

a causal factor in Dudayev's moves toward independence. In the course of the sovereignization of the subjects of the Russian Federation after 1990, local elites encountered few problems in appropriating a fair share of profits from their mineral resources. The expensive and risky establishment of an independent state was by no means necessary. Neither do Chechnya's oil deposits serve as a motive for the Russian intervention. In 1993, only 2.6 million tons were pumped—less than 1 percent of the total output for Russia—and this is far too little to hold any strategic importance.

The single most powerful explanation for the second war in Chechnya is the previous war. In this respect, the argument that wars breed new wars is clearly supported. As Collier and Hoeffler predicted, it was not a desire for vengeance that triggered the war; rather, it was the incursion of two renegade commanders into the neighboring republic of Dagestan. What motivated this raid is far from clear. What made it possible was the existence of two idle, but well-armed and well-trained, militias in search of a mission.

The effect of ethnic dominance is difficult to gauge. The fact that Chechens were the largest ethnic group and that Russians were poorly organized and not mobilized certainly contributed to the speed of the Chechen revolution, which met no resistance at all. However, there was no interethnic conflict between Chechens and Russians in Chechnya. Russians opted for exit—many had left Chechnya even before the war started—and today, there are hardly any Russians living in Chechnya.

Finally, the mountainous terrain has had some effect on the duration of the war, as rebels have been able to retreat into the mountains and war supplies have been trafficked along mountain paths. However, the most decisive fighting has taken place in the urban environment, and the political conditions that paved the way to violence were first laid down in Grozny. Therefore, there is no evidence that terrain has causally contributed to the unleashing of the war in Chechnya.

5

Wars in Georgia

Background

In the bygone Soviet space, Georgia was without doubt the land of plenty and wonder. Located just south on the impressive mountain chains of the high Caucasus, every year hundreds of thousands of Soviet tourists visited its resorts on the Black Sea, relaxed on its beaches, and enjoyed excellent cuisine, fine wine, fresh fruits, hospitality, and the omnipresent public display of *grandezza* and style, which is so cultivated by Georgians. In the collective imagination of the Soviet public, Chechnya stands for the exotic, yet dangerous and wild Caucasus, and Georgia is its no less exotic but tamed and hospitable counterpart. Georgians were quite comfortable with the way their country and their culture were perceived in the Soviet Union, and they contributed to their national clichés, which, after all, served the tourism industry and brought cash into the country. Despite the fact that Georgia later produced an oppositional national elite whose radicalism and uncompromising stand toward the Soviet Union proved to be exceptional even by the standards of the late Soviet Empire, many Georgians are well aware of the fact that Georgia's special position within the Soviet Union was not entirely to its disadvantage. It is not uncommon for Georgians jokingly to toast to "the colony we have lost—to the Soviet Union," a reference to the opportunities that the exploitation of the Soviet shadow economy offered (a field which the Georgians, according to abundant anecdotic evidence, had perfected). When, in the early 1990s, a series of internal wars devastated the country, undoing all remnants of functional statehood, this came as no less unexpected and shocking for the Georgian population than it would for the populations of Germany or Norway today.

Between 1989 and 1993, there were three related wars in Georgia. The first, over the breakaway region of South Ossetia, began in Novem-



ber 1989, escalated in January 1991, and then flared up again in June 1992. The second war was fought between rival Georgian groups bidding for political power; it began in December 1991 and ended in November 1993 and was triggered by the violent overthrow of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia by a coalition of opposition politicians and warlords. The third war was over the breakaway Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia; it began in August 1992 and ended in September 1993 with the defeat of Georgian troops. The conflicts over South Ossetia and Abkhazia remain formally unresolved to the present day. In both cases, the secessionist entities have asserted themselves militarily but have failed to gain international recognition.

The wars have cost up to 13,000 lives and have produced the second largest ethnic cleansing in the former Soviet Union, when Abkhazian forces “cleansed” 200,000 mostly ethnic Georgians from the breakaway republic. But even in catastrophe and war, Georgia at least partly held up to its theatrical, dramatic style where tragedy and comedy are closely intertwined. It seems unusual for a sculptor and a playwright to become the leaders of the two largest paramilitary forces, while the president is the translator of Baudelaire into Georgian and the son of Georgia’s best-known modern novelist. All three leaders were drawn from Tbilisi’s close-knit intellectual elite. Perhaps, therefore, it is also not surprising that it is quite hard to find a Georgian who had participated in any of the militias and who had a rank lower than colonel. It seems that these armies, commanded by artists and intellectuals of a

sort, consisted only of officers. And finally, it may also be characteristic of Georgia that the leaders of the eventually defeated paramilitaries were pardoned by President Shevardnadze and allowed to return to a life as privateers; Shevardnadze, in turn, after having lost power in the so-called Rose Revolution, retired unharmed. In Georgia, it seems, the gestures of pardon are respected more than the thrust for vengeance. This, at least, sets the wars in Georgia apart from other wars in the Caucasus region.

Georgia (69,700 km²) lies in the South Caucasus and has an extraordinarily varied ecology, with alpine, subtropical, and semiarid climatic zones. To the west, the country is bordered by the Black Sea; the northern border is formed by the Caucasus mountain chain. Here, Georgia borders on the Russian North Caucasian republics of Karachai-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan. In the southeast, Georgia has borders with Azerbaijan; in the south with Armenia and Turkey. Around 65 percent of Georgian territory is over 800 m above sea level; 30 percent lies over 1,500 m and is mountainous. The territory of contemporary Georgia was incorporated into the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 19th century. After 1917, Georgia became an independent republic for a short time before being forcefully incorporated into the new Bolshevik state in 1921. In 1936, Georgia received the status of an SSR within the framework of the Soviet Union.

Georgia has a multinational population; in 1989 it had 5.4 million inhabitants, 70 percent of whom were Georgians. Armenians (8 percent), Russians (6.3 percent), Azeris (5.7 percent), Ossets (3 percent), and Abkhaz (1.8 percent) were the larger minority groups. There were three autonomous, ethnically defined regions within Georgia. The Autonomous Region of South Ossetia in the north, and the Autonomous Republics of Abkhazia and Ajaria in the west, at the Black Sea coast. The Abkhaz comprised only 17.8 percent of the total population of 525,000 in their ASSR. The Georgians, with 45.7 percent of the population, constituted the largest group.

In South Ossetia, in contrast, the titular nation constituted 66 percent of the total population of around 100,000. With 29 percent of the population, Georgians made up the largest minority. A further 100,000 Ossets lived outside the AO in the rest of Georgia, and 335,000 Ossets lived in North Ossetia, which now belongs to the Russian Federation, and which is linked with South Ossetia by a tunnel through the

Caucasus Massif. In Ajaria, the third autonomous region in Georgia, about 63 percent of the population were Ajars.¹

Georgia possesses no mineral resources. The products of Georgian agriculture, especially wine and other alcoholic beverages, but also citrus fruits, grown mostly in Abkhazia, and tea, brought large profits on the Soviet market (especially in the shadow economy). Living standards during the Soviet period in Georgia were noticeably higher than in other Soviet republics, with the exception of the Baltic states, even if this is not reflected in the official Soviet statistics.² The 1980s in Georgia was a period of especially rapid growth in the shadow economy, and at the end of the decade (i.e., at the end of the Soviet Union), significantly more was produced in the shadow economy than in the official economy. Even if reliable data are lacking, it can be cautiously estimated that there had been no negative growth in per capita income in Georgia before the escalation of the first of the three conflicts, the war against South Ossetia in November 1989. After 1989, the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union were exacerbated by the effects of the internal wars in Georgia, and the Georgian economy started to shrink dramatically: in 1990 by 11.1 percent, in 1991 by 20.6 percent, in 1992 by 43.4 percent, and in 1994 by 40.0 percent.³ The civil war for power in Tbilisi and the war against Abkhazia took place, therefore, in a period when the official economy barely existed any more.

