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Managing ethnic diversity in Georgia: one step forward, two steps back

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This article attempts to explain how the Georgian state sought to manage ethnic diversity at the same time as (re-)building state institutions within a (nominally) democratic framework, from the collapse of Soviet power to the present day. It is suggested that the explanation for the slow and uneven progress in accommodating national minorities within the Georgian state derives from four principal factors: first, the collapse of the Soviet state and the consequent inability of the newly independent state to provide basic public goods; second, the lack of a 'civic' model for the accommodation of minorities; third, the continuation of the Soviet norm of arbitrary exercise of power by leaders, which is ill-suited to accommodating diversity and resolving conflict; and, finally, the Soviet legacy of ethnofederalism, which carved out three autonomous territories – Abkhazia, Achara and South Ossetia – from within Georgia that would (violently, in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) resist the encroachments of the new Georgian state, and would later (in the case of South Ossetia) provide a pretext for military conflict between Russia and Georgia.

Keywords: Ethnofederalism; state-building; nation-building; democratization; institutions

Introduction

Central to the discussion on managing ethnic diversity in Georgia are three interrelated processes that have set the parameters for transformation in most former Soviet republics. These are: state building, nation building and democratization. State building is the establishment of the state's capacity to exercise what is referred to here as the 'core functions of statehood'. These include a monopoly over violence, the provision of public goods (such as education, healthcare, pensions and basic infrastructure maintenance), and the establishment of a set of institutions that can defuse and process potential conflicts that result from divergent interests within society. These institutions, which include courts, economic regulations and (in democracies) elections and referendums, can be subsumed under the broad rubric of 'rule of law'.

Nation building refers to the development of an 'imagined community' or 'demos' to which citizens feel they belong and with which they identify (Anderson 1991). National communities can exist without states, but more often there is a close link between the nation and the state. First, the goal of most nationalisms, in which the national community lacks its own state, is independent statehood. Once independent statehood has been achieved (as was the case for the successor states of the former Soviet Union in 1991), the goal is to persuade or cajole all citizens living within the territory of the state to identify with that state, and to perceive as legitimate the laws and institutions it imposes. Here, the new state's capacity to exercise its 'core functions' plays a role; if the state is unable to provide security, the rule of law, or basic public goods to those whose loyalty towards it is already less than certain, its chances of establishing a 'national community' or 'demos' will be low indeed.

Democracy and democratization form the third element of the triad, which is also linked inextricably with the first two elements. First, democracy is commonly associated with the

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rule of law: although the rule of law is not a prerequisite for democracy, stable democracies rarely exist without it. Non-democratic regimes in which the rule of law is weak are often prone to state weakness and collapse. This can happen when the conflict-processing institutions are ineffective, and conflict resolution depends instead on the arbitrary decision-making power of the executive. In such cases, the coherence of the state itself can be threatened if the leadership falls from power. Similarly, if the state is to be successful in establishing its own institutions to regulate conflicts of interests within society, the population must perceive these institutions as legitimate, and democracy is widely seen as the most effective way of providing legitimacy.

This article examines how this triadic relationship of state, nation and democracy has functioned in Georgia since the country's independence. The article first considers the legacy of Soviet rule in terms of the ethnofederal structure of the USSR and the Soviet conceptualization of the nation. It then turns to the Georgian case, and examines how ethnic tensions came to the fore during the short-lived presidency of Zviad Gamsakhurdia. The following section focuses on the return of former Georgian Communist Party boss, Eduard Shevardnadze, and how the (partial) restoration of state authority affected the management of diversity, both in terms of the relationship between Georgians and minorities, and in terms of the relationship between the central state and the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The final section turns to the most recent period following the ostensibly 'democratic' Rose Revolution, in which the new president, Mikheil Saakashvili, attempted to re-establish state authority by restoring central control over the breakaway territories and integrating minorities into Georgian public life.

The Soviet legacy

The Soviet state was based on the principle of ethnofederalism. According to this principle, the USSR was divided territorially into a hierarchical system of administrative units and sub-units – union republics, autonomous republics, autonomous *okrugs* and autonomous *oblasts* – each of which was supposed to represent a 'homeland' for a particular nationality, or (in rare cases) a religious group. Within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), there were two autonomous republics (Abkhazia and Achara) and one autonomous *oblast* (South Ossetia). The 15 union republics alone enjoyed the formal right to secede from the USSR, although this was not a feasible scenario until the very last days of Communist rule. By 1990, there were also 20 autonomous republics, 10 autonomous *okrugs* and eight autonomous *oblasts*. The Soviet state collapsed along the fault-lines of this federal structure as all 15 union republics became independent, and many of the sub-units (autonomous republics and autonomous *oblasts*) began demanding greater autonomy from their union republics.

The ideological conception of the Georgian national community was heavily influenced by the legacy of Soviet ethnofederalism. Not only was the USSR divided territorially, but each individual was also classified according to his or her nationality, irrespective of the territorial division in which he or she lived, and the nationality would be registered in his or her passport. Nationality was a legal category that was recorded in most bureaucratic transactions and even affected where one could live and work (Brubaker 1996). Thus, under the Soviet Union, there was a territory referred to as the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic and a Georgian nationality, but no notion of a 'citizen of the republic of Georgia' as an official category. This would make the establishment of a civic (non-ethnic) national identity problematic.

The Soviet conception of 'nationality' relied heavily on the concepts of eighteenth and nineteenth century German romanticism, and was based on the premise that a nation was somehow a primordial entity, objectively definable and independent of the self-perception of its members.¹ According to this Soviet 'primordialist' concept of nationhood, language was

the primary determinant of nationality, with cultural and religious factors of secondary, although still significant, importance. This idea of a primordial nation with its own language, history and territory translated itself into a perception that the nation had inalienable rights over certain territories, a right that other nations did not enjoy. As the Soviet Union collapsed, heated disputes broke out between the elites of various national groups over who had ‘owned’ a particular territory during remote historical periods. Once again, this undermined any possibility of developing any type of non-ethnic citizenship in which the rights of *all* groups to a particular territory would be respected.

