian society, regardless of whether they were simultaneously generic societal characteristics of the Soviet Empire or peculiar only to a specific region.

A sketch on the Soviet social structure: the starting point of the social transformation

One major difficulty in analysing the social structure of Soviet society is an unusually wide cleavage between "objective" components of social structure, on the one hand, and self-awareness of social groups, or the absence thereof, on the other. This cleavage is not unique, indeed, it is found everywhere to some extent — intellectuals love discussing the "mythologising" nature of social discourse in modern western, i.e. democratic, society. However, I believe that the very existence of free social discourse is important in the sense that this discourse is formative of social structure. Social structure undoubtedly has "objective" foundations, such as access to resources, institutionalised power, territorial distribution of the population, etc. However, I would argue that those variables only provide for the potentiality of such a structure, unless they are processed by social discourse. Society structures itself through social discourse, that is, by interpreting differences between groups and people in a certain way, thereby rendering them "objective".

If this is the case, then it is legitimate to ask whether can one speak of social groups when people are denied the possibility to define themselves as members of those groups and to discuss what this membership entails in terms of interests, priorities and possible alliances, let alone representation of those interests? Can social structure exist without discourse on the social structure — or if the very existence of social structure is denied? It is no coincidence that sociology was not recognised as a discipline under communism (grudging and incomplete legitimisation in the last decades of communist rule was another indication that the regime was losing its willpower to defend the ideology on which it was based). Whatever the answer, one should be aware of these reservations.

The grand project of the communism was to build a "classless society", i.e. ultimately to eliminate social structure as such. It was conceded that during the transitory stage (and all Soviet history was considered part of the transitory stage) to the true communism, society was still divided into two classes, the working class and the peasantry, and one social stratum — the intelligentsia. However, the very transitory, residual character of this division discouraged speculation about the distinctions between these social groups, apart from the character of labour (the working class worked in factories, the peasants in the fields and the intelligentsia in offices). According to Marxism, the principal feature of social structure was the "ruling" status of the working class. The fictitious character of this "hegemony", however, was obvious. Therefore, although the "ruling" status of the working class was never formally rejected as the central principle of the Soviet communist ideology, in late Soviet times it was not emphasised, and the "unity" of Soviet society was stressed all the more strongly.

A concept of the elite, however, was completely foreign, for how could an elite exist in an egalitarian, almost classless society? The concept of the elite was replaced by the concept of the avant-garde, which was identified with the Communist Party. But this, too, was fictitious, for in the absence of multiparty democracy rank-and-file members of the Communist Party could hardly be considered as part of the force leading society; nor did they perceive themselves as such. By the end of communism, the mass Communist Party metamorphosed into another ideological fiction, which was supposed to conceal the true nature of the political regime.

Arguably, by the late Soviet period the official ideology had lost most of its legitimising power (as demonstrated by the fact of the Soviet collapse). People no longer took its central tenets (the inevitability of communism and the superiority of the socialist economic system) seriously. Hence, the influence of this ideology should not be overestimated. Even so, it still exercised its power in a negative way: by occupying the place meant for the social discourse, it prevented free social discourse from developing (the Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili defined this condition as inanoneali, a Russian word meaning "impossibility to think otherwise"). Dissident, underground discourse did exist, but it was not "free" or "normal" as it was defined by its underground status and its related "obligation" to undermine the established system.

Hence, the ideologically defined social discourse left no space for people to perceive themselves as members of social groups, unless in the completely fictitious role of the ruling working class. This state led to what some commentators of Soviet life called atomisation of society, an idea that was popular among commentators in the Soviet sphere, although it did not find much support in the West. One consequence of the absence of public awareness of concepts of social grouping and group interest was the destruction of (perceptions of) social structure. People could not identify themselves with
any social groups. The major (and for many the only) form of politically meaningful identity that remained was the *ethnic* one (whose centrality was, as mentioned above, reinforced by the nationality registration system). It was only natural that when the Soviet Union collapsed, society divided primarily along ethnic lines; the notion of group economic interests was almost absent from the public discourse.

Against this backdrop, I shall try to sketch the structure of communist society on the basis of an analysis of elite discourse (which, in Soviet times, was private rather than public), and my own observations of Georgian society, rather than specific empirical data. I will also formulate a general assumption that whereas *birth* (hereditary privilege or the lack thereof) was the dominant marker of the social stratification in pre-industrial society and *wealth* in modern industrial society, in communist totalitarian society it was *power*. Hence, measured by the major dimensions of social structure, wealth, status and power, traditional society would be notable for the predominance of the second, in modern industrial society the economic dimension takes the lead, but communist society was structured primarily around political power. The extreme degree of centralisation and the fact that changes in the period of transition were mainly initiated at the elite level will arguably justify my top-down approach to late communist society, i.e. my focus on the elite level. I accept the totalitarian paradigm in analysing the Soviet society; i.e. I recognise that the claim of the political elite to control all major aspects of social life was the central factor defining character of political, social and economic processes. At the same time, however, I recognise that late Soviet society is notable for the substantial *erosion* of the totalitarian system. A grasp of the nature of that erosion is crucial for an understanding of post-communist processes of transformation. One could say that the formation of a proto-social structure in the late communist period occurred at the expense of the totalitarian system.

According to this approach, the so-called *nomenklatura* occupied the central place in the social structure. Literally, this term referred to the list of offices to which people were appointed by the ruling bodies of the Communist Party at different levels. In the wider sense, it referred to the upper echelon of the Communist Party, a hierarchically layered bureaucratic elite that actually ran the country and commanded major resources. In the heyday of communism, under Stalin, this elite was in constant flux owing to purges, which, from the contemplative perspective, was probably the healthiest way to prevent it from hardening into a proper elite (as mentioned, creation of a social structure would be contrary to the spirit of communism). Denunciation of Stalinism after Stalin's death meant, above all, the end of the purges within the elite, i.e. its stabilisation and relative hardening. Once a person joined the nomenklatura, it was highly probable that he or she would stay within its circle for the rest of his or her life, denoted perhaps, but

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28 This simplification is justified in a comparative perspective. Of course, one could present social structure of the advanced industrial society from status and power perspectives as well; but even in that case, it is necessary to stress a strong correlation between economic status, on the one hand, and status and power. A person's worth in terms of status and power is normally expected to translate into income categories—which, as I shall argue below, was not the case in communist society.