Georgia's Way to War

During the early years of perestroika, Georgia was a relatively peaceful republic, ruled by an ethnically homogenous Georgian *nomenklatura* that was organized into closely knit patronage networks and skilled in exploiting the lucrative opportunities offered by the Georgian shadow economy. A Georgian nationalist discourse opposing Soviet assimilationist policies had been present sporadically since the 1970s, but a real opposition movement had not existed. It was not until the beginning of 1988 that an oppositional nationalist discourse similar to that which existed in the Baltic states and Armenia—a discourse representing religious, cultural, and political concerns—established itself in Georgia.⁴

Among the first oppositional groupings was the Ilya Chavchavadze Society, founded by the dissidents Giorgi Chanturia, Irakli Tsereteli, and Tamar Chkeidze. The Ilya Chavchavadze Society was a broad plat-

form for dissidents and parts of the liberal intelligentsia. At the same time, foreign-language specialist Zviad Gamsakhurdia and musicologist Merab Kostava, both dissidents who had spent some time in Soviet prisons and thus had considerable prestige within the emerging national movement, created the Helsinki Union. At that time, both groupings were mainly concerned with issues of Georgian national culture. In 1988, radical leaders broke away from these groupings to form new, more politicized and more nationalist movements: Gamsakhurdia and Kostava formed the Society of St. Ilya the Righteous, Tsereteli founded the National Independence Party, and Girogi Chanturia built up his National Democratic Party. The latter was the first group with an explicitly separatist program. Already in its early stages, what was to become the leitmotif of the Georgian national movement became visible: small groupings with only rudimentary internal organizational capacities, formed around charismatic leaders and personal ties rather than a program, with a tendency toward fragmentation and radicalization.

The nationalist tide soon grew stronger and developed variations on a general theme, such as Georgian victimization, distortion of Georgia's national history, prohibition of a national memory, and imposition of Russian-Soviet foreign rule. Even the pro-Communist Rustaveli Society appropriated the main elements of the nationalist discourse (short of the demand for independence).⁵ Beginning in 1989, the radical Georgian nationalists dominated the public sphere. The more radical groupings around Chanturia, Kostava, Tsereteli, and Gamakhurdia were pivotal in organizing mass demonstrations in Tbilisi. Already in November 1988, the national opposition mobilized up to 200,000 demonstrators in order to protest a proposed constitutional change that would have given the new USSR Congress of People's Deputies the right to impose union law over republican law. By the end of 1988, the national mobilization had clearly developed into a real political power, posing a serious threat to Communist rule.

National mobilization in Georgia proper was mirrored (and in large part dependent on) national mobilization in Georgia's autonomous republics. The first wave of national mobilization hit Abkhazia. Abkhazia was an autonomous republic within Georgia with 525,000 inhabitants, of whom 45.7 percent were Georgians, 14.3 percent Russians, and 14.6 percent Armenians. The Abkhaz made up 17.8 percent of the population.⁶ The Abkhazian-Adygean language group belongs to the North Caucasian linguistic family, akin to the Chechen-Dagestanian group and

not related to the Kartvelian family of languages of which Georgian is a member. There are both Orthodox and Muslim believers among the Abkhazian population. The relationship between Georgians and Abkhaz was not free of tension during the Soviet period. The severe policies of repression under Stalin, Abkhaz' fear of Georgian demographic and political dominance, and the competition for resources between Tbilisi and Sukhumi (mainly over money transfers from Moscow, but also over cadre positions in Abkhazia and control of lucrative segments of the shadow economy) had caused political friction. As long as Soviet rule was firmly established in the region, however, this friction had not led to violent conflict between the local Abkhaz and Georgian populations.

In 1957, 1967, and 1977, Abkhazian cultural movements and parts of the intelligentsia (and some high-ranking Communist Party functionaries in 1977) requested that Moscow integrate Abkhazia into the territory of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR). The Soviet leadership turned down the Abkhazian request each time but compensated them by putting together a package of concessions and increased regional investment. These compensatory measures led to the Abkhaz' gaining disproportionate access to resources and to key political positions. This was particularly true at the end of the 1980s when Tbilisi was losing its grip over local Abkhazian affairs. In 1990, some 67 percent of the ministers in the Abkhaz government were Abkhaz.⁷ As economic control went hand in hand with administrative power in the Soviet system, Abkhaz controlled most of the local economy.

When the national tide grew stronger among Georgians and Abkhaz, each group started to promote its discourses about past injustices. The Abkhaz complained about the shifting of demographic proportions in their republic. Primarily due to the immigration (including a government-led resettlement) of Megrelian (western Georgian) peasants to Abkhazia during the Soviet period, the proportion of Georgians in the autonomous republic had risen from 28 percent in 1914 to 45.5 percent in 1989, thus heightening competition over scarce land.⁸ Abkhaz also complained that per capita investment in Abkhazia was only 40 percent of the level of investment in the rest of Georgia. This was factually correct but incorrectly interpreted as ethnic discrimination since Georgians were the largest ethnic group in Abkhazia and would thus be the main victims of a discriminatory policy. Furthermore, Abkhazia, as the "Soviet Riviera," was without a doubt one of the wealthiest regions of the

Soviet Union and enjoyed a far higher standard of living than the rest of Georgia.

The Georgian population in Abkhazia, meanwhile, complained about the disproportionate allocation of key positions in Abkhazia. In particular, control over the distribution of land was important, since produce from the Abkhazian agricultural sector, including tea, tobacco, wine, and citrus fruits, brought huge profits on the Soviet market. The Georgians in Tbilisi accused the Abkhaz of having special connections to patrons in Moscow and regarded the Abkhazian national movement as an existential threat to the ultimate objective of Georgian independence from the Soviet Union.

In June 1988, some 58 Abkhaz Communists sent a letter to the Nineteenth Party Conference in Moscow demanding the uncoupling of Abkhazia from the Georgian SSR. This demand awakened Georgian fears of a repetition of the scenario in Karabakh, when an autonomous entity in one former Soviet republic sought to be integrated into another. A mass demonstration in Abkhazia took place in March 1989 near Sukhumi at Lykhny, a place that is significant in Abkhazian history and mythology due to its holy tree and the fact that it was the historical residence of Abkhazian rulers. Some 20,000 people, including Abkhaz members of the Communist elite, signed the Declaration of Lykhny, calling for the promotion of Abkhazia to the status of a union republic, which implied secession from Georgia. The declaration was published in Abkhazian newspapers on March 24, 1989. In July 1989, the first cases of intercommunal violence occurred. Sixteen people died and hundreds were injured.⁹ The clash was provoked by an attempt to divide the University of Sukhumi into two parts, one of which was to become a branch of Tbilisi State University.

The Georgian national movement reacted to Abkhaz mobilization and especially to their demand to join the Soviet Union as a union republic with a new call of its own. Throughout the country, mass demonstrations took place, combining anti-Communist and anti-Abkhazian slogans. The anti-Abkhazian mood strengthened, especially among the Georgian community in Abkhazia. In March 1989, the news of a mass demonstration of Abkhaz—at which, again, the secession of Abkhazia from Georgia had been demanded—led to one of the largest protests in Tbilisi's history. The Georgian Communist Party leadership, fearing a loss of control over the situation in the capital, asked Soviet troops to

move in against the demonstrators. On the morning of April 9, the army violently broke up the demonstration. Hundreds were wounded, and 19 people were killed, mostly women and girls. The events of April 9 were a turning point in the Georgian drama, but they resonated also within the Soviet Union and beyond, dealing a fatal blow to the Communist regime's legitimacy. Virtually minutes after the brutal dispersion of the demonstration, rumors began to spread that the Soviet army had killed demonstrators with sharpened shovels and toxic gas. These rumors found their way into both Soviet and Western media and soon turned into a widely accepted version of what happened. There are good reasons to doubt this version, and I could find no eyewitnesses who actually confirmed the story. Rather, it seems that the victims were trampled to death in the mass panic that emerged when the poorly trained, poorly equipped army units started to clear the square, which was blocked by barricades made from buses.