The notion of citizenship was, in any case, weak in the USSR. The rulers based state authority on the arbitrary exercise of power over the ruled. The concept of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, as formulated by Lenin and Stalin, was the ‘rule – unrestricted by law and based on force – of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie’ (Jowitt 1992, p. 66). While the principle of arbitrary repression reached its apogee during the purges of the late 1930s, and later (from the Khrushchev period onward) began to dwindle, the fulfilment of goals took precedence over the rule of law throughout the Soviet period. On paper, the Soviet Constitution was relatively liberal, and included far-reaching individual rights (including freedom of conscience, the right to profess any religion and to conduct religious worship, the right to privacy, and freedom of scientific, technical, and artistic work), as well as the formal right of union republics to secede (see above). However, these rights were not observed in practice, and were countered by other constitutionally stipulated ‘duties’ to the centre. In reality, individual rights were subordinate to the arbitrary power of Communist Party leaders, while any discussion of secession from the USSR was strictly prohibited.

Paradoxically, Georgian nation-builders today define their nation in terms of the borders of the territorial entity that used to be the Georgian SSR – the very entity that modern Georgian nationalists deny was ‘national’. With the exception of the short-lived independent social democratic republic of Georgia (1918–1921), there has been no other modern blueprint of a state or state-like entity that Georgia can draw from. Although it forms the basis for the foundational myth of modern Georgian nationalism, the medieval kingdom of Georgia was not a modern state in any shape or form. Even the most fervent Georgian nationalists cannot claim the imperial lands of medieval Georgian Queen Tamar (reigned 1184–1213) for modern Georgia. Many of these territories now sit within Armenia, Turkey and Azerbaijan. Only the legacy of the Soviet republic provides the legal justification for the continued incorporation of the disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into the rest of Georgia.

The rise of Gamsakhurdia

At the end of the Soviet period, Georgia was an ethnically diverse republic (see Table 1) that contained within its territorial structure two autonomous republics (Abkhazia and Achara) and one autonomous *oblast* (South Ossetia). During the early Soviet period, Abkhazia and South Ossetia had acquired autonomous status because they were deemed to be the homeland of two distinct nationalities, Abkhazian and Ossetian, while Achara had attained its status of autonomous republic because much of its population was Muslim (as a result of a long period under Ottoman rule), even though it was mainly populated by ethnic Georgians.

The practice of identifying oneself with a national group that ostensibly enjoys certain inalienable rights combined with a weak notion of citizenship very much shaped the philosophy of late twentieth-century Georgian nationalism. By the late 1980s, an ethnocentric discourse dominated Georgian historiography, even within the official (Communist) intelligentsia. According to this ethnocentric version of history, neither the Abkhazians nor the Ossetians were indigenous to Georgia (Lortkipanidze 1990).² Therefore, as ‘guests’ in the country,

Table 1. National composition in Georgia, 1989 and 2002.

	Georgians (%)	Abkhazians (%)	Ossetians (%)	Armenians (%)	Azerbaijanis (%)	Russians (%)	Others (%)
Georgia Total 2002	83.75	0.08	0.87	5.69	6.51	1.55	1.54
Georgia Total 1989	70.13	1.77	3.04	8.10	5.69	6.32	4.95
Achara 2002	93.38	0.41	0.06	2.35	0.14	2.41	1.24
Achara 1989	82.77	0.42	0.21	4.04	0.27	7.66	4.64
Abkhazia 1989	45.68	17.76	0.22	14.58	0.10	14.27	7.39
S. Ossetia 1989	28.97	0.01	66.21	1.00	0.04	2.16	1.62

Source: Population censuses from 1989 and 2002. The 2002 survey includes neither Abkhazia, except for the Kodori Gorge, or those parts of the former autonomous *oblast* of South Ossetia that were outside the control of the Georgian government.

neither group should be entitled to the same rights as the titular nationality. It was this discourse that was adopted and championed by Georgian nationalists, with disastrous consequences.

Ethnic tensions in Georgia began to rise in the late 1980s as not only former dissidents but also members of the official intelligentsia began to press for greater autonomy for Georgia within the USSR, and, later, full independence. The push towards independence was led by former dissidents, most notably Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Merab Kostava and Giorgi Chanturia and, following the deaths of 20 demonstrators – mainly women and girls – at the hands of Soviet Interior Ministry troops on 9 April 1989, the mood of virtually the entire Georgian population swung firmly behind independence (Beissinger 2002, p. 185).³ In an effort to catch up with the new mood, even the Georgian Communist Party became increasingly anxious to portray itself as a defender of Georgian national interests. In November 1989, the Supreme Soviet of the Georgian SSR officially condemned the Soviet annexation of Georgia in 1921. In March 1990, the same body passed a declaration of sovereignty and announced that it considered illegal the 1922 pact on the basis of which the USSR was formed (Wheatley 2005, p. 51, Zuercher 2005, p. 90).

These moves provoked alarm amongst ethnic minorities, especially since the rhetoric of the most prominent and popular opposition leader, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was characterized by ethnic chauvinism, and was often directed against ‘ungrateful minorities’, whom he saw as an obstacle to the creation of an independent Georgian state. During 1989, pressure on ethnic minorities increased, and culminated in the expulsion of ethnic Azerbaijanis from the town of Bolnisi. However, the greatest disquiet was felt in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where local political elites feared losing all power in the event of Georgian independence. Here, ethnicity and nationalism was used by the elites of the two autonomous regions as a resource for mobilizing the ethnic Abkhazian and Ossetian populations. Abandoned by the centre as the USSR collapsed, these elites fought hard to preserve their power-base, and found themselves in a fierce power struggle with the nationalist elites in Tbilisi.