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29 Of course, they were also united by the fact that both were criminal in the eyes of the government and were sent to the same jails.
There was also an elite group in communist society whose special status enabled it to straddle the gulf between the nomenclatura and the alternative elite: the intelligentsia - not in the neutral sense of Soviet sociology, viz. intellectuals workers (more or less the equivalent of the western term white-collar workers), but in the more general sense of the established intellectual elite, for the most part active in the arts and sciences, whose claim to moral leadership was recognised by broad sections of the general public. For a regime based on specific ideology, the support of intelligentsia was crucial, not only because it was intellectuals who produced and reproduced ideology, but also because recognition by famous artists and academies was an important symbol of political legitimacy. Accordingly, the intelligentsia was granted generous state support and privileges by such typically communist institutions as the "creative unions" (of writers, composers, etc.) or the network of research institutes under the Academy of Sciences. The especially privileged constituted the so-called nomenclatura intelligentsia, established representatives of arts and sciences that became part and parcel of the ruling elite and had direct access to the political leadership. The other pole of the intelligentsia was the above-mentioned dissident milieu, which was usually dominated by intellectuals. In the middle were the so-called liberal intelligentsia, people who tried to distance themselves from the hard-line communist ideology and create niches for intellectual autonomy without denouncing the regime, tried to avoid glorifying the regime and criticised it in private, but accepted the privileges bestowed by it.

The importance of the shadow, or illegal, economy raises the question of a "shadow" economic elite. The difficulty here is that the "shadow" economy was, as the concept implies, largely an extension of the legal Soviet economy.30 Hence, the shadow economy was, for the most part, run by people involved in legal production who stole raw materials and finished products and sold them on the black market. There may have been a few illegal workshops that were outside the socialist system, but they would also have been linked with the shadow aspect of legal enterprise, their source of raw materials, facilities and some form of legal cover. To some extent, the entire economic elite was a shadow elite, because illegal economic activities were the only way in which people could enrich themselves (and what was the point of being part of the economic elite without becoming rich?). In much the same way as the intelligentsia included both nomenclatura and dissidents, so the shadow economic elite spanned the cleavage between the nomenclatura and criminal elite. The top level of economic managers formed part of the nomenclatura, but below them were a host of economic agents that also enriched themselves and enjoyed some of the benefits of the elite lifestyle - but their riches were the rewards of crime, and occasionally some were tried and jailed as a sop to the fight against corruption. This group of people enriched themselves illegally without necessarily acquiring political power. In the public mind they had a distinct social profile as a source of wealth for the politically powerful nomenclatura (through corruption and the criminal elite (through racketeering). If the nomenclatura intelligentsia-liberal intellectuals - dissidents formed a continuum of the ideological elite in Soviet society that defined official and unofficial discourse in society, the nomenclatura-shadow economy-criminal elite constituted its economic continuum that defined the rules of economic behaviour.

The specific peculiarities of the social structure of Soviet society as compared with modern and traditional societies were most pronounced at the elite level, where they were defined in relation to a communist regime. For the rest of society, one could more confidently use traditional categories, such as industrial, agricultural, white-collar and service workers - with the distinction that in a society without independent trade unions and political parties and in which social discourse was preoccupied with elite issues, these groups lacked mechanisms to define and promote their interests. Hence, in Soviet and post-Soviet discourse non-elite groups were considered not as social or political actors, but (and usually referred to) as passive masses, the residual, as it were, majority of society. Members of these groups accepted reality as it was without even entertaining the idea of influencing it in any way. On the other hand, in the (near) absence of public social discourse, elite groups never tried to recruit or mobilise the masses by constructing or articulating their interests for them. These elite groups themselves were unable to properly articulate their identities and interests, but were at least aware of their distinctness in private and, to a degree, public discourse. They defined the profile of the Soviet society - which was recognised by the masses. Thus, by the time the grip of the political regime loosened, elite groups already constituted social networks, and it was within them that independent political initiative developed.

In speaking of this elite continuum, one must keep in mind that it was not a pan-Soviet elite continuum. There was a pan-Soviet nomenclatura, but it was dominated by representatives of Slavic nationalities (for the most part Russians), and, although it ultimately controlled the mechanisms of decision-making and defined the rules of the game, socially it did not extend into non-Russian societies. Each of non-Russian republics had its own elite continuum, similar to one another in general structure, with various local distinctions. Regardless of similarities and dissimilarities, each was separate, with its own internal dynamics and culture, and usually dominated by the titular nationality of respective republic. Elite continuums in Georgia, for instance, were ethnically and culturally predominantly Georgian (which did not exclude members of other ethnic groups - but they had to play by Georgian rules). More or less similar elite continuums could also be found in autonomous units, such as Abkhazia. Abkhazian elite continuums differed in that the Abkhazian ethnic group did not dominate the same degree of dominance (this group constituted only between 17 and 18 per cent of the population of Abkhazia), and the Abkhazian language and culture were even less important. However, Abkhazians were disproportionately represented in the elite. Thus, when the Soviet system collapsed, it left behind an atomised society in which ethnic identity was pre-

dominant, with proto-social structures represented by elite groups that divided not just along ethnic lines, but along the lines of the pre-existing Soviet nationality structure.

Another important dimension of the Soviet social structure needs to be noted. "Proximity to power", the most important social marker, also had a geographic element: residence in a capital city was a social privilege. Geographic areas were hierarchically categorised with regard to the supply of goods. Capitals and locations with important military installations enjoyed the highest status. A fixed amount of money could buy much more in a privileged place than in a less privileged one (unlike in modern western societies, where prices are usually higher in more desirable areas). Geographic proximity to power also implied a crucial advantage in the informal networks that played a central role in the distribution of resources, prestige and power. Hence, inhabitants of Tbilisi were, by virtue of being such, an elite group relative to the rest of the population. The restrictive system of residential permits (propiska) limited migration, making this elite a closed group (despite legal and illegal remedies to the bureaucratic hurdles). The elite status of the capital city persisted in the post-Soviet period, despite the abolition of the centralised supply system and bureaucratic hurdles to resettlement.