Whatever the real course of events may have been, the bloodbath of April 9, 1989, destroyed in an instant whatever legitimacy the regime had, with immediate consequences: the national opposition became much further radicalized, and moderate voices were almost completely sidelined. After April 9, the various leaders of the national movement overtly demanded full independence; neither compromise with the authorities nor a gradual approach was an option. Public opinion rallied behind these nationalist demands, while the Communist regime lost all legitimacy and public support. Moreover, as Jonathan Wheatley argued in his authoritative account of the Georgian transition, the events of April 9 also effectively stymied all efforts to create a Popular Front along Baltic lines.¹⁰ In the Baltic, the Popular Fronts were based on a compromise between the so-called reform Communists and the leaders of the broad national movements. It was this compromise that enabled the Baltic states to avoid sharp elite cleavages and internal fragmentation. By contrast, the Georgian national movement was not simply radicalized and internally fragmented; it was also unable to engage in any (even if only tactical) compromise with the state authorities. By default, politics in Georgia became even more deinstitutionalized.

One additional consequence of this was the emergence of paramilitary groups, especially the Mkhedrioni (horsemen, or knights). The Mkhedrioni can be described as a loosely organized paramilitary grouping that successfully combined national-patriotic symbols and rhetoric

with lucrative criminal entrepreneurship. It was founded by former bank robber turned playwright Jaba Ioseliani. After April 9, the Mkhedrioni's appeal to protect and defend the Georgian population, especially women and children, from Soviet assaults was answered by many new recruits. The Mkhedrioni would soon have a crucial role in the organization of violence in Georgia.

Moscow reacted to the rapidly unfolding crisis in Georgia as it had some months earlier during the Karabakh crisis by replacing local officials. In this case, it sacked the Georgian Communist Party chief, Jumber Patiashvili, and substituted the chairman of the Georgian KGB, Givi Gumbaridze. The shock of the events of April 9 was so great, however, that the new Communist Party leadership adopted the main demands of the nationalist opposition. Far-reaching concessions were made to the national movement. First, the leaders of the movement—Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Merab Kostava, and Giorgi Chanturia—were freed from jail. In August 1989, the Communist Party-dominated Georgian Supreme Soviet passed a language law that made the use of Georgian mandatory in the public sector throughout the republic, a move that was badly received in Abkhazia (where the majority of the non-Georgian population does not know Georgian) and in South Ossetia.

In September 1989, Gumbaridze demanded before the plenum of the Central Committee in Moscow that Georgia be allowed to regulate its own internal ethnic matters and suggested that it even be allowed to form its own armed forces for this purpose. In November, the Georgian Supreme Soviet proclaimed that it would not recognize Soviet Union laws that were contrary to Georgian interests. It declared Georgia's sovereignty in March 1990, thereby nullifying all treaties concluded by the Soviet government since 1921. Gumbaridze announced that it was the aim of the party to restore Georgian independence. The new Communist Party leader's increasingly nationalistic rhetoric greatly troubled those minorities that had regional autonomy within Soviet Georgia and added to their fears of Georgian dominance.

In March 1990, the Georgian Supreme Soviet legalized all the banned opposition parties and completed its split with Moscow by declaring Georgia to be an annexed and occupied state. In reaction to these unmistakable steps toward Georgian independence from the Soviet Union, the Abkhaz took unmistakable steps toward independence from Georgia. Significantly, the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet unilaterally proclaimed

Abkhazia to be a sovereign union republic and petitioned Moscow to be incorporated into the Soviet Union as a union republic. These steps were declared invalid by the Georgian Supreme Soviet.

After Abkhazia, a second hotspot to emerge was South Ossetia. An autonomous region within Georgia, South Ossetia had a population of just over 100,000, of which 66.2 percent was Ossetian and 29 percent Georgian.¹¹ About one half of all families in South Ossetia were of mixed Georgian and Ossetian origin.¹² The Ossetian language belongs to the northeastern group of Iranian languages. The majority of the Ossets are Orthodox Christians, while a minority are Sunni Muslims. Between 1918 and 1921, Menshevik-ruled Georgia violently suppressed the Bolshevik revolt of the Ossets. This event has had a significant role in the Ossetian discourse on the wrongs suffered throughout the group's history. In general, however, relations between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali, as well as relations between the Georgians and the Ossets living in South Ossetia, were mostly free of serious tension until the end of 1988. But in 1989, problems between these two groups began to increase. It then became clear that South Ossetia was taking the same path as Abkhazia: one aiming at secession from an increasingly nationalistic Georgia. It wanted to be unified with North Ossetia, an autonomous republic situated in the Russian Federation.

At that time, a war of laws escalated: The Ossets countered the Georgian language law that the Georgian Supreme Soviet had passed in August 1989 by making Ossetian the official language in South Ossetia. In November 1989, the South Ossetian Regional Soviet, the area's highest legislative organ, appealed to the Georgian Supreme Soviet and the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union to raise the status of South Ossetia from autonomous oblast (AO) to autonomous republic (ASSR). This appeal contained nothing unconstitutional and was not exceptional during the latter years of perestroika when all AOs and ASSRs strove to have their statuses raised. Nevertheless, the Georgian Communist Party and the national opposition perceived South Ossetia's request as a step toward secession and a threat to the goal of Georgian independence.

The Georgian national movement, the most popular leader of which was now Zviad Gamsakhurdia, made use of increasing tensions with South Ossetia. On November 23, 1989, in reaction to the decision of the South Ossetian legislature to upgrade the area's status to that of a sovereign republic, 30,000 Georgian demonstrators were mobilized and bussed to a protest demonstration in Tskhinvali, the capital of South

Ossetia. Upon entering the city, the demonstrators were obstructed by Soviet security forces. Clashes followed, primarily benefiting Gamsakhurdia; who had demonstrated that he was capable of mobilizing 30,000 people and was able to force his agenda on the Georgian Communist Party leadership. In reaction to this demonstration by the Georgian nationalists, the leadership of the Adamon Nykhas group began to form the first militias in South Ossetia.¹³ The Georgian population in South Ossetia began moving its transportable possessions to safety and preparing to flee should it prove necessary.

In August 1990, in preparation for the first free parliamentary elections in Georgia, the Georgian Supreme Soviet passed an electoral law forbidding the participation of groups that were only active on the regional level, essentially excluding any Ossetian party from participating in the elections. The regional South Ossetian Soviet reacted by proclaiming South Ossetia a Democratic Soviet Republic on September 20, 1990, and asked Moscow to allow it to stay within the Soviet Union. On December 9, elections were conducted in South Ossetia. The newly elected Georgian parliament, in which Gamsakhurdia's supporters formed a majority, declared the South Ossetian elections to be invalid and suspended the autonomous status of the region. A state of emergency was imposed on South Ossetia, and Interior Ministry security forces were posted to Tskhinvali.

The Gamsakhurdia government imposed an economic blockade on South Ossetia, cutting off the supply of electricity and gas, and on January 5, 1991, a 5,000-strong Georgian military formation, comprising local militias and members of the recently created Georgian National Guard, entered Tskhinvali, looting and attacking the civilian population. The blockade was maintained throughout the winter, with only sporadic clashes and the looting of a few villages. In early March, Gamsakhurdia outlined his program for resolving the crisis by restoring the "rightful authorities" in Tskhinvali and reducing South Ossetia's status to a "cultural autonomy." South Ossetia refused to participate in the referendum of March 31, 1991, to restore Georgia's independence. Two days before the voting, Gamsakhurdia ordered the newly formed National Guard to take control of Tskhinvali, but the paramilitaries retreated from the area after a couple of weeks of intensive clashes.