In Abkhazia, the local political elite was predominantly Abkhazian (Cvetkovski undated; Tsikhelashvili 2001),⁴ even though numerically the Abkhazian population of Abkhazia was considerably smaller than the Georgian population (17.8% compared to 45.7%). This imbalance made the Abkhazian elite view the collapse of centralized power in Moscow, and steps towards democratization, with increasing alarm, as Georgian independence threatened to deprive them of their dominant position in ‘their’ autonomous republic. In July 1989, a violent episode broke out in the Abkhazian capital, Sukhum/Sokhumi,⁵ as a result of a decision by the Georgian Council of Ministers to permit the establishment of a Georgian-language affiliate of Tbilisi State University there. The violence led to the deaths of several people and significantly increased tensions between Tbilisi and Sukhum/Sokhumi.

Following the victory of Gamsakhurdia's 'Round Table–Free Georgia' bloc in elections to the Georgian Supreme Soviet in October 1990, in which all ethnically-based parties were disallowed, including Abkhazian and Ossetian political parties, it was South Ossetia that provided the first major flashpoint. In September 1990, the South Ossetian regional Soviet had declared South Ossetia an independent republic within the USSR and on 11 December the Georgian Supreme Soviet annulled this declaration, abolished the *oblast's* autonomous status, and made it part of another Georgian region. The direct result of these actions was 18 months of civil war within the region of South Ossetia, leading to hundreds of deaths and the expulsion of thousands – both Georgians and Ossetians – from their homes. Hostilities continued until a joint peacekeeping force of Georgians, Russians and Ossetians took control in July 1992. A mainly Ossetian government was established in the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinval/i, and Tbilisi lost control over most of what had been the South Ossetian autonomous *oblast*.

The return of Shevardnadze

Eventually, Gamsakhurdia's demagogic and confrontational style of leadership alienated not only his enemies but also his closest supporters. In January 1992, he was finally forced out in a military coup led by an unlikely coalition of former communist *nomenklatura*, paramilitary leaders and liberal intelligentsia. Although former Communist Party boss Eduard Shevardnadze returned to Georgia in March 1992, to chair a newly established governing body called the State Council, real power rested with two paramilitary leaders: Tengiz Kitovani, Gamsakhurdia's former defence minister, and Jaba Ioseliani, a charismatic bank robber-turned-theatre critic who led a patriotic military formation called the *Mkhedrioni* (Horsemen).

Shevardnadze had yet to impose his authority on the various disparate and often armed factions when new hostilities broke out in Abkhazia. The immediate catalyst for the conflict was a decision taken in August 1992 by Kitovani to move his troops into Abkhazia beyond the jurisdiction set by Shevardnadze, supposedly to secure the roads and railways and to crush an armed uprising by Gamsakhurdia's supporters in western Georgia. In September 1993, after 13 months of war in which at least 10,000 people from both sides were killed, Abkhazian troops supported by Russian irregular forces retook the city of Sukhum/Sokhumi and expelled more than 200,000 ethnic Georgians from the territory of Abkhazia. Henceforth, Abkhazia would be under the control of a separatist government and would remain outside the Georgian government's sphere of influence.

The central state's control over other parts of Georgia was also weak. The former autonomous republic of Achara, despite remaining peaceful, fell under the control of a local potentate, Aslan Abashidze, who had originally been appointed by Gamsakhurdia, and remained impervious to influence from the centre. Meanwhile, much of the western region of Samegrelo was under the sway of armed supporters of the deposed president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Finally, those areas that were inhabited mainly by ethnic minorities also had little to do with the new state. Until 1993 the mainly Armenian southern region of Javakheti (the districts of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda) was under the control of a local ethnic Armenian self-help organization called *Javakh*, while the southeastern region of Kvemo Kartli, which was home to a large Azerbaijani population, was ruled by a number of Georgian and Azerbaijani criminal gangs that carried out smuggling activities along the main roads leading to Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Thus, in the early 1990s Georgia was marked by total chaos and lawlessness. More than almost anywhere else in the former Soviet Union, with the exception of war-ravaged Tajikistan, the new state proved utterly incapable of executing its core functions. Crime was rife as armed gangs systematically looted private and state property and real power rested with paramilitary groupings, the most powerful of which were Kitovani's National Guard and the *Mkhedrioni*.

Both organizations were heavily-armed mafia-type militias that resorted to extortion and theft to obtain resources. The economy went into a nosedive: according to official figures, GDP fell by 15.0% in 1990, by 20.1% in 1991, by 44.2% in 1992, by 29.3% in 1993 and by 11.0% in 1994.

During 1994 and 1995, Shevardnadze began to take on the paramilitary groups and restored some semblance of state authority. He did so by rebuilding Georgia's police force, which he himself had headed during his time as Georgian Interior Minister from 1965 to 1972, and by using this force to gradually undermine the paramilitaries. At times he was forced to co-opt members of the paramilitary gangs into the police, but at least in this way he was able to introduce some degree of centralized control. By the end of 1993 he had defeated Gamsakhurdia's supporters in western Georgia. Tengiz Kitovani was arrested in January 1995, after leading a faction of some 1000 lightly-armed supporters in a quixotic attempt to retake Abkhazia. Ioseliani was also arrested following an assassination attempt against Shevardnadze in August 1995. By the end of 1995, the National Guard and the *Mkhedrioni* had been effectively neutralized.

However, the dire economic situation still made the establishment of a well-functioning state highly problematic. Despite a marked reduction in armed conflict and a reassertion of central authority in most areas of Georgia – with the exception of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and (in part) Achara – pervasive official corruption undermined the state's ability to exercise its core functions. This was the result both of economic collapse, which obliged the Georgian leadership to re-establish order with the minimum of resources, and of the ingrained bureaucratic culture of Shevardnadze's political elite, most members of which had a history of service in Communist Party structures. This culture was marked by rule-breaking, clientelism and outright corruption, as well as by the accumulation of private resources at the expense of providing public goods for society.