Denying social groups any possibility to conceptualise themselves as social groups in the public space – to express and discuss their concerns or interests and negotiate respective public policies – led to the privatisation of the social structure. One result of this privatisation was the above-mentioned uncontested prominence of ethnicity as a market in post-communist society. This dimension was viewed as an alternative to the theoretically internationalist nature of communist ideology (despite outlets for its expression in communist social reality). Ethnicity was the sole politically meaningful and politically legitimate identity. On the other hand, however, this privatisation meant that people identified more strongly with those dimensions of social identity that did not have overt political implications, such as profession, locality, generation, gender, kinship, etc. In as much as Soviet society remained apolitical (the public political sphere had exclusively negative connotations of unfree and false), these private social identities became, along with ethnicity, central for the average Georgian citizen. How these private social identities affected, or were affected by, post-Soviet transformations is an extremely interesting issue, but beyond the scope of this chapter.

Regime change and social transformation

From the late 1980s, a series of revolutionary changes in Georgia abruptly and dramatically resulted in the overthrow of the political regime and economic system and the creation of an independent state. How did these revolutionary changes affect the structure of society? If they were a social revolution, what kind of a social revolution was it?

A traditional way to conceptualise social revolution is the replacement of the ruling class (Marx) or elite (Pareto) by another. But this was not the case in Georgia. In the absence of genuine social structures, no alternative elite able to assume political power could be created. The change was prepared not by the strengthening of one elite group (or class) at the expense of another, but by the general loss of the legitimacy by the political regime, a process generated by the ruling nomenclatura itself. In this sense, one could define the Soviet collapse, dramatic though it was, as sociologically without foundation. Instead of being defeated by a specific social or political force, the system imploded. This implosion destroyed, among other things, the amorphous proto-social structures that had developed under the ancien régime, leaving social debris from which new social structures could emerge.

But the transformation process can also be described in non-traditional terms. I propose two processes: a mixing of elites and the replacement of "old people" by "new people". In other words, social transformation took the form of two parallel processes: on the one hand, the existing distinctions between different elite groups disappeared or changed and, on the other hand, "new people", who were not members of the former elite groups, grasped new opportunities for prominence, bringing with them different outlooks and social habits.

One should point out, however, that initially political change in Georgia resembled Pareto's model of replacing the ruling elite by an alternative one more closely than change in any other part of the Soviet Union did. As discussed in the previous chapter, political infighting in Georgia polarised society from the outset. Whereas in Russia, the Baltic states and Armenia broad reform coalitions including a considerable number of the ruling elite, in Georgia a handful of recent dissidents, with the support of mostly very young ("new") people, defined the pace of change. In other words, in Georgia a new group led by an erstwhile alternative elite fought against the established elites. This new elite was generally known as the "national movement". The national movement criticised the established intellectual elite almost as strongly as the ruling nomenclatura.

The victory of this new elite in the 1990 elections was officially presented as a peaceful revolution. This implied a change not only in political principles, but also in the people in power. With very few exceptions, names of new MPs did not say anything to the public, who really voted for the leader of the coalition, Zviad Gamsakhurda (his picture was the major campaign tool). For the most part they were young professionals.

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31 One should point out here, however, that although recent changes deserve to be qualified as "revolutionary" in the described "objective" sense, the dynamics of the usage of the word "revolution" in public discourse is a different story. The opposition victory in the elections of November 1990 was described by the new government as a "peaceful revolution", while the overthrow of Gamsakhurda was declared to be a "democratic revolution". In both cases, however, the usage of the term "revolution" did not generate much enthusiasm and did not stick. The reason for this may be the negative connotations of the word "revolution" on account of its prominence in communist propaganda.
who did not hold positions of any prominence even in their professions (junior research fellows and students rather than professors, rank-and-file physicians or architects rather than heads of departments). Accordingly, elite change - "new people" replacing "old people" - was a very prominent topic of public debate at the time.

However, it soon became clear that this change was not as complete as it appeared. The new government represented not only the whole national movement (i.e. the "new elite" in its entirety) but only one faction; the remainder were far more bitterly opposed to the new government then communists. In these circumstances, Gamsakhurdia trusted the opportunistic part of the old nomenclatura more than enthusiastic revolutionaries who were not loyal to him personally. The nomenclatura might not be happy with the new leader, who used their communist past to blackmail them, but had no other choice, and Gamsakhurdia's authoritarian style appealed to them more than the opposition's pro-Western style of debate. Moreover, as the new elite had no experience of government, Gamsakhurdia had to rely on the experienced cadres. Thus, contrary to the government rhetoric, a number of the prominent leaders of the communist era retained or gained important positions in the new government. Interestingly, the position of the communist nomenclatura in the executive strengthened rather than weakened with time, notwithstanding the banning of the Communist Party in August 1991. At the middle level of the bureaucracy, the position of the old elite was even stronger. Despite the radical revolutionary character of the political fight and formation of a relatively large new political elite, the new government did not try to purge the old elite. The result is what I call the mixing of elites and incorporation of new people.

Gamsakhurdia's ideologists presented the Christmas coup of 1991/92 as a counter-revolutionary restoration, the revenge of the nomenclatura. In fact, the result was just another mixture: another part of national movement mixed up with another part of the communist nomenclatura (though some nomenclatura functionaries managed to serve both Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze). There were differences. The return of Shevardnadze, a former communist, to power, meant at least partial legitimisation of the old nomenclatura. Accordingly, they preferred the new regime, even though the number of former functionaries in Shevardnadze's government may not have been higher than in Gamsakhurdia's. Second, the significance of the liberal intelligentsia changed dramatically: bitter opponents of Gamsakhurdia, they formed an important power base for Shevardnadze. Thirdly, and most importantly, a criminal-military elite emerged in the shape of various militias, all of them some mixture of criminal and urban youth cultures. The most powerful and notorious was the Mkhadzori militia. It was led by Jaba Joksiani, whose mixed social background - a prominent criminal leader in his youth, but also an intellectual - was itself a symbol of the social confusion. This criminal-military elite has its roots in the breakdown of the Soviet system in 1989-90, when the first militias were formed in defiance of the impotent communist authorities. Their heyday was during and after the Christmas coup of 1991-92. The new regime was an uneasy coalition between four groups: the communist nomenclatura, the liberal intelligentsia, a part of the national movement and the criminal-military elite. Shevardnadze's ultimately successful policy of stabilisation consisted mainly of efforts to squeeze the criminal-military elite out of positions of power.