The level of hostilities remained low through the summer of 1991. The next escalation started in September, when Gamsakhurdia, facing an increasingly determined opposition, again ordered the National

Guard to move into South Ossetia. He obviously sought to save his presidency by scoring an impressive victory, but the National Guard saw little incentive for engaging in protracted warfare in a province that had no lootable resources. Only a few detachments attempted several attacks, but they were repelled by the better-organized Ossetian militia. In January 1992, Gamsakhurdia was ousted in a military coup (as discussed below), creating an opportunity to deescalate the conflict. Indeed, Georgia's new leader, Eduard Shevardnadze initiated negotiations, seeking to put the blame for the violence squarely on Gamsakhurdia. However, the National Guard attacked Tskhinvali again in June and burned and destroyed up to 80 percent of dwellings in the city. The aim of that "last push" was perhaps not to achieve a decisive victory but to assert a position of strength in the final round of negotiations resulting in an agreement, which was signed on June 24, 1992, by Shevardnadze, Russian President Boris Yeltsin, and representatives from South and North Ossetia. The agreement marked the end of open hostilities and established a cease-fire that was to be monitored by a joint peacekeeping force for which Russia contributed a battalion of 700 lightly armed troops. Political pressure from Moscow, and threatening gestures such as sporadic helicopter attacks on Georgian villages, forced Shevardnadze to agree to a cease-fire. In July 1992, a Russian-Georgian-Ossetian peacekeeping force under Russian leadership began monitoring a negotiated cease-fire.

By the fall of 1990, it was already clear that Georgia was falling apart. Two out of three autonomous entities, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, were largely outside Tbilisi's control. The Georgian national movement was deeply divided, and paramilitary "pro-fatherland" groups were operating largely unchecked. Yet, on April 9, 1991, exactly two years after Soviet troops violently suppressed the April demonstrations in Tbilisi, the Georgian parliament declared Georgia's independence, and on May 26, Gamsakhurdia was elected president with over 86 percent of the vote. Gamsakhurdia lasted less than a year in office. He was ousted after a coup and a subsequent civil war, Georgia's second war.

The starting point of the first Georgian civil war was the August 1991 putsch in Moscow. Gamsakhurdia, surprised by these events, declared that he was neutral in relation to the struggle for power in the Soviet Union, but he complied with the Soviet military commander's demand to integrate the Georgian National Guard into the structure of the Soviet Interior Ministry. The leader of the National Guard, Tengiz

Kitovani, however, resisted this order, which would have meant the dissolution of "his" guard, and withdrew with his troops from Tbilisi in September 1991, leaving the president without an effective military force. Moreover, Prime Minister Tengiz Sigua defected. This left Gamsakhurdia with very few armed men on whom he could rely. Kitovani and Sigua moved against the isolated and increasingly erratic Gamsakhurdia, whose vehement anti-Soviet and nationalist politics could not hide the fact that the Georgian state was falling apart and remained internationally isolated.

On December 22, 1991, approximately 500 National Guard soldiers entered Tbilisi and, after a short siege of the parliamentary building, drove the elected president into exile. On January 6, 1992, Gamsakhurdia fled to Armenia, and the opposition claimed victory. The civil war was by no means over, however. The deposed president mounted a military resistance from his home region in western Georgia against the new authorities in Tbilisi that lasted until the fall of 1993 and only came to an end when Gamsakhurdia's successor traded substantial parts of Georgia's sovereignty to Russia in exchange for military backing.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia is a controversial figure. For many Georgians, he was the messiah of Georgian independence from the Soviet Union; for many liberal intellectuals, he was a dictatorial, even fascist politician who ruined the country. Gamsakhurdia was born in Tbilisi in 1939. His father, Konstantine Gamsakhurdia (1893–1975), was one of the most famous Georgian writers of the 20th century and one of leaders of the National Liberation Movement of Georgia in the 1920s and 1930s. Zviad followed closely in his father's footsteps. Educated as a philologist, he authored a number of critical literary works and monographs, and he translated British, French, and American literature, including works by T. S. Eliot, William Shakespeare, and Charles Baudelaire. He was awarded a professorship at Tbilisi State University and enjoyed membership of the prestigious Writers' Union of Georgia between 1966–1977 and 1981–1992.

Behind the official facade, however, this distinguished man of letters was active in the underground network of samizdat publishers, contributing to a wide variety of political periodicals. In 1955, Gamsakhurdia established a youth underground group, which he called the Gorgasliani (a reference to the ancient line of Georgian kings), that sought to circulate reports of human rights abuses. In 1973, Gamsakhurdia cofounded the Initiative Group for the Defense of Human Rights. In

1974, he became the first Georgian member of Amnesty International, and in 1977 he cofounded the Georgian Helsinki Group.

In 1956, Gamsakhurdia was arrested during demonstrations in Tbilisi against the Soviet policy of Russification and was arrested again in 1958 for distributing anti-Communist literature and proclamations. He was confined for six months to a mental hospital in Tbilisi, where he was diagnosed as suffering from “psychopathy with decompensation,” thus perhaps becoming an early victim of what became a widespread policy of using psychiatry as a means of political suppression in the Soviet Union. In 1977, a nationwide crackdown on human rights activists was instigated across the Soviet Union. First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party Eduard Shevardnadze ordered the arrest of Gamsakhurdia and his fellow dissident Merab Kostava. The two men were sentenced to three years of hard labor plus three years of exile for “anti-Soviet activities.”

At the end of June 1979, after serving only two years of his sentence, Gamsakhurdia was pardoned. The circumstances of his release from jail are controversial (Kostava remained in prison until 1987). The authorities claimed that he had confessed to the charges and recanted his beliefs. His supporters, family, and Merab Kostava claimed that his recantation was coerced by the KGB, and although he publicly acknowledged that certain aspects of his anti-Soviet endeavors were mistaken, he did not renounce his leadership of the dissident movement in Georgia. Gamsakhurdia returned to dissident activities soon after his release, continuing to contribute to samizdat periodicals and campaigning for the release of Kostava. When Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev initiated his policy of glasnost, Gamsakhurdia soon played a leading role in the national movement. He became the first president of independent Georgia.

During his short career as a politician, Gamsakhurdia capitalized both on his merits as a dissident and on his prestige as an intellectual, and he arguably mixed politics with his convictions about the “mission” of the Georgian nation. For example, in May 1990, in the midst of the political turmoil that the unmaking of the Soviet Union created, he delivered a speech at the Tbilisi philharmonic, in which he developed rather opaque theories about the “spiritual mission of Georgia” and the “ethnogeny of Georgians.” Whatever the merits of these theories were, it was quite clear that there was little room in his thinking for those liberal values that may have helped defuse rising tension between various ethnic groups in Georgia. The final stages of Gamsakhurdia’s career as a

politician were marked by an increasingly authoritarian attitude, populist mobilization, and constant struggles with an opposition that rallied around the National Congress but that was also supported by the old cadres and an urban intelligentsia that increasingly feared the disastrous consequences of Gamsakhurdia’s erratic politics. On December 31, 1993, Zviad Gamsakhurdia died under murky circumstances. He was found dead in the village of Khibula in the Samegrelo region of western Georgia. According to British press reports, the body was found with a single bullet wound to the head. A variety of reasons have been given for his death, but most observers outside Georgia accept the view that it was suicide.

With the flight of Gamsakhurdia from Tbilisi in January 1992, what was left of Georgia was de facto governed by the commanders of two militias, Kitovani (commander of the National Front) and Ioseliani (commander of the Mkhedrioni). Kitovani, Ioseliani, and former Prime Minister Sigua formed a triumvirate that went under the name of the Military Council. The new authorities faced considerable challenges: the country was visibly falling apart, and its leaders lacked both domestic and international legitimacy. In a quite surprising move, the new leaders declared their commitment to democracy and signaled their willingness to work together with all political parties and leaders in order to restore order, and they called Eduard Shevardnadze back to Georgia, to be head of state.

Shevardnadze, who had served as Soviet foreign minister during Gorbachev’s most innovative phase, commanded a high reputation internationally and within Georgia and was widely seen as a senior statesman who could lead Georgia out of civil war. After his return on March 7, 1992, Shevardnadze was named chairman of a transitional government, the State Council, and entrusted with the task of leading the country out of civil war. In view of the circumstances, this task was extremely complex: in South Ossetia, the war could no longer be won; the conflict with Abkhazia threatened to reescalate at any moment; and deposed President Gamsakhurdia was operating with units loyal to him in western Georgia. In addition, Russia, as the successor state to the Soviet Union, put Georgia under pressure to join the newly formed Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and to agree to a Russian military presence in the country. Shevardnadze’s only (and very unreliable) backing at this time was his coalition with the entrepreneurs of violence, Ioseliani and Kitovani.