Overall, the state did not provide public goods. Instead, it supplied 'network goods', whereby state goods and services were provided only to those who were part of a particular personalized network that linked them to an individual in a position of state power. In some areas, especially rural areas and areas in which national minorities were concentrated, few people had access to these networks. As a result, they became almost entirely disengaged from the public sphere and were forced to find subsistence by living off the land and using up their previous savings. This undermined the legitimacy of the Georgian state in the eyes of many inhabitants of Georgia, especially those who did not belong to the 'titular nationality'.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia under Shevardnadze

The dysfunctional nature of the Georgian state and the recent history of armed conflict provided little incentive for the breakaway enclaves to re-integrate into Georgia. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it was widely believed (not without reason) that the goal of the Georgian side was nothing less than their total absorption into Georgia. Within these enclaves, Georgia was therefore viewed as the enemy, and the main debate was whether to aim for full independence or whether to opt instead for some form of autonomy within the Russian Federation (RF). In general, the Abkhazian political and intellectual elite favoured the first option, although some Abkhazian NGO leaders and politicians argued that Abkhazia should be incorporated as an associate member of the RF (Anjaparidze 2005). In South Ossetia, the emphasis was on unification with North Ossetia, which was a part of the RF and, as a result, the South Ossetian leadership at times lobbied actively for the full integration of South Ossetia into Russia. In both cases, re-integration into Georgia was considered anathema to the national interest.

Although neither Abkhazia nor South Ossetia were recognized as independent states, both enclaves received economic and political support from Russia. Although Russia, together with

other states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), had imposed a naval and economic blockade on Abkhazia in 1996 in response to perceived Abkhazian intransigence in negotiations with Georgia, this blockade was short-lived. Already in 2000 restrictions on freedom of movement of adult men were lifted and residents of Abkhazia could cross the border into the Russian Federation. By 2002, Russian businessmen began investing in Abkhazia and in December 2002 the rail link between Sukhum/Sokhumi and the Russian city of Sochi was opened. Meanwhile, South Ossetia was a major recipient of Russian humanitarian aid and was far more integrated with the North Ossetian and Russian economic space than with Georgia. In 2002, Russia began issuing passports to the population of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It is estimated that 80% of Abkhazians had received Russian passports by 2005 (German 2006), and it is probable that a similar statistic applied to residents of the breakaway zones of South Ossetia. This further cemented the already powerful links between the two enclaves and the Russian Federation.

Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia could be described as ‘frozen conflicts’, which remained unresolved despite the near absence of violent conflict.⁶ One reason for this state of affairs was that it was to the advantage of powerful factions on all sides to maintain the status quo. Both the elites of the breakaway regions and many Georgian officials took advantage of the porous ‘borders’ between the *de facto* separatist regimes of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia to engage in, or protect, smuggling. From 1998 onwards, contraband trade grew very rapidly and smuggling was the one activity that brought together ‘entrepreneurs’ from two mutually hostile communities. Contraband cigarettes, petrol, scrap iron, stolen cars and hazelnuts were habitually smuggled across the so-called ceasefire line (monitored by UN military observers) from Abkhazia into Samegrelo (Mingrelia), while all types of contraband goods, especially flour, petrol and alcohol flowed into the Shida Kartli region via the Ergneti market in Tskhinval/i (Chikhladze 2001, Kukhianidze *et al.* 2003). In both cases, this smuggling was the result of co-operation between criminal groupings from opposing sides of the ethnic divide, law enforcement officers and, at times, Russian peacekeepers (Kukhianidze *et al.* 2003, Shonia 2003). Often these groups had close links with the top leadership in both Georgia and the breakaway regions, and it must be questioned whether these political and economic elites were genuinely interested in a comprehensive settlement for these ‘frozen conflicts’.

National minorities under Shevardnadze

Within ‘Georgia proper’, i.e. outside the two breakaway regions, there remained a significant proportion of non-Georgians, even though this proportion was lower than it had been during the Soviet period (see Table 1). While previously the Georgian SSR had been a multi-lingual community, with Russian recognized as the language of inter-ethnic communication, the newly independent Georgia was now a monolingual state, with most bureaucratic transactions carried out in Georgian and nearly all media using only this language. The use of Russian in public life declined as the ethnic Russian population dwindled (see Table 1), and young Georgians no longer found it either expedient or fashionable to learn the language of the former imperial power. Increasingly, the language barrier became a barrier to participation in public life, and minorities became more and more socially and culturally isolated. Nowhere was this more so than in the rural provinces of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli, where knowledge of Georgian was low and the state infrastructure weak.

Javakheti region (consisting of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts) is home to an Armenian population, who make up over 90% of the local population. Armenians also make up a little less than half the population in Akhaltsikhe district (also in Samtskhe-Javakheti province) and in Tsalka district (in Kvemo Kartli province). Azerbaijanis make up a majority in three districts of

Kvemo Kartli province (Marneuli, Dmanisi and Bolnisi districts) and nearly half the population in a fourth (Gardabani). These non-Georgian population groups have traditionally been better integrated in the social, cultural and economic life of their kin states than within that of their home state, Georgia. Unable, for the most part, to speak or read Georgian, they have little knowledge either of Georgian political life or even of their own rights and responsibilities under Georgian law. For educational text books, as well as for news and media, they have turned either to their kin-states of Armenia and Azerbaijan or to Russia, and have frequently travelled to their kin states to attend university and to Russia for work.

For its part, the Georgian state under Shevardnadze had little interest in integrating national minorities in these rather remote districts of Georgia.⁷ The language barrier increasingly became an obstacle to communication between Georgians and minority groups, especially amongst young people, as Russian began to lose its role as the language of inter-ethnic communication. The youth, especially the Georgian youth, could no longer speak Russian fluently enough to communicate. Programmes to teach the Georgian language to ethnic minorities were half-hearted, mainly due to the state's incapacity to implement its education policy. Communications were made even more complex due to the declining infrastructure, and poor provision of public goods further undermined prospects for integration. School buildings collapsed and some regions, especially Javakheti and Tsalka district, became virtually cut off from the rest of the country as the parlous state of the roads made journeys to the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, arduous. In terms of the provision of public goods, regions in which minorities were concentrated were not necessarily worse off than other remote rural districts, but linguistic barriers reinforced a sense of isolation and neglect.