What happened to the passive majority? The national movement with its mass rallies dramatically increased political participation. People who had been powerless for decades were now able to denounce the government. However, this political participation was pretty superficial. It did not produce stable mass political parties or genuine grassroots organisations. Hence, most people who did not become political activists limited their political involvement to cheering their political favourite (Gamsakhurdia or Shevardnadze) and voting in elections. The few attempts by political groups to mobilise mass support around socio-economic interests failed miserably. Political parties were defined not by their economic agendas, but by their position vis-à-vis independence and relations with Russia, the former imperial power. This corroborates the thesis formulated above that in a socially atomised society ethnicity is the most powerful social marker.

While the transformation of the elite was driven mainly by politics, most changes in the wider social structure reflected economic developments. Political turmoil in Georgia was accompanied by an economic crisis that affected everybody. Most industry production ceased owing to the collapse of the Soviet industrial network, the energy crisis and the inability to compete with newly available foreign commodities and goods. Agriculture all but lost its vast Russian market, the source of relative prosperity of Georgian peasants. The amounts paid to people on salaries and fixed incomes, including government employees, were virtually worthless. Almost overnight the majority of the population found they could no longer rely on their traditional sources of income. Many people of various ages and backgrounds tried their hand as independent businessmen, typically in small trade. Others migrated within the country or emigrated. The cumulative effect was mass geographic and social dislocation. Dislocation is not necessarily stable, or perceived as such by the dislocated people themselves. As far as the young physician who goes abroad to support his family in Georgia, the female schoolteacher making periodic trading trips to Turkey or selling hot cakes in the streets of Tbilisi (while holding onto her formal government job "just in case"), and the engineer at an idle, but officially functioning factory, who grows vegetables on his private plot of land in the nearby village are concerned, their social status is not defined by their present activities, which they see solely as provisional strategies of survival. But this means that in the interim they have no social status at all - or better: they have one, but do not want to admit it.

Of course, some people have not changed their occupations and do not intend to, while others accept change as a relatively stable condition (e.g. a young intellectual who has started a successful business). But this does not ameliorate the general sense of uncertainty and social disorder. A large part of the population is still trying to establish a new social identity, and general rules of social interaction between different groups are
still in flux. The current transitory nature of Georgian society is not just an objective observation, but also the self-perception of Georgian society.

Assuming that Georgia’s general development towards democracy and a market economy continues without further turmoil, this stage of social dislocation should be the starting point for a new “normal” social structure — “normal” being a central concept in post-communist public discourse, and roughly synonymous with modern or civilised in contradistinction to the artificial, political, economic and social infrastructure imposed by communist ideology. There are signs that a new social structure is indeed emerging, in particular among the elites. The political elite is gradually edging towards political parties that are reasonably distinct from the bureaucratic elite.32 The special role of the intelligentsia is being taken over by a fairly unprofessional but assertive media33 and increasingly active NGOs still largely dependent on western support. The various interest groups are starting to be just that.34

Without analysing these new social structures, I will try to briefly sketch the new cleavages (or redefined old cleavages) in the Georgian public or private discourse.

New and Old Cleavages

“Old” and “new” people

Unsurprisingly, revolutionary change gave rise to the distinction between old and new people. This distinction, and the concept of the new generation, is very present in public discourse. It is often maintained that real change, normality, is only possible under a new post-communist generation that is not contaminated by the former totalitarian system. But the external marker “new” of a new generation does not necessarily correspond with the more substantial characteristic of a new mentality. As the country has learned from its own recent experience, new people may still think in old patterns. On the other hand, people who are not very young may well be new in spirit, especially if they did not belong to the Soviet elite.35 Accordingly, I prefer the term “new people” to “new generation”, although Georgians would find this usage strange.

New refers to modern western mentality, however general and vague this definition may be. Old, naturally, means Soviet habits. New people speak English, travel to the West, are often educated there, and are usually pro-western politically. Old people speak Russian as their second language and are more likely to be pro-Russian in their political views.

At the outset of the social and political transformation, the new people basically conformed with the national independence movement, and were fairly political. Many people who entered public life than continue to be active in politics, media or business. Later, other, usually more pragmatic people entered public life. The new mentality is most publicly represented by a fairly small group of reform-minded politicians, active mostly in parliament but also in parts of the executive, even heading parliamentary committees or ministries while still in their twenties or early thirties. Some of them are graduates of western, usually American universities. New people dominate those areas that either did not exist in or have changed radically since Soviet times: the media, apart from state radio and television, and NGOs. Large segments of the executive, most of the regional political elite, law-enforcement bodies, academic institutions and hubs of the established intelligentsia, such as the Writers’ Union, are strongholds of the old people. The business community is mixed, as many members of the old nomenklatura have successfully translated their head start in power and networking capacities into economic power.

Presumably, the distinction between old and new people will blur in time, though it is still part of the public debate. Moreover, there is an obvious gap between the symbolic image of the new people and the patterns of behaviour and value orientations of those who entered public life in the new circumstances. Although pragmatic and pro-active are regarded as relatively value-free characteristics of new people, pragmatic instincts may push some new people into siding with old people and imitating their behavioural patterns. Politics provides some evidence of this. If we equate the new political elite with political party activists, this elite is a stronghold of new people. Yet, it is highly unusual for people raised under the old regime to create or join a political party. They are reluctant to join parties, preferring more familiar political methods, such as behind-the-scenes networking and personal loyalty to a particular political leader; most ministers in the Georgian government are still not members of political parties. Hence, although ideology is not the defining mark of Georgian parties, party politics is dominated by pro-Western and nationalist orientations, between which there are strong links. Recently, signs of a political shift to the left, which correlates with a weakening of negative attitudes towards the communist legacy and stronger criticism of the current government’s pro-western orientation, have complicated the picture. This, however, may in part reflect greater efforts by old nomenklatura networks to maintain or regain power (they are represented in the current government as well); many new people have made the pragmatic or ideological choice to join those groups.