Simultaneous with the deescalation in South Ossetia, a new increase in violence took place in Abkhazia. For several years, the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict had been chiefly a war of laws (issued by the respective parliaments). On August 25, 1990, the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet proclaimed Abkhazia to be a union republic within the Soviet Union. This decision was immediately declared invalid by the Georgian Supreme Soviet. One serious attempt at reaching a compromise was made in August 1991, when Gamsakhurdia reached a power-sharing deal with the Abkhazian leadership in the form of an electoral code whereby electoral districts would be demarcated according to ethnic lines, effectively giving each group a quota of seats in the new 65-seat Abkhazian parliament. Thus, the Georgian population (representing 45.7 percent of the population of Abkhazia in 1989) would receive 26 seats; the Abkhaz (17.8 percent) would receive 28 seats; and the other groups (primarily Armenians [14.6 percent] and Russians [14.3 percent]) would receive the remaining 11 seats. A two-thirds majority was required to make decisions on constitutional issues, thus preventing either of the main groups from pushing through constitutional amendments without the consent of the other.¹⁴ On September 29, 1991, elections were held to the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet on the basis of this law, with a second round of voting held on October 13 and December 1. In the long run, however, the 1991 agreement would not be honored.

One reason that this agreement failed was the collapse of the Gamsakhurdia government, which had several major repercussions. First, because the new Shevardnadze administration was doing everything it could to delegitimize Gamsakhurdia, it was reluctant to lend active support to a power-sharing arrangement forged by him. Second, in response to criticism from Gamsakhurdia's supporters that Shevardnadze's government was "Moscow's puppet," the new government sought to portray itself as an even stauncher defender of national interests than Gamsakhurdia. For this reason, it was tempting for the government to portray the 1991 agreement as a "betrayal of the national interest." Third, the Abkhazian leadership saw a window of opportunity in the breakdown of authority and legitimacy in Georgia, and on July 23, 1992, members of the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet, without attempting to secure a two-thirds majority in accordance with the power-sharing compromise agreement of August 1991, passed a law reinstating the draft 1925 Abkhazian Constitution adopted by the All-Abkhazian Congress of Soviets that declared Abkhazia to be a sovereign state.

Tensions increased once more in August 1992, when troops supporting Gamsakhurdia kidnapped the Georgian minister of the interior and a parliamentary deputy, and were said to have brought their hostages to the district of Gali within Abkhazia. Whatever the truth of this allegation, Georgian troops took it as a justification for entering Abkhazia. On August 14, 1992, some 5,000 soldiers of the National Guard moved into Abkhazia and entered Sukhumi; another 1,000 guardsmen landed in Gagra, blocking Abkhazia's border with Russia. The Abkhazian parliament retreated to Gudauta and declared mobilization against Georgia's "invasion"; its armed forces (no stronger than 1,000) took defensive positions along the River Gumista, with the Russian airbase to their immediate rear.

For the first week of the war, Georgian troops were busy looting Sukhumi and Gagra, but then they discovered that the enemy was serious about protracted resistance. By the end of September, up to 1,000 armed volunteers arrived from the Russian North Caucasus via mountain passes to support the Abkhaz. On October 2–3, a surprise attack was launched on Gagra, where an isolated Georgian grouping was soundly defeated. After restoring the main line of communications with Russia, the Abkhazian de facto government started to build up its forces.

One of the most serious controversies in the Abkhazian war involves the role of Russia. Officially the Russian government tried to mediate the cessation of hostilities on the basis of a compromise, less concerned about the fate of Abkhazia than about its control over the North Caucasus. At the same time, Russian forces deployed in Abkhazia provided direct support for the rebels. The Abkhazians attempted an offensive in mid-July 1993 and launched their decisive attack on Sukhumi in mid-September, despite the cease-fire agreement of 27 July, guaranteed by Russia. Sukhumi fell on 27 September, and by the end of the month Abkhazian forces had driven the demoralized National Guard south of the River Inguri, establishing control over the whole territory of Abkhazia and forcing some 200,000 Georgians to flee. That was the end of the war, which was confirmed by the deployment of 3,000 Russian peacekeepers in July 1994 under a CIS mandate and UN monitoring by the 100-strong United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia. That operation, however, has not helped in setting an effective framework for the peace process; negotiations on resolving the conflict remain deadlocked, while fighting occasionally resumes. The most serious clashes occurred in May 1997 and October 2001.

After the defeat in the war in Abkhazia, Georgia was forced to end its opposition to the CIS by becoming a full member and to sign a series of security cooperation agreements. In June 1994, the Abkhazian and Georgian authorities agreed to the deployment of Russian peacekeepers between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia.

While the war in Abkhazia was still going on, a new Georgian parliament was elected on October 11, 1992. At the same time, a direct election for the chairman of parliament took place, an election for which Shevardnadze stood unopposed. He won 96 percent of the vote on a 74 percent turnout. On November 6, 1992, the new parliament ratified the Law on State Power—making Shevardnadze chief executive, supreme commander of the armed forces, and head of state. Shevardnadze became president after the new constitution was ratified on August 24, 1995, and elections to the post were held on November 5, 1995. Shevardnadze won 74 percent of the vote in 1995, according to official figures.

These elections gave Shevardnadze the democratic and constitutional legitimacy that he had lacked during his assumption of power. After his failure to reestablish control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Shevardnadze faced off against Ioseliani and Kitovani, the paramilitary leaders who had called him back to Georgia in 1992 in the expectation that they would be able to control him with their paramilitary groups. Shevardnadze first neutralized the National Guard under Kitovani and gradually integrated it into the state structure. In May 1993, Shevardnadze dismissed Kitovani as minister of defense and in February 1994 Kitovani's protégé, Giorgi Karkarashvili, resigned and was replaced by a Shevardnadze loyalist, Vardiko Nadibaidze. In January 1995, in a last desperate bid for power, Kitovani (with the support of Tengiz Sigua) led a motley force of some 700 lightly armed supporters in a bid to retake Abkhazia. They were stopped by Georgian police and arrested. Meanwhile, in the autumn of 1993 Shevardnadze still had to rely on Ioseliani and his Mkhedrioni to defeat the forces loyal to ousted President Gamsakhurdia. Only in early 1995 did Shevardnadze order his Interior Ministry troops to take on the Mkhedrioni units. In fact, Ioseliani's deputy and the former Georgian minister of internal affairs, Temur Khachishvili, now deputy minister of state security, remained in their posts until the middle of 1995. Not until after the August 1995 assassination attempt against Shevardnadze were Ioseliani and Khachishvili arrested.

Ethnofederalism, Mobilization, and Fragmentation

With hindsight, it is possible to identify the main elements of this highly complex narrative of the Georgian drama, at the end of which one of the most beautiful and prosperous Soviet republics was devastated by a series of internal wars. It was the destructive mechanism of Soviet ethnofederalism, the internal fragmentation of the oppositional nationalist elite, and the unhealthy cooperation between a feeble state and private entrepreneurs of violence that, in the end, unleashed the Georgian wars.

The extent to which the process of mobilization of Georgians, Abkhaz, and Ossets was shaped by the institutions of the Soviet federal system becomes quite clear when contrasting the mobilization of Abkhaz and Ossets to the nonmobilization of other ethnic groups within Georgia. Ossets and Abkhaz are not the only, nor even the largest, national minorities in Georgia. In 1989, some 8 percent of Georgia's population was Armenian and 5.7 percent Azerbaijani. The largest number of both groups lived in relatively compact areas of settlement in southern Georgia, on the borders with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Yet, Armenians and Azerbaijanis living in Georgia did not mobilize, and in contrast to the Ossets and Abkhaz, they demonstrated no separatist tendencies. Decisively, the Abkhaz and Ossets already had their own autonomy and were equipped with political institutions and symbols that facilitated mobilization and secession. Armenians and Azerbaijanis, on the other hand, were not in autonomous regions or republics within Georgia. South Ossetia and Abkhazia, therefore, turned out to be powerful examples of the potentially subversive mechanism of Soviet ethnofederalism.¹⁵ (The third autonomous region within Georgia, Ajaria, did not embark on a secessionist course; the reasons for this are discussed in chapter 7, "Wars That Did Not Happen.")