In Javakheti, it was not the Georgian state that provided public goods to the local population, but the 62nd Divisional Russian base located in the town of Akhalkalaki. This military base provided employment and a source of living to many local families. The presence of the base meant that the currency circulating in the region was the Russian rouble, rather than the Georgian lari, which further distanced Javakheti from the rest of Georgia. The base also provided psychological reassurance as a guarantee of defence against neighbouring Turkey.⁸ Therefore, plans by the Georgian government to close the base were fiercely resisted by the local population.

Meanwhile, the Georgian state ruled over Javakheti indirectly, by co-opting local Armenians to top positions in the local *apparat*. Typically, these were businessmen who had profited from Georgia's status as a 'neutral' state in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to engage in the trade of oil and gas between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Some had previously been part of the *Javakh* movement. While enjoying considerable authority in Javakheti, these leaders were themselves poorly integrated into the Georgian state and were linked to the state leadership by informal ties, rather than by their influence over state decision making.

In Kvemo Kartli, the Azerbaijani population was barely represented in state structures at all. In the late 1980s, most Azerbaijanis holding top positions in local power structures were removed from their posts as a result of the new mood of ethnic nationalism that had swept the country. During Shevardnadze's term as president (1995–2003), all heads of the *rayon* (district) administration (*gamgebelis*) in Kvemo Kartli were Georgians (unlike in Javakheti, where these posts were held by Armenians), and virtually all other senior posts at *rayon* level were also held by Georgians. Local Azerbaijani leaders were given minor posts but, more importantly, were allowed to engage in corruption in return for their loyalty to Kvemo Kartli's powerful governor, Levan Mamaladze. As a result, there were few mechanisms for the local Azerbaijani population to express their grievances, the most pressing of which was corruption in the process of land distribution following the dissolution of the communist-era collective farms (*sovkhoses* and *kolkhozes*). Much of the land that had formerly belonged to *sovkhoses* and *kolkhozes* was leased out in a non-transparent manner. Very often the bulk of this land was

rented by ‘local notables’, typically former *sovkhos* or *kolkhos* directors or individuals with close personal links to members of the local administration. Most, although not all, of these individuals were Georgians. This added to the impression amongst many local Azerbaijanis that they were second-class citizens who did not really belong in the Georgian state.

The Rose Revolution and its aftermath

It was the Georgian state’s incapacity to provide the basic core functions of statehood that fuelled the public disillusionment that brought about the non-violent overthrow of Shevardnadze’s government, in what became known as the Rose Revolution, in November 2003. The new government, under President Mikheil Saakashvili, aimed to remedy the situation by increasing the power of the state and making it more visible throughout the country. Above all, Saakashvili’s government sought to eradicate enclaves – geographical, economic and cultural – that had hitherto appeared beyond the reach of the state. Economically, this meant cracking down on corruption and increasing budgetary revenues with a view to increasing the supply of public goods. Politically, it meant reintegrating the country by bringing Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Achara back under the control of the central government and integrating national minorities into the political and cultural life of Georgia.

At the outset of his presidency, Saakashvili made it clear that the restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity was his top priority. Travelling to the tomb of the eleventh-century Georgian king David *Aghmashenebeli* (‘the Builder’, credited with uniting the medieval Georgian state) on the day before his inauguration, Saakashvili promised to consolidate the Georgian state and to bring the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia back under Georgian sovereignty.

In a number of ways Saakashvili was rather successful in strengthening the Georgian state. He significantly reduced corruption by abolishing the notoriously corrupt traffic police, and by arresting a number of high profile politicians and businessmen for graft. The fiscal capacity of the state grew; tax revenues rose from 15.0% of GDP in 2003 to 25.8% in 2007.⁹ As a result, significant improvements were made to Georgia’s energy and transport infrastructure. Roads were repaired in Tbilisi and in many rural areas, and 24-hour electricity – virtually unknown during the Shevardnadze period – was the norm throughout the country by 2006, including in remote rural areas and those in which national minorities were concentrated.

Initially, the new government’s campaign to restore Georgia’s territorial integrity also met with some success. On 6 May 2004, the Acharan leader Aslan Abashidze was forced from office as a result of peaceful protests in much the same way as his old rival (and later ally) Shevardnadze had been six months previously. While never formally demanding autonomy from Georgia, Abashidze had ruled the former autonomous region as his personal fiefdom for the past 13 years; now Achara was brought back under the full control of the state.

However, these two notable successes would mark the limit of Saakashvili’s state-building achievements. The problem was that state building in Georgia was carried out in time-honoured tradition, i.e. by means of coercion, rather than by establishing reliable institutions that link together the state and civil society, and provide checks and balances against abuse of authority by the executive. The fight against corruption was waged using the strong arm of the law, while armed force was seen as indispensable to restoring Georgia’s territorial integrity. From the outset, the government embarked on massive increases in military spending. Having made up just 0.7% of GDP in 2003, defence spending in Georgia made up 8.8% of GDP in 2007 according to IMF statistics.¹⁰ In the words of Mann, Saakashvili’s new state was based on ‘despotic power’ rather than ‘infrastructural power’ (Mann 1994).

Despite the ostensibly ‘democratic’ nature of the Rose Revolution, state power came to rest with a narrow circle of Saakashvili’s close associates¹¹ and was propagated by means of a ‘party

of power' – the United National Movement. This party was highly centralized and depended fully on the patronage of the presidency for its existence in very much the same way as Shevardnadze's 'party of power' – the Citizens' Union of Georgia – had done beforehand. Both structures resembled the old Communist Party in organizational terms and were based on the principles of 'democratic centralism', i.e. decision-making power was vested in the leadership alone. Within this system, decisions were taken arbitrarily without consultation either with civil society or with other political forces. This often led to ill-thought out decisions that undermined the success of the state-building project.

This project began to unravel as early as 2004. Buoyed by his success in Achara, Saakashvili turned his attention to South Ossetia. In order to win over the South Ossetian people, he attempted to employ very much the same tactics that he had successfully used in Achara; he supplied free fertilizers to the rural population and promised full state pensions to Ossetian citizens in order to mobilize the people against the separatist government. However, as well as a carrot, Saakashvili also wielded a stick. In early June, the Georgian side closed down the Ergneti market on the 'border' between South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia, which was a major trading point for contraband goods between Georgia and Russia and, it was argued, a major source of enrichment for the South Ossetian political elite.