35 For instance, recently the Minister of Justice Lado Tchanturia (a typical “new man”) called for dramatic changes in the civil service, to be achieved by attracting “new professionals” who “are not burdened by the Communist mentality”, quoted in Lado Chchanturia: A Reform of the System Is Necessary”, Black Sea Press, 11 February 1991.
Rich and poor

In the 90s, living conditions of a large part of the Georgian population dropped dramatically, resulting in mass poverty, while a small group managed to enrich themselves. This gap materialised in a very short period of time. Yet, it did not stoke class struggle or resentment against the rich. As people socialised in communist society take it for granted that their economic condition is determined by the state, they blame the state rather than the rich for their misfortunes. Any resentment is directed not so much against the genuinely rich as against street vendors and small shopkeepers, who are regarded as speculators and responsible for higher prices. At the same time, there are very few active public expressions of resentment about poverty. Western observers are often surprised by the low level of protest, despite the existence of neo-communist and other leftist parties who would probably benefit from mobilising social protest. One possible explanation is that initially the dramatic drop in living standards was blamed on the general breakdown of state authority, expressed most dramatically in civil wars and warlordism, rather than on any particular government. Several years of relatively stable development since 1995 have changed perceptions, and the government is now more likely to be blamed for economic problems. In 1998-99 reports of public protests against the state’s failure to meet its social obligations rose sharply. But these, too, are protests against the state, not against the rich as a class. Some leftist leaders, like Vakhtang Rechelishvili, leader of the Socialist Party, who call for more intrusive state economic policies as an alternative to the IMF-dictated economic liberalism followed by the current government, are themselves pretty wealthy entrepreneurs.

Social analysis of poverty in Georgia requires an analysis of the majority of the population. The most popular strategies to cope with this new situation are migration either of the whole family or one member, selling or leasing assets, starting a small business, and low-paid service jobs. Many people, however, appear to consider their poverty as transitory and have expectations that any general improvement in the situation will enable the state to help them out. It is noticeable that the term poor is almost never used in public in Georgia: it is replaced by the politically correct concept of the socially vulnerable, which implies that expectations of a better life are linked to improvements in social security rather than greater economic activity.

The rich, or, to use other term, the new economic elites, have not been the subject of serious research so far. Conventional wisdom suggests, however, that enrichment is usually not so much the fruit of proper business activities than of abuses of state power. With the breakdown of order, corruption – already widespread under Soviet rule – spun out of control. Those in power could take advantage of privatisation and other enrichment opportunities unfettered by legislative restrictions or any notion of conflict of interests. On the other hand, it is widely believed that no large business can be successful

without buying protection from influential politicians and bureaucrats. Thus, economic power is strongly linked to political power. This does not mean that companies cannot succeed through their own efforts or are not interested in regular business, but they cannot feel secure without some government “protection”, and they cannot survive if they do not at least bend some rules, especially tax regulations. Small businesses run up against similar obstacles, but at a lower level of authority. 37

The situation in Georgia is basically similar to the more widely publicised situation in Russia. However, there are notable differences. Political turmoil in Georgia meant that different groups had access to economic power at different times. In the most spectacular case, when the Mikhaidzoni militia was destroyed, it had to surrender all the economic gains of political and military power. Many other people who enriched themselves in the early 90s went bankrupt or emigrated. This may explain why the business elite has had less time to stabilise in Georgia. Until recently, there was no talk of a more or less stable oligarchy attempting to dictate its will to politicians. Lately, though, people have started to talk of the “Shervadnashvili clan”, a group of the president’s relatives who control important sectors of the economy.

There is not really a Georgian equivalent of a nouveau riche character, like the “new Russian”, the butt of recent Russian jokes who personifies an ostentatious display of wealth uncharacteristic of Russia under communist rule. The term “New Georgians” exists, but is an obvious imitation the Russian term, and much less popular. Georgians have always been less afraid to display wealth, even in communist times. In the words of a Georgian psychologist, “New Russians and Old Georgians”, a reminder that behavioral patterns ascribed to Russian nouveaux riches are reminiscent of the ethnic stereotype of the rich Georgian in Soviet Russian jokes.

Ethnic groups

Since independence, Georgia has gained unwanted notoriety for its ethnic territorial conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. These conflicts, suspended but unresolved, may be the most serious challenges to development in Georgia. While a new cycle of violence is not expected in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, nobody can be sure about Abkhazia, where tensions run much deeper.

Developments depend not just on the success of negotiations or the good will of the parties involved, but also on the wider geopolitical developments in the region. Although not discussed in public, in private the political elites accept the “Cyprus variant”, i.e. maintaining the status quo for a long time to come. This situation is not desirable for anybody, but is preferable to a renewal of fighting. Moreover, unless there is a danger of losing everything in a new war, the parties are unlikely to make the necessary painful compromises.


37 For a credible analysis of the situation using the example of bread industry, see Valeri Melikidze, Georgian Bread Industry during Economic Reform, United Nations Development Programme – Georgia, Tbilisi 1998.
The prospects for a settlement in South Ossetia are usually thought to be better, but there are no grounds for much optimism there, either. Society in the breakaway regions is largely isolated from the rest of Georgia, and each has its own dynamics of development. Their status as unrecognised entities with very uncertain prospects is hardly a good basis for successful economic and social development. In the case of Abkhazia, the situation is exacerbated by economic sanctions imposed by the Commonwealth of Independent States at Georgia's insistence. Reports from this very beautiful area, which used to be one of the most popular holiday destinations in the former Soviet Union, provide evidence of depopulation, high crime and economic devastation. On the other hand, maintaining the status quo may be beneficial to the agenda of nationalist leaders as societies on the both sides of the divide get used to living without each other. South Ossetia is less isolated, as people and goods travel quite freely between the region and the rest of Georgia, which is not true at all in the case of Abkhazia. The determination of Georgian refugees to return may also weaken in time.

But even without the breakaway territories Georgia remains a multi-ethnic country. Ethnic policies of the post-Gamsakhurdia leadership have been more prudent, and though Shevardnadze failed to stop the conflict in Abkhazia from degenerating into open warfare, potential complications with other minorities were avoided. There were fears of violence in two pockets in which ethnic minorities are in the majority, ethnic Azeris on the border with Azerbaijan and ethnic Armenians on the border with Armenia. Had neighbouring states any irredentist agendas, it would probably be easy to stir up ethnic tensions. However, it did not happen, if only because these states had their hands full fighting each other in another irredentist conflict around Nagorno-Karabakh.