Soviet ethnofederalism facilitated mobilization and separatism in the autonomous regions in different ways. First and most important, the substantial privileges enjoyed by the titular nations of the autonomous regions in the Soviet Union were threatened by Georgian moves toward independence. This was especially clear in the case of Abkhazia. As a result of demographic shifts in the Soviet period, the Abkhaz made up only 17.8 percent of the entire population of Abkhazia in 1989, while the Georgians comprised 45.7 percent. But because they held the key bureaucratic positions, the Abkhazian elite at that time had disproportionate access to political and economic resources.¹⁶ Moscow's increas-

ing weakness, together with the gradual destabilization of political control and property rights, threatened this system, particularly the privileged position of the Abkhaz.

Consequently, both groups mobilized in response to the new circumstances. The Georgians, hoping that they could take advantage of their position of relative majority, had the goal of abolishing the system of disproportional access to resources for the Abkhaz. The Abkhaz, who hoped for support from Moscow, sought to maintain the status quo or even to improve their political position. From this perspective, it was predictable that the Abkhaz would campaign for their autonomous republic to be directly subordinated to the Soviet Union. The demand for independence arose when the Soviet Union perished, depriving the Abkhaz of this potential umbrella. For the Georgian national movement, in contrast, Abkhazian loyalty to Moscow, inspired initially by predominantly economic interests, proved that they were the “servants of the Soviet empire,” thus threatening Georgia’s national struggle for independence. In this way, a conflict over resources was ethnically reinterpreted and harnessed to aid mobilization.

In addition, mobilization for separatism was favored by the fact that groups with autonomous entities, in contrast to national groups without their own territory, had political institutions that elites could exploit. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the national movements quickly gained ascendance in the context of a general crisis in the Soviet political system. In both entities, there was fierce competition for control over the local state structures between national elites. Communist officials participated in the rallies in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, putting their state and party resources at the disposal of their own national movements. Similarly, both the Ossetian and the Abkhazian elites embodied a “personal union” of the national intelligentsia and Communist Party officeholders. In both cases, the separatist activities soon shifted to the legislative bodies (soviets). Both the South Ossetian and the Abkhazian soviets turned repeatedly to Moscow with the request to be directly subordinated to the Soviet center. Both legislatures initially followed Soviet procedures, thus gaining a certain degree of formal legitimacy that was difficult for the government in Tbilisi to contest, particularly when Georgia had itself ceased to play by Soviet rules.

Moreover, the Soviet central government encouraged the separatist aspirations of the autonomous entities within the various union republics—

sometimes deliberately, sometimes involuntarily. The principle of divide and rule had been a core element of Soviet nationality policy since the Stalin era. In some cases, the autonomous units in the union republics were then used as a counterbalance to nationalist stirrings of the titular nation of a union republic. The titular nations of subordinated autonomies particularly profited from this arrangement, gaining a disproportionate access to resources, at least as long as their loyalty to Moscow was not questioned. In the late perestroika period, Moscow reverted to this procedure and largely supported both South Ossetia and Abkhazia against Georgia politically and, after the outbreak of hostilities, militarily as well. The Georgian side, struggling to explain away its two military defeats, often exaggerated this assistance. But South Ossetia and Abkhazia, before the outbreak of war, almost certainly overestimated Moscow’s real levers of influence. Distorted assessments doubtless did shape the separatist agendas in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Along with the drive of ethnonational mobilization and the enabling institutions of Soviet ethnofederalism, internal divisions among the new Georgian elites also paved the way for organized violence by preventing the consolidation of newly won independence.¹⁷ The story of Georgia’s national movement is a story of increasing radicalization and fragmentation.¹⁸

Surfing the wave of national mobilizations, the various nationalist groupings had already proved that they could mobilize hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in 1988. The traumatic events of April 9, 1989, strengthened the radical leaders over the moderates and turned the national movement into a serious political force—but a force that was internally fragmented and unwilling to engage in a tactical compromise, not to speak of cooperation, with the Communist regime. The first visible split within the movement related to the tensions in South Ossetia. Gamsakhurdia, by far the most popular leader, and seen by many of his followers as a sort of Georgian messiah, had a long record of defending what he perceived as the interests of Georgians within Georgia. Predictably, he took a radical stance toward the Ossets’ separatist aspirations, as he regarded them to be “guests”—as relatively new migrants—in Georgia anyway. In November 1989, he organized a protest march to South Ossetia’s capital, Tskhinvali, which was blocked only by Soviet Interior Ministry troops, thus preventing a probable bloodbath. Other leaders of the national movement, among them the

leader of the National Democratic Party, Chanturia, thought Gamsakhurdia's preoccupation with the issue of ethnic minorities within Georgia was far less important, and even damaging, to the overall objective of Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union.

A second blow to the internal cohesion of the national movement came with the elections to the Supreme Soviet of Georgia, which were planned for March 1990. Initially, most groupings agreed to boycott these elections to, as they saw it, a Soviet institution and planned instead to hold elections to an alternative parliament, the National Congress. To this end, the various groupings formed a National Forum, which was meant to plan for the elections to the alternative parliament. But Gamsakhurda, facing criticism over his attitude toward Ossetia, walked out of the National Forum and set up a new loose coalition, the "Round Table," which eventually participated in the election to the Supreme Soviet. These elections took place on October 28, 1990, and saw Gamsakhurdia's Round Table winning an overwhelming majority with 54 percent of the votes and 155 out of 250 seats.¹⁹ On September 30, shortly before the election to the Supreme Soviet took place, the National Forum went ahead with the elections to the alternative parliament. Although voter participation was not particularly high, it was sufficient to pass the 50 percent threshold the organizers had set. The National Independence Party and Chanturia's National Democratic Party came out first and second, respectively. The alternative parliament was also supported by Jaba Ioseliani, commander of the paramilitary Mkhedrioni, who even got himself a seat in the assembly.

Thus, by fall 1990, there were two "parliaments" in Georgia, the "Soviet" and the alternative, both dominated by radical nationalists although the most powerful armed grouping supported the latter. Influential patronage networks, old cadres, and the urban intelligentsia were not represented in either of these assemblies. The new legislature was thus never in a position to halt the erosion of the state. In particular, it was not able to mobilize the economic and political resources of the old cadres and patrons. Almost by default, Gamsakhurdia and his new parliament fell back on ethnonational mobilization as a means of retaining power. However, although nationalist mobilization led to electoral victory, it could not create state unity.

Organization of Violence and the Human Costs of War

The three Georgian wars had remarkably different patterns of organization, but in all three the paramilitary forces had to be built from scratch since the military structures of the Transcaucasus Military District remained under Russian control. While the spontaneous meltdown of Soviet law-and-order institutions created tempting opportunities for political actors to get access to the instruments of power, the rapid growth of militias can be explained only by a sharp decrease in recruitment costs. What emerged in Georgia in 1990–1991 as a result of the collapse of the institutional framework was a market of violence in which the demand was shaped by competing political platforms, with their various mobilization techniques, and the supply was basically the function of three parameters: the availability of young men, the availability of weapons, and the availability of financial resources.