However, this strategy backfired: the closure of the Ergneti market not only hit the South Ossetian leadership, it also hit ordinary South Ossetian traders for whom the market was their main source of livelihood. Tensions between Georgian and South Ossetian forces within the enclave escalated, leading to six weeks of low-level fighting between the two sides, the deaths of 17 Georgians and five Ossetians and the exodus of many civilians from their villages. Although both sides eventually withdrew to their previous positions, the confrontation was highly counter-productive to the Georgian government's long-term aims. While previously Ossetians and Georgians had mixed and traded with one another, particularly in the Ergneti Market, after the summer of 2004 virtually all of these contacts stopped. Both the Ossetian population and the population of ethnically Georgian villages within South Ossetia developed a 'siege mentality', characterized by deep distrust of the other side. Russia was seen as the defender of South Ossetian interests and posters of Russian president Vladimir Putin were displayed in the streets of Tskhinval/i. Now more than ever, the South Ossetian leadership and the Ossetian population were united in a desire for unification with Russia and were encouraged in their aspirations by the government of the Russian Federation. The Georgian initiative had been an unmitigated failure.

In July 2006, tensions escalated between Tbilisi and Abkhazia over the Upper Kodori Gorge in the east of Abkhazia. This tiny enclave had a predominantly Svan population (a linguistic subgroup of Georgians) and had been under the control of local militia leader, Emzar Kvitsiani, since the mid-1990s, who was nominally loyal to Tbilisi, but ran the enclave more or less as he saw fit. Following an announcement by Kvitsiani that he was rearming his militia and would resist all attempts of the government to bring his enclave under central control, the Georgian government responded by sending troops to the region and forced Kvitsiani to flee. In what was seen as a major provocation by the *de facto* authorities in Abkhazia, the Georgian government decided to turn the Upper Kodori Gorge into a temporary administrative centre and to move the headquarters of the Abkhazian government-in-exile to the gorge, leading to an angry reaction from the Abkhazian and Russian sides.

While repeatedly stressing that it was only intending to use peaceful means to restore Georgia's territorial integrity, and bring South Ossetia and Abkhazia back under effective Georgian sovereignty, events on the ground suggested that Georgia was also considering the military option. A part-time territorial army was established, and Georgia pointedly refused to sign a guarantee on the non-use of force, which was a key demand of the separatists as a pre-condition

for negotiations. On 17 March 2008, the head of the parliamentary committee on security and defence, Givi Tagamadze, a member of Saakashvili's inner circle, even suggested that if diplomacy proved ineffective, Georgia was ready to restore its territorial integrity with the help of the armed forces.¹²

This determination on the part of the Georgian side to restore the country's territorial integrity went hand in hand with an equally strong determination on the part of Russia to maintain its influence over Georgia and the Caucasus region as a whole through its hold over the two breakaway entities. The Russian Federation now viewed events in Abkhazia as part of its own internal affairs. During Saakashvili's presidency, the national project of Georgia, on the one hand, and that of the Russian Federation, on the other, became irreconcilable. This would lead to a total breakdown in relations between the two countries. Russia clearly viewed its continued hegemony over Abkhazia and South Ossetia as central to its national security. On the other hand, Georgia was equally determined to restore Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Georgian sovereignty, and sought to build alliances with the United States and Western Europe in order to achieve this aim.¹³ Relations between Russia and Georgia deteriorated progressively during 2004–2008 and Russia imposed an economic blockade on Georgia in 2006.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in detail the five-day war that broke out between Russian and Georgia over South Ossetia in August 2008, which caused at least 600 deaths on both Georgian and South Ossetian sides and led to the temporary occupation by Russian troops of broad swathes of Georgian territory. It would appear probable that the political leadership in the Russian Federation had prepared for the eventuality of war in South Ossetia and had made strategic military contingencies with this end in mind.¹⁴ In many ways, it would seem that the Russian leadership goaded Saakashvili into launching a military assault on the enclave so that Russia could subsequently reinforce its grip on both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, most observers also agree that Saakashvili's decision to launch a military attack on Tskhinval'i on the night of 7 August was ill thought-out and foolhardy.¹⁵

Certainly, the effects on the Georgian state-building project were devastating. Altogether, Georgia lost control over the Upper Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia, Akhgori district in South Ossetia, as well as Georgian villages in other parts of South Ossetia, mainly in the Liakhvi Gorge close to Tskhinval'i, which Georgian forces had controlled before the conflict. Following Russia's decision to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states in late August, the Russian Federation pledged to station a total of approximately 3700 troops in each of the two breakaway regions, suggesting that the 'independence' of the two enclaves would be strictly circumscribed. For Georgia, the major consequence of the war was one that almost all Georgians, both within the government and amongst the population at large, would continue to deny: that neither South Ossetia nor Abkhazia will be returned to Georgian sovereignty in the foreseeable future.

The ill-fated decision to intervene militarily in South Ossetia without due appraisal of the potential consequences reflects a lack of institutionalization of the decision-making process and a legacy of arbitrary rule that dates back to the Soviet period. All key decisions were taken by a narrow circle of Saakashvili's close associates, who were unrestrained by any mechanism of oversight or any effective opposition. The government, in order to maintain its grip on power, sought to portray the domestic opposition as *pro-Russian* and therefore traitors to their homeland.¹⁶ In turn, opposition politicians were forced to play the same game by showing that they were even more 'patriotic', more anti-Russian and more forceful in their desire to reintegrate Georgia than the government. This left no space for a moderate discourse that would promote negotiation and compromise.

Alongside its drive to bring back the two breakaway enclaves, the Saakashvili administration also pledged to integrate national minorities as full citizens of Georgia. There was a new

emphasis on ‘civic nationalism’, based on the notion that all citizens, irrespective of their nationality, have the right to participate fully in public life. However, this policy led to fears amongst some members of national minorities that what the Georgian government really had in mind was forced assimilation of minorities.