The situation in the Armenian-populated Javakheti region in South Georgia caused much greater anxiety than the Azeri-populated Southeast, despite the fact that Azeris are Muslims and Armenians are Christians. The reason for this difference is purely political. Azerbaijan is considered a close ally because of common interests in curbing Russian influence in the region and in promoting oil and gas pipeline projects between the Caspian, Black and Mediterranean Seas. Armenia, on the other hand, is seen as an outpost of Russian influence – the unresolved conflict with Azerbaijan makes it a natural Russian ally – which makes Georgians more suspicious. These suspicions were strengthened by the fact that Armenia used Gorbachev's liberalisation to start an irredentist campaign against Azerbaijan: if Armenians do it there, Georgians thought, they can also it in Javakheti. The activities of Javakth, an Armenian nationalist organisation that claims to be cultural, but also supports autonomy for the region, appeared to corroborate those fears, as it is assumed that territorial autonomy for an ethnic-minority region could be the first step to secession. The presence of a Russian military base is another source of tension. Apart from the conviction of Georgians that Russians have an interest in manipulating local ethnic tensions against Georgia, there is a conflict of interest between the Georgian government, which eventually wants to get rid of the Russian military presence on its soil, and the local Armenian population, which wants the base to stay, as the Russian military are a major source of jobs in the economically backward region, and their presence provides a sense of security for the local population vis-à-vis neighbouring Turkey and the Georgian government.

Despite suspicions, nothing serious has happened in Javakheti. So far, the Georgian government has successfully negotiated deals with local informal leaders, and at election time the region routinely votes for Shevardnadze's party. The Armenian government is helpful in alleviating real or potential tensions, since trouble with Georgia is the last thing it wants. The Russian military withdrawal also started in the first half of 1999, with Georgian border troops replacing Russian garrisons on the Georgian-Russian border. So far, this has not given rise to complications, either.

Other minorities, including the Russian one, are not considered sources of potential conflict, as they are scattered and/or small and cannot raise credible territorial claims. In 1998, the problems of the tiny – 12,000-strong – Kisti minority, a group akin to the Chechens that lives in the mountains on the border to Chechnya, a rebellious breakaway region of Russia, attracted public interest owing to the spread of Wahhabism, a militant Islamic sect, among its young people. The second war in Chechnya in 1999–2000 resulted in several thousand Chechen refugees entering this region, worsening an already serious situation. Georgians fear that this wave of refugees may be the first step in a process that will ultimately lead to the conflict spilling over into Georgian territory. At the time of writing, the outcome of the Russian military campaign in Chechnya, and its impact on the neighbouring region in Georgia, was still uncertain.

Apart from minorities living in Georgia, the country has a problem with a group that was expelled but wants to return: Muslim Meskhetians, an ethnic confessional group forcefully deported by the communist regime from the southern Georgian province of Meskheti in 1944. In 1944, the deportees numbered about 100,000 (including some 10,000 Muslim Tarakama, Kurds and Hemsili); the number of Muslim Meskhetians is now estimated at 200,000–300,000. The ethnic affiliation of this group is disputed. The majority consider themselves to be Turkish – hence the widespread reference to them as Meskhetian Turks – but one group does call itself Georgian, though its ethnic identity is much weaker than its religious identity. For decades, Meskhetian activists fought for the right to return to their land, but the communist authorities refused to acquiesce. Georgian anti-communist dissidents and some representatives of the intelligentsia supported their stand, and a few Meskhetian families were allowed to return. However, once the prospect of the group's returning became realistic in 1989, the idea of receiving a population that called itself Turkish turned out to be extremely unpopular, and most supporters of the Meskhetians' cause reversed their stance. Moreover, ethnic Armenians now populate part of the territory formerly inhabited by deportees, and co-existence with their traditional enemy – the Turks – would create new sources of conflict. Currently, Georgian society and the political elite are divided on the issue of return, and public opinion is strongly against it. Some politicians support the gradual return of deportees of "Georgian orientation" only. Very few people accept the right of all deportees to return,
regardless of their ethnic self-awareness. The issue was linked to Georgia's membership of the European Council: the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council recommended that Georgia be admitted to the organisation in January 1999, on condition that Georgia provided guarantees that the Meskhetians would be able to return within 12 years.

Though Georgia has successfully prevented new ethnic conflicts, it has been far less successful in moving to what should be its long-term strategy: integration of minorities into Georgian society. The government does not appear to have a proactive policy, or even a concept of such a policy, in this respect. Residents of Armenian- and Azeri-populated regions do not speak Georgian and even their command of Russian appears to be waning. Few minority children attend Georgian schools, while in Russian, Armenian and Azeri schools, which most of the minorities attend, Georgian is taught very poorly. The army, a very weak institution unable to guarantee proper conditions for its officers and men, does not seem to be successful instrument of national integration, either. Javakheti has better communications with Armenia than with the rest of Georgia. Finally, there are very few minority representatives in government. Although ethnic discrimination may play a role, it is also true that the pool of minority representatives who are integrated enough to serve is pretty small.

The issue of the relationship between democratic polity and ethnic plurality appears to be unresolved in Georgia. Calls in the early stage of the national-independence movement to restrict Georgian citizenship to Georgian-speakers were subsequently abandoned: even the nationalist government of Gamsakhurdia chose the "zero option," i.e. citizenship was open to anybody who resided in Georgia by the time of independence. The law on naturalisation is liberal, although it excludes dual citizenship. However, the Soviet practice of identifying nationality with ethnicity rather than citizenship persists. In January 1999, parliament decided to remove "nationality" (that is, ethnicity) from official documents such as IDs and birth certificates. This provoked an outcry among nationalist groups, which prompted Prime Minister Shevardnadze to label parliament's decision "hasty and a mistake and to call for it to be reversed. In his argument, however, he referred not to Georgian nationalist sentiments, but to the Georgia's "traditionally multi-ethnic" character and the danger that the removal of the nationality field will offend minorities. Though the loudest protests came from Georgian nationalist groups rather than minorities, it is true that the idea of assimilation is anathema to both Georgians and minorities, and removal of the nationality field could indeed be considered a step in that direction.

Confessional problems

The communist state's greatest success in its ideological project to change peoples' attitudes was in the field of religion. This success may have been qualified in Catholic countries, such as Poland and Lithuania, or Islamic regions, but the Eastern Orthodox Church, which has a tradition of accepting rather than challenging government authority, lost most of its influence. Churches were closed down in most parts of the country, and where congregations continued to function they were small. Christmas as a holiday was more or less forgotten, Easter - traditionally a more important holiday in Eastern Orthodox countries - was still observed, but the most popular holiday was the ideologically neutral New Year.