In Georgia, the main armed groups were the National Guard (which was meant to be the core of a future national army) and the paramilitary Mkhedrioni. One of the first laws adopted by the new Georgian parliament declared the conscription of Georgians into the Soviet Armed Forces illegal—and this provided a potential pool of young men for a proto-army, the so called National Guard. The corresponding legislation was approved in January 1991 and authorized the buildup of a 12,000-strong force on the basis of conscription. Moscow reduced its financial transfers to the mutinous republic, so the Georgian government was unable to support its demand for the National Guard with meaningful resources. Instead of conscription, it had to rely on volunteers who enlisted to serve with their own weapons, and these volunteers had to rely on their weapons in order to feed themselves. Only in July 1992 did the National Guard receive a large amount of heavy armaments, including some 50 tanks, from the former Soviet arsenals in Georgia, controlled by Russia.²⁰

Tengiz Kitovani, a close supporter and friend of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was appointed first commander of the guard and also minister of defense. In the 1970s, Kitovani (born in 1939) served a prison sentence for armed assault, and in prison he had made the acquaintance of nationalist dissidents. Beginning in the early 1980s, he was very close to Gamsakhurdia. An artist by profession, Kitovani had neither military training nor experience, but he proved himself to be a very efficient fundraiser. Since state funds for the new National Guard were virtually

unavailable, Kitovani engaged in targeted taxation of various shadow businesses, thus building his forces through a soft extortion racket. Later on, the guard also controlled a lucrative arms trade. Many fighters motivated by the opportunity to loot joined its operations. In particular, the campaign against Abkhazia was clearly driven by the National Guard's economic motives, including a desire to control key sectors of the region's shadow economy.

The National Guard never came close to the targeted 12,000 men; until the summer of 1991, it had around 1,000 armed men. Although the pool of sympathizers, which could be mobilized when necessary, was far larger, they were untrained and undisciplined weekend soldiers, with a general motivation for looting. In its highly unsuccessful campaigns against South Ossetia and Abkhazia, approximately 5,000 to 6,000 men were involved, fighting under the umbrella of the National Guard, but many of them were these *de facto* weekend fighters and volunteers.

The founder of the other group, the Mkhedrioni, Jaba Ioseliani (1926–2003), was a former patron of the Soviet underground (a so-called thief in law—a criminal observing a code of honor and commanding respect from other criminals). Born in Khashuri, Georgia, Ioseliani majored in Oriental studies at Leningrad University but did not graduate. He staged a bank robbery in Leningrad in 1948, for which he served 17 years in a Soviet jail. Released in 1965, he later served another sentence for manslaughter. He eventually returned to his native Georgia and graduated from the Georgian Institute of Theater Arts, where he became a professor. He wrote a number of popular plays and enjoyed membership in the Writer's Union of Georgia.

The Mkhedrioni funded its activities from criminal dealings, including extortion and racketeering. In 1992, it also gained control over lucrative sectors of the economy, such as the gasoline trade.²¹ The Mkhedrioni saw itself as a patriotic society for the protection of Georgia, and its members often played with patriotic and religious symbols. Many displayed a large amulet with a portrait of Saint George on their chests. Essentially, the Mkhedrioni was the weapons-bearing arm of successful patriot-businessmen who put their private army at the service of the state when it waged war against secessionist minorities.

The Mkhedrioni had only very loose connections to any of the political parties or groups, but its leader, Ioseliani, had a personal antipathy toward Gamsakhurdia and treated him with the disregard that a re-

nowned criminal authority thought appropriate for a bookish and weak intellectual. By mid 1991, the Mkhedrioni had about 1,000 fighters and around 10,000 associate members and focused their attention on getting access to arms, buying or seizing them from Soviet military garrisons. According to Ioseliani himself, he had around 800 to 1,000 men in Tbilisi alone and around 4,000 in Georgia.²² The heyday of the Mkhedrioni came when, in 1993, Shevardnadze entrusted them with fighting supporters of the overthrown President Gamsakhurdia in West Georgia. In many respects, this war was similar to an organized looting campaign by weekend fighters, who were attracted by the calls for volunteers uttered by Ioseliani and other Mkhedrioni leaders on television. In general, volunteers formed small groups on a neighborhood basis and then obtained automatic weapons from the Mkhedrioni enlistment offices. At the height of the escalation, up to 3,000 fighters were engaged on each side. Up to 2,000 were estimated to have been killed in the fighting.

Neither the Mkhedrioni nor the National Guard was at any time under the control of the state. The Mkhedrioni opposed President Gamsakhurdia from the time it was established, and the National Guard resisted incorporation into the state structure and refused to pledge loyalty to the president. Gamsakhurdia's attempts to gain control over both organizations by means of patriotic mobilization led to an escalation of the war in Ossetia in the fall of 1991, and, in the final analysis, failed. Neither the Mkhedrioni nor the National Guard were interested in a campaign against the impoverished and already looted Ossetia. Both organizations were still less interested in coming under the control of the state because it threatened the basis of both organizations: their lucrative activity on the Georgian market of violence—in particular, the protection-racket business.

When the government attempted to establish firmer control over the National Guard and suppress the Mkhedrioni, the struggle for power in Georgia degenerated into a civil war. The warlords opted to seize political power directly, seeing the need to secure their monopoly on the extortion racket in order to sustain their paramilitary structures; they also recognized the need to find new loot. Gamsakhurdia's fate was sealed in the fall of 1991 when Kitovani and the National Guard turned against him. The battle for power in Tbilisi ended quickly after Gamsakhurdia's expulsion.

The successful coup still left the National Guard and the Mkhedrioni

with the problem of a rapidly shrinking resource base that undermined their sustainability. It was a remarkable achievement that a brewing clash between them was avoided by carefully dividing the spheres of control so that the Mkhedrioni got the monopoly over the distribution of fuel and the National Guard got the profit from the arms trade. After Kitovani and Ioseliani agreed to bring Shevardnadze back, both armed groupings were “promoted”: the National Guard became the “official army” (with Kitovani as the defense minister), and the Mkhedrioni became the interior forces (Temur Khachishvili, one of Ioseliani’s lieutenants, became the interior minister).

It was only the defeat of the National Guard in Abkhazia, as personally painful as it was, that provided Shevardnadze with a chance to eliminate the warlords from Georgia’s political arena. In late 1993, relying on assistance from Russia, Shevardnadze started to build a new security force, answerable to State Security Minister Igor Giorgadze, and was soon able to take assertive steps. In February 1994, the weakened Mkhedrioni was formally transformed into a so-called Rescue Corps. The next year, it was ordered to surrender its arms; and after the August 1995 assassination attempt on Shevardnadze, it was disbanded and its leadership arrested. Before that, in February 1995, Kitovani had been provoked into attempting a new march on Abkhazia, which was presented as a mutiny and suppressed by the security forces. In autumn 1995, relying on rehabilitated police and Interior Minister Shota Kviriaia (a former KGB general), Shevardnadze also managed to get rid of Giorgadze, which left him as the undisputed leader of Georgia’s armed agencies.

In Abkhazia, the capacity for the organization of violence started much later than in Georgia. Interestingly, until 1992 there was astonishingly little organized violence between local ethnic groups in Abkhazia. The ethnic balancing and functional multiculturalism of Soviet making was defended by all groups over a period of time and only destroyed by the intrusion of “foreign” paramilitary groups from Tbilisi. The escalation was a consequence of the overspill of the Georgian civil war.

When in August 1992, Kitovani’s National Guard started its military campaign in Abkhazia, the Abkhazian government fled to Gudauta and called for a general mobilization. The Abkhazian National Guard, at this point around 1,000 strong and mostly equipped with light weapons, took up defensive positions along the Gumista River near the Russian air base. The war was financed primarily by Abkhazians with bud-

get funds of the Abkhazian ASSR, with money from the local populations, and with contributions from the Turkish diaspora and Abkhazian businessmen in Moscow. The Abkhazians gained support from volunteers from the North Caucasus. Hundreds of volunteer fighters arrived, trickling through the mountain passes in small groups. Most of their weapons were from Chechnya.