During the Saakashvili administration, the following trends have been observed with respect to the integration of national minorities: greater emphasis on teaching Georgian in schools where national minorities are concentrated, often with the assistance of international donors such as the OSCE; promises to improve the basic infrastructure in areas where national minorities are concentrated, including a promise to rehabilitate the roads linking Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda to other Georgian cities with the help of the US-funded Millennium Challenge Grant; the establishment of a school of public administration, named after the late prime minister Zurab Zhvania, aimed to recruit members of national minorities to work in the civil service; the establishment of youth camps called ‘patriot camps’ aimed to bring together young people from different ethnic backgrounds; and the ratification of the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, which came into force in December 2005.

However, within this new policy direction, certain assimilationist tendencies can be observed. If we look at the markers of this new ‘civic’ identity, the main one is the Georgian language, which is to serve as the basis for national integration. While this can be seen as a practical step that is based on the necessity of establishing a *lingua franca* for all nationalities of Georgia to replace Russian, which served that role during the Soviet period, language is nevertheless laden with symbolism and is seen as closely tied to notions of nation and nationhood. Moreover, looking at some of the rhetoric from the Georgian leadership, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the cultural markers that are to define the new ‘civic’ Georgia are to be predominantly ethnically Georgian. Here a speech delivered by Mikheil Saakashvili at the congress of his party, the National Movement, on 22 November 2004 to celebrate the first anniversary of the Rose Revolution is illustrative:

True heroes are Shorena [a young teacher who addressed the conference earlier] and hundreds of other young idealists like her, remarkable people for whom their homeland is more than simply empty words and drum-beating ... This is her daily work. ... She gets up at six o’clock and takes four different buses to go from Tbilisi to Sadakhlo [a place with a large ethnic Azerbaijani population]. She spends more than half her salary on these buses, so that she can teach not just the Georgian language, but also Georgian national consciousness. These are the kind of people who are building the new Georgia.¹⁷

This new emphasis on nation-building by ‘teaching Georgian national consciousness’ alarmed some representatives of national minorities who feared cultural assimilation. In particular, they objected to provisions in the new Bill on General Education, passed in 2005, which required Georgian language and literature, the history and geography of Georgia as well as ‘other social sciences’ to be taught in Georgian as part of the national curriculum by the academic year 2010–2011 at the latest. They objected not only because of the short time-scale, which many believed to be unrealistic due to the low level of competence in Georgian of many members of national minorities, but also because they feared that the new curriculum would deprive their children of the opportunity to learn about the culture and history of their own people. Instead, they would be forced to learn the highly contested official historiography of the Georgian nation. Although schools for national minorities would still have the right to teach the minority language, history and culture as specialist subjects outside the national curriculum, the fear remained that the long-term goal of the new government was to turn members of national minorities into Georgians.¹⁸

Despite the new emphasis on ‘civic nationalism’ and despite the passage of 15 years since Georgia acquired independence, historical discourses that emphasize (ethnic) Georgians’

unique claim to indigenesness and that gave priority to Georgian cultural symbols still prevailed. In particular, arguments over which groups were indigenous to Georgia still clouded the debate over the language issue. Thus, leading government officials and parliamentarians frequently argue that while Abkhazian may be recognized as a second state language on the territory of Abkhazia because it is an autochthonous language and is not used in any other 'kin state', Armenian, Azerbaijani and Ossetian, fulfilling neither of these criteria, could not be given such status (Korth *et al.* 2005).

As well as the motivation behind the new policy, questions have also been raised about its effectiveness. According to a survey carried out by the National Integration and Tolerance in Georgia Program (NITG) at the end of 2006, in Samtskhe-Javakheti and in Kvemo Kartli, respectively only 24.6% and 16.9% of inhabitants who belong to national minorities say they speak Georgian. Most members of minorities who speak Georgian in Samtskhe-Javakheti almost certainly live in the ethnically mixed Akhaltsikhe district. The number of Georgian-speaking minority inhabitants who speak the language in the largely mono-ethnic Armenian districts of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda is likely to be much lower. More worryingly, perhaps, amongst those inhabitants between 18 and 25 years of age the corresponding figures are 15.1% and 14.1% respectively, showing that efforts to improve instruction in Georgian in recent years have been barely effective.¹⁹

The language barrier has prevented many members of ethnic minorities from entering state administration or even state universities. Language legislation to ensure that public servants had knowledge of Georgian – conveniently ignored during the Shevardnadze presidency – was enforced more enthusiastically after the Rose Revolution. There were isolated incidents in Javakheti of existing (Armenian) staff being replaced by Georgians in the Notary's Office and in the local office of the Ministry of Justice on the grounds that they were unable to speak the state language.²⁰ Increasingly, language tests and appraisals for civil servants were required to gain positions in various professions. Although these tests and appraisals had already been introduced during the Shevardnadze period, they had not been enforced.

These practices led to an under-representation of minorities in public life. According to the above-mentioned survey, only 4% (1222 employees) of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and only six out of 261 judges belonged to national minorities.²¹ Minorities were also under-represented in political life; in the 2004–2008 parliament only nine out of 225 MPs belonged to national minorities, and this number fell to six after the 2008 parliamentary elections, although the total number of MPs was also reduced to 150. This is lower even than during the Shevardnadze period; in the 1999–2004 parliament there were 14 members of national minorities.

Finally, minorities concentrated in rural areas remain ignorant of the political developments of the country, mainly because they cannot understand news broadcasts in Georgian. A survey carried out by the European Centre for Minority Issues in 13 rural districts in the provinces of Kakheti, Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti a few days before the parliamentary elections of May 2008 showed that, on average, ethnic Georgian respondents could identify 4.01 of the 12 parties and blocs that were competing in the elections, while members of ethnic minorities identified only 1.93 parties and blocs on average. The difference was highly statistically significant (on a Welch Two Sample *t*-test, $t = 23.55$, $df = 1051.64$, $p < 2.2e-16$).