Although traditional confessional divisions did not disappear completely, ethnic allegiances overshadowed them. Western observers with a superficial knowledge of the Caucasus tended to seek a religious explanation for conflicts there, such as between Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis, but this was always misleading. The role of religion in conflicts in Georgia was even more negligible. Religiosity among Azerbaijanis and Ossetians is very low. In addition, the Abkhazian community is divided between Christians and Muslims, but this division has not played a serious role in the conflict (though Georgians believe that Ochamchira Abkhazians (Christians) take a more positive view of Georgians than the Muslim community in the North). The fact that Georgians and Ossetians are nominally both Eastern Orthodox Christians did not prevent conflict between them. The Georgian view that (fellow-Orthodox) Russia instigated the conflicts also reduced the importance of the religious factor. It is true that some Georgians occasionally referred to Abkhazians as Muslims when talking to westerners, but generally with the intention of gaining sympathy in the West.

With independence the importance of the Church and of religious identity changed. The rediscovery of religion was considered to be one of the most important elements in rejecting communism and finding the nation's true identity. But the issue very soon became divisive. Zviad Gamsakhurdia described his ideal Georgia as "independent, democratic and Christian". One of the first acts of the new government after October-November 1990 elections was to declare major Church holidays, including those forgotten by most of the population, as official state holidays. Soon after his return to Georgia in March 1992, Eduard Shevardnadze joined the Orthodox Church and considered Church endorsement of his authority important for his legitimacy. Even in the last years of communist rule, churches closed down by the communists were being returned to religious authorities, which resumed their activities, and later began building new churches.

However, the official status of the Orthodox Church and its importance for national identity remains a divisive issue in Georgian society. Representatives of the ethnic nationalist trend, of various political affiliations, usually insist that Orthodoxy is central to Georgian identity and that the Georgian Orthodox Church should enjoy special privileges, sometimes even demanding that Orthodox Christianity should be recognised as the official state religion. Those who favour liberal pro-western values, including the

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19 "President calls the decision to remove the nationality field "hasty" and asks to change it", quoted in Black Sea Press, 8 February 1999.
20 A. Jokhadze,
separation of church and state and equal rights for all confessions, resent this stance. Shevardnadze's government tries to occupy the middle ground, since it wants both to appear liberal and democratic, without losing the support of the Church. Article 9 in the 1995 constitution is a compromise: "The state recognises the special significance of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgian history, but simultaneously declares complete freedom of religious belief and confessions, as well as independence of church and state." Interpretation of this clause depends mainly on what is meant by "history": does it refer only to the past, or does it also include the present and future? In the latter case, the recognition of "the special significance" may imply quite a lot. In certain areas, the Orthodox Church already receives special support from the state. It has the legal right to veto certain curricula and textbooks within the competence of the Ministry of Education. The state budget earmarks funds for the Orthodox Church but not for other confessions. In addition, the Orthodox Church, but not others, enjoys considerable tax breaks. Law-enforcement officials often support the Church's demand for curbs on the activities of aggressively proselytising sects, such as Jehovah Witnesses. The church, however, demands that these policies be written into law; its particular interest is to have firm legal ground to act against the proselytising activities of other confessions. The reformist leadership in parliament is wary of such demands, but considers it politically inappropriate to openly oppose them—in their tactic of postponing passage of such legislation.

Other religious organisations fall into two groups: traditional churches (Catholic, Moslem) and new sects. Some of them have an intermediate status, such as the Baptists, a well-established church that often referred to as a "sect" as a hangover from the Soviet era. To our knowledge, no serious research has been done on these organisations, but there is no reason to believe that they wish to influence government policy; their public activities consist of humanitarian actions and proselytising, which may or may not be interconnected. As the activities of other groups draw a sharp reaction from the Georgian Orthodox Church as well as some government officials, religious minorities are on the defensive.

The status of mainstream religion is important not only in the context of Georgia's attempts to define itself as a liberal, democratic state in a European model. It has very practical ramifications as well, because not only the population of Georgia, but also the ethnic Georgian community is divided along religious lines. As the role of religion increases, these divisions may become more significant. Religious divisions among ethnic Georgians are more important in this regard. Azeris are Muslims and Armenians are Armenian Apostolic, but traditionally (i.e. in the Soviet tradition), ethnic differences overshadow religious differences: people are different primarily because they are ethnically different, and religious difference only colours such differences. But the presence of the Georgian Muslims changes the picture: the question of Georgian (ethnic) unity very much depends on how closely the definition of Georgian identity is linked to Eastern Orthodoxy. When Georgian nationalists insist on the special role of the Georgian Orthodox Church, they believe they are promoting Georgian unity, but in doing so they ignore those religious minorities that are also ethnic.

It should also be pointed out that more recent calls to legislate privileges for the Georgian Orthodox Church are aimed primarily against new sects, as their proselytising activities directly target the constituency of the mainstream Church. A distinction is usually drawn between these sects and traditional churches, whose activities are accepted as legitimate, provided that they abstain from proselytising. In the early period of the national independence movement, however, certain nationalist groups adopted a more aggressive stance towards the Muslim Georgians. It was often said that Adzharia needed to prove their "Georgianness" by separating, or "returning" to Christianity: their Christian ancestors had converted under the Ottoman Empire, so after returning to Georgia they had to reconvert. The Georgian Orthodox Church succeeded in converting a number of Adzharians at that time.40 Opponents of the return of Muslim Meskhetians, even those who considered themselves Georgian, used a similar argument: why should we accept them back if they abandoned Christianity? This kind of discourse is much less common today, but calls to give Georgian Orthodox official status still questions the "Georgianness" of Muslim Georgians.

In this context it would be natural to discuss tensions between the central authorities and Adzharia, an autonomous region for Muslim Georgians. The problem of Adzharia, however, defies the stereotype of the religious conflict. Despite the suspicions of the Tbilisi media about a hidden Islamic and pro-Turkish agenda, so far the local strongman Aslan Abashidze (himself a Christian) has avoided playing the religious card. The conflict is about the division of powers between the centre and the autonomous republic, and is kept within those limits. There is no mass mobilisation around that issue: the only instance of such mobilisation was a series of rallies on 22-23 April 1991 to protest against Zviad Gamsakhurdia's plan to abolish the autonomy of Adzharia. Abashidze is believed to have organised that rally himself, bussing in people from mountain villages. Gamsakhurdia, who had not formally called for the abolition of Adzharia's autonomy, dropped his plans to do so. Since then, Tbilisi politicians have never mentioned abolition again, nor has Abashidze brought his people onto the streets. In his territory he maintains Soviet methods of exercising power: he succeeded in destroying all his political opponents, who moved to Tbilisi, and has absolute control without opposition or independent media. The result is considerable differences between the political cultures of Adzharia and the rest of Georgia, which may not boast a model constitutional order, but does not lack political pluralism. Each election underscores the contrast. In the November 1998 local elections, for instance, average turnout for all Georgia was between 30 and 40 per cent, with the vote split between numerous parties; in Adzharia, the figure for both turnout and Abashidze was about 98%. Despite this, nobody in the central gov-