Instrumental in the recruitment of these volunteer fighters was the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus. This was a pan-nationalist movement founded in August 1989 by activists from Adygea and Karachai-Cherkessia (both autonomous regions in the North Caucasus within the Russian Federation) and Abkhazia. In the early 1990s, the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus evolved into an insurgent political movement seeking independence for the states of the North Caucasus. While independence from Russia remained an elusive goal, the confederation was nonetheless able to build up a volunteer armed force that proved to be important during the war in Abkhazia. Later, in 1994, parts of this force became the core of the Chechen resistance against Russia.²³

The numerically disadvantaged Abkhazians found further support from the Russian army. Officially, Russia was endeavoring to find a peaceful settlement in Abkhazia and denied any involvement in the war. But its policy of divide and rule included military support to both sides in the conflict, which, over the course of the conflict, increasingly favored the Abkhazians. The Abkhazian National Guard received weaponry from a battalion of Russian forces stationed in Sukhumi, and some volunteer training camps were under the leadership of Russian instructors.²⁴ Furthermore, Russia supported the Abkhazians logistically, provided them with weapons, and occasionally leveled air strikes on Georgians from an airbase in Abkhazia. The Georgian side tended to inflate the Russian contribution to the war, underplaying the fact that it also obtained its weapons exclusively from Russian supplies.

Over the course of the year, while reinforcements from the North Caucasus and Russia constantly increased the fighting strength of the Abkhazians, on the Georgian side the opposite was true. The Georgian army of fighters and plunderers started to fall apart. On September 27, 1993, the Abkhazian fighters drove the last of the Georgian troops out of Sukhumi and a few days later were in control of the entire territory of Abkhazia. The remaining Georgian population in Abkhazia, totaling around 200,000 people, fled the region.

In Ossetia also, it was the challenge from Tbilisi that sped up the mobilization of the Ossets around the Adamon Nykhas (People's Assembly), created as a political platform for advancing the claim for more autonomy. This organization, operating on a very limited manpower base and an even more limited resource base, was hard pressed to build a paramilitary structure. The main source of small arms was the Soviet army helicopter regiment based in Tskhinvali. In response to that mobilization, in the neighboring Georgian villages a self-defense force known as the Merab Kostava Society began to grow and engaged in sporadic, low-profile clashes.

In early 1990, South Ossetian forces had only 300 to 400 poorly armed fighters, who were able to hold the second line of defense behind some 500 Soviet Interior troops. But in just six months, that force grew to about 1,500 full-time fighters plus some 3,500 quick-to-mobilize volunteers; it was able to resist more determined attacks without any direct help from Moscow. The better organization of forces on the South Ossetian side was largely the result of direct material support from North Ossetia (a part of the Russian Federation). Some 320,000 Ossets lived there (out of a total population of 630,000), compared with just 60,000 in South Ossetia, so the arrival of a few hundred volunteers made a big difference when the fighting around Tskhinvali came to a head. North Ossetia had several large Soviet army garrisons, which were "leaking" arms to local militias who then delivered them to the conflict area. It should also be noted that for South Ossetia the costs of mobilizing the force were further lowered by the flow of Ossetian refugees from the rest of Georgia.

Assessing the human costs of the Georgian wars is difficult because the available data is even poorer than those for the wars in Chechnya and Karabakh, and it is hard to distinguish between civilian and non-civilian casualties.

With regard to the war in South Ossetia, most sources speak of between 500 and 600 dead.²⁵ Around 12,000 Georgians (out of approximately 30,000 Georgians living in South Ossetia) left the region in several waves between 1990 and 1992. At the same time, approximately 30,000 Ossets living in Georgia left for North Ossetia in response to Gamsakhurdia's nationalist urgings.

The violent struggle for power in Tbilisi (from October 1991 to November 1993) took place in two distinct locations. The actual coup against Gamsakhurdia in Tbilisi in December 1991 cost around 120

lives. The further confrontations between the opponents and supporters of Gamsakhurdia took place mainly in West Georgia, Gamsakhurdia's home. In this war approximately 2,000 were killed.²⁶

The third war in Georgia was fought over the secessionist Abkhazia (August 1992–October 1993). This war was by far the bloodiest of the three Georgian conflicts, taking up to 10,000 lives, of which at least three-quarters were civilians.²⁷ Almost the entire Georgian population, between 230,000 and 250,000 people, were forced to leave Abkhazia.²⁸

Georgian Lessons

The story of the Georgian wars highlights once again the pivotal role of the Soviet ethnofederal system. The Georgian drama resulted from the disintegration of this structure, where each level of governance was ordered hierarchically—with the union center (Moscow) at the top, the union republic (Georgia) in the middle, and finally, the autonomous republic of Abkhazia and the autonomous oblast of South Ossetia at the bottom. Over the course of events, hierarchical top-down control became increasingly loose, and secessionist pressures at lower levels gathered strength. The emergence of a sovereign Georgia was paralleled by the growing determination of forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia to achieve their own sovereignty.

Mobilization in the third-tier units (ASSRs and AOs) was facilitated by the political institutions that these units provided to their titular groups. In Abkhazia and in South Ossetia, the national elites quickly put state and party bureaucracies at the service of the national cause. In particular, the Supreme Soviets, until 1988 little more than a simulation of representative bodies, increasingly changed into seats of political power and legitimacy that advocated and legitimized a separatist course for Tbilisi. Initially, both the Osset and the Abkhaz Soviets turned repeatedly to Moscow with the request for the respective autonomous region to be uncoupled from Georgia and directly subordinated to the Soviet Union. Formally, both legislatures initially retained the Soviet procedures, which lent their concerns a certain degree of legal legitimacy.

The separate waves of mobilization in Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia soon grew into a highly interdependent process in which each action produced a counteraction, thus further adding to the mobilization spiral. There are two elements to this spiraling. First, as Mark

Beissinger's seminal study convincingly argued in relation to mobilization processes throughout the Soviet Union, events in Georgia were interdependent and linked by what may be called the demonstration effect of successful nationalist mobilization.²⁹ Publics and elites closely monitored the efforts of other national movements, and every wave of mobilization that went unpunished by Moscow added energy to other national movements. In that sense, the spiral of ethnonational mobilization within Georgia was fueled not only by the rival movements of Georgians, Ossets, and Abkhaz but also by the national movements among the Baltic nations and the Armenians. Second, Georgians, Abkhaz, and Ossets mobilized in reaction to the national project of the other groups, which was perceived as a threat to their own national project. Each of these three groups came to see the ethnonational claims of the other group as mutually exclusive, and they mobilized in reaction to the other group's mobilization.

Neither the Abkhaz nor the Ossets had national independence high up on their agenda in 1988 or even 1990. Both entities actually opted to remain a part of the Soviet Union, with the status of a sovereign republic. This is arguably quite different from a national project that seeks to establish a fully independent, sovereign nation-state. One could then argue that the national project of the Ossets and Abkhaz was not so much defined by what they wanted to become but, rather, by what they did not want to be: a minority group within a rapidly nationalizing Georgia that clearly did not intend to honor the status quo that the Soviet Union had guaranteed to Ossets and Abkhaz. As a titular nation of an ASSR and an AO, each had profited from the "affirmative actions" of the Soviet Union. The Abkhazians in particular, who were only a minority within their autonomous republic, were set to lose these privileges within a nationalist Georgia. Yet, for a time, the competition between ethnonational discourses remained purely a war of words. Then it turned into a war of laws: beginning in 1989, many of the nationalist positions were turned into laws and proclamations by the revitalized Soviet legislatures, in which each authority claimed to be sovereign. But despite the fact that by now mutually exclusive claims were codified as laws, violence had not yet occurred, and the ethnically mixed communities within Abkhazia and Ossetia still avoided violence. As in the war in Bosnia, interethnic ties only broke down when the center unleashed its paramilitary forces to invade.

Violence in South Ossetia started only when Zviad Gamsakhurdia,

long a champion of the rights of ethnic Georgians within the autonomous republics, unleashed the recently created, paramilitary National Guard. Whatever the personal beliefs of Gamsakhurdia, it is clear that the war was a tactical move by a nationalist populist politician who was constantly threatened with being outflanked by an extra-parliamentary radical nationalist opposition. Furthermore, the move was based on a woeful miscalculation of the costs and benefits of this war, which was