Like the state-building project, the success of Mikheil Saakashvili's drive to integrate national minorities into public life ran into serious difficulties. First, the 'civic' notion of the Georgian nation was hard to distinguish from the ethnic concept, a distinction that has eluded Georgian nation-builders since the Soviet period. As a result, the drive was met with resistance by certain minority groups that feared assimilation. Second, the implementation of the project was ineffective and few tangible results could be observed.

Conclusion

The internal conflicts that engulfed Georgia at independence and remain unresolved today are, in part at least, a legacy of the Soviet Union. The ethnofederal structure of the USSR and the way the 'nation' was conceived during the Soviet period made it almost impossible for the new state first to function effectively and to create a 'national community' with which all citizens could identify. Moreover, as a result of the chaos that engulfed the country in the early 1990s, the Georgian state was unable to exercise the core functions that modern democratic states are supposed to provide. At the same time, state power did not become institutionalized; instead key decisions were the result of arbitrary decision making by the president and his inner circle. This too appears to be a legacy of the Soviet tendency towards arbitrary rule by the Party leadership. Under such circumstances, it proved hard for the new state to establish meaningful links with its citizens, to foster the development of a 'demos' or national community with shared values and to persuade citizens to identify with the new state.

Following the Rose Revolution in 2003, serious efforts were made to consolidate the authority of the Georgian state, and this included a drive to reintegrate the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The state-building drive achieved a degree of success, especially in terms of increasing the extractive capacity of the state and improving the delivery of public goods, even in remote rural areas in which national minorities were concentrated. However, the failure of the leadership to establish reliable democratic institutions and its preference for arbitrary decision making led to the decision to use the military as the main means of restoring territorial integrity. This would prove to be an abject failure.

Notes

1. See, for example von Herder (1969).
2. Lortkipanidze argues that the Apsilae and Abasgoi, mentioned by classical writers of the first and second centuries AD as inhabiting the area that today is Abkhazia, were not the ancestors of the modern Abkhazians, but were instead Kartvelians (Georgians). Therefore, she argues that it is Georgians, not Abkhazians, that are the autochthonous population of Abkhazia. Such discourse had already appeared in Georgian historiography in the 1950s; a much-cited 1954 publication by Georgian historian Pavle Ingoroqva championed the notion that the Abkhazian community was not native to the region. President Gamsakhurdia, on the other hand, eventually came to recognize the Abkhazians as autochthonous.
3. Five months after the massacre, an opinion poll indicated that 89% of Georgians supported Georgian independence. This compares with 64% of Estonians in August 1989 and 55% of Latvians in June 1989 (Beissinger 2002, p. 177).
4. The First Secretary of the Communist Party provincial committee (*obkom*) of Abkhazia was Abkhazian, and even in 1978, 39.4% of *obkom* members, 37.5% of city and district first secretaries and 45% of heads of Party departments at province district and city level were also Abkhazian (Cvetkovski). These figures are likely to have been even higher in the 1980s after Moscow's further concessions. Another estimate indicates that 41% of members of the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet and 67% of republican ministers belonged to the (Abkhazian) titular nationality (Tsikhelashvili).
5. For the most part, Georgian place names end with an 'i', whilst neither Abkhazian nor Ossetian place names do so. Throughout this article both forms of spelling will be indicated.
6. A major outbreak of violence in Abkhazia did occur in May 1998, when Abkhazian military units swept into the predominantly Georgian district of Gal/i and expelled most of the Georgian population living there.
7. See Julie A. George's article in this issue for further details.
8. The Armenian population of Javakheti frequently refers to what they term the 'Armenian genocide', i.e. the large-scale massacre of Armenians by Turkish Ottoman troops during the First World War.
9. IMF data. See <http://www.imf.org/external/country/GEO/index.htm>.
10. Ibid.

11. For example, these included Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Bokeria, Tbilisi Mayor Gigi Ugulava, Head of the National Security Council, Kakha Lomaia, Justice Minister, Zurab Adeishvili, the Head of the Parliamentary Committee on Security and Defence, Givi Tagamadze, Targamadze's Deputy, Nikoloz Rurua, and Minister of Internal Affairs, Vano Merabishvili. Most of these individuals were part of a network of former NGO activists who helped to mastermind the Rose Revolution.
12. *Civil Georgia: Online Magazine* (18 March 2008). Available from: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17380> [Accessed 21 January 2009].
13. Georgia's main goal was to join NATO. Although NATO refused Georgia a Membership Action Plan (MAP) in April and again in December 2008, they passed a declaration expressing the conviction that Georgia would become a NATO member at some time in the future. This infuriated Russia.
14. In May, Russia troops were sent into Abkhazia to restore a railway from Sukhum/Sokhumi to the Ochamchire region. During the August war the railway was used to transport Russian soldiers into Abkhazia. Moreover, according to the International Crisis Group (2008), local sources in South Ossetia reported that in late July Russian advisers and military officers arrived in the town of Java and hired local workers to help construct military buildings there.
15. Including Irakli Alasania, who claimed that the August crisis 'was caused by unilateral, chaotic, non-institutional process of decision-making on vital issues and absence of transparent system of governance'. *Civil Georgia: Online Magazine*, 24 December 2008. Available from: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=20191>.
16. After mass opposition protests in the autumn 2007 precipitated the declaration on a state of emergency on 7 November, the government-controlled media produced highly questionable evidence that appeared to link a number of opposition leaders with Russian intelligence.
17. BBC International Reports (Former Soviet Union) 22 November 2004. Original Source: Imedi TV, Tbilisi, in Georgian 1200 GMT, 22 November 2004.
18. Source: Interviews with the author; '24 Hours' online newspaper No. 231 (60), 6 April 2005; International War and Peace Reporting, *Caucasus Reporting Service*, No. 282, 14 April 2005. Available from: <http://www.iwpr.net>.
19. National Integration and Tolerance in Georgia. Available from: http://www.diversity.ge/files/files/ASR/NITG_Assesment_survey_report_Report.pdf [Accessed 21 January 2009].
20. Source: Interviews with the author.
21. National Integration and Tolerance in Georgia.

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