40 The Georgian media mentioned that 4,000 Adzharians had converted to Christianity in 1989-90, David Darchishvili, "Adzharia on the Crossroads of Civilizations" (manuscript, in Russian), 1996, p. 17.
Social and cultural markers: Analysis of a survey sample

Attitudes and opinions are shaped by a variety of factors. In any society, people's behaviour is determined by gender and age, regardless of whether they live in an urban or rural environment, or are employed, self-employed or unemployed. Different levels of education may colour views, as may different levels of income. Hence, it is standard procedure in social research to explore the relative impact of social markers on attitudes and opinions. Yet, biological and spatial factors, status and income may not satisfactorily explain all the differences in social and political attitudes.

This is particularly true of societies composed of groups that differ by language, nationality and religion. Georgia is a case in point. Thus, it is imperative to include cultural as well as socio-economic markers in any discussion of factors influencing people's convictions.

After giving a breakdown of our sample by markers, we shall analyse their interrelationships in succession.

Social and economic variance

Of the 2,000 respondents, 46 percent are men and 54 percent women.

Distribution by age is as follows (in percent*):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18–24 years</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–34 years</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–49 years</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50+ years</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sample was restricted to persons of voting age. Owing to the higher life expectancy of females and to the migration of males in recent years, women are overrepresented in the upper two age groups.

What kind of environment do the interviewees live in?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capital city</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large town</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural town</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sub-samples were constructed for nine regions of Georgia and the two disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

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* Applies to all tables, unless otherwise indicated.
The central region includes Tbilisi and Rustavi. Of the respondents, 88 percent live in the capital and 12 percent in large towns. Income and level of education are above average. Eighty-four percent of the interviewees are Georgian nationals, 4 percent Russian and 8 percent Armenian. Eighty-four percent speak Georgian as their mother tongue, 13 percent Russian and 3 percent Armenian. Two percent stated that they had no religion. Eight percent are refugees – about half of all refugees in the sample.

In the Imereti region, 43 percent of respondents live in large towns, 7 percent in rural towns and the other 50 percent in villages. Levels of income and education are below average. Nine out of ten respondents are of Georgian nationality, 4 percent are Russians and 2 percent are Armenians. Ninety-two percent speak Georgian and 6 percent Russian. Ninety-five percent profess the Orthodox faith and 3 percent none.

In the region of Ajaria, 38 percent of the population live in large towns, 8 percent in rural towns and 54 percent in villages. Here, too, levels of income and education are below average. By nationality, 89 percent are Georgian, 2 percent Russian and 6 percent Armenian. However, Russian is the mother tongue of 11 percent of the respondents and Armenian of just 2 percent. By religion, 56 percent of the respondents are Orthodox Christians, 30 percent Muslim (unfortunately, the Ajarian sub-sample does not reflect the Muslim majority in this territory) and 11 percent have no religious affiliation.

Megrelya is strongly rural: 69 percent live in villages, 16 percent in large towns and 15 percent in rural towns. Income and education are above average. Ninety-six percent speak Georgian at home and 4 percent Russian. Ninety-seven percent are Orthodox Christians and 2 percent have no religion. In Megrelya, 26 percent of respondents are refugees – the other half of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the sample.

Three out of four Gurian respondents are villagers; the rest live in rural towns. The level of education is average, but income levels are far below average. By nationality, 88 percent are Georgian, 8 percent Russian and 2 percent Armenian. However, 92 percent speak Georgian at home, and 6 percent Russian.

Two-thirds of Samtshe-Javakheti respondents are villagers; the rest live in rural towns. The level of education is far below average, and income levels even more so. Three-quarters are Armenian and one-quarter Georgian.

In Shida Kartli, 58 percent of respondents live in villages, 18 percent in large towns and 24 percent in rural towns. The level of education is average, but incomes are very low. Nine out of ten respondents are Georgian, and half of the rest – Russians and Armenians – speak Georgian at home, too.

In the Kakheti region, one respondent in four lives in a rural town, the rest in villages.

Here, too, the level of income is far lower than the standard of education, though both are below average. Ninety-four percent are of Georgian nationality, and the rest, both Russians and Armenians, also speak Georgian at home.

Kvemo Kartli is the most rural of the sample areas: four out of five respondents are villagers and the rest live in rural towns. The level of education is average, and income distinctly above average.\(^{42}\) Three-quarters of the respondents are Azeri, the rest Georgian; both groups speak their own language at home. Seventy-five percent are Muslims, 24 percent Orthodox and 1 percent have no religion.

To accurately measure attitudes of the Abkhazian ethnic group, the Abkhazian sample is exclusively Abkhazian. Fifty-eight percent live in towns and 42 percent in villages. At home, 70 percent speak Abkhazian and 30 percent Russian. Sixty percent are Orthodox Christians and 20 percent Muslim; 15 percent do not belong to a religious community. The strong bias towards respondents with high education and high income is unintentional – 37 percent of the sample are university graduates and 76 percent are in the highest income bracket. For the purpose of this study, however, the bias may well be a blessing: Abkhazian attitudes and opinions are expressed by a highly articulate group that is influential in shaping public opinion.

The breakdown of the South Ossetian sample is similar. The urban/rural distribution of 65 percent to 35 percent is representative. All are of Ossetian nationality; 89 percent speak Ossetian at home and 11 percent Russian. Four out of five are Orthodox, while 18 percent have no religion.

As in Abkhazia, the sample is biased towards the elite: 38 percent of respondents have attended university, and nine out of ten are in the highest income bracket. In the following interpretations, we shall have to bear in mind this peculiarity of the Ossetian and Abkhazian samples.

The distribution of the total sample by occupation is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>work at home</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unemployed</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pensioner</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trade</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education, science</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>housewife</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transport</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>industry</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>public healthcare</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agriculture</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>police, army</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>finance</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cultural or religious activity</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>invalid</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>construction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>media</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>state administration</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{42}\) This does not reflect the reality of the region. On the deficiencies of the sub-sample, see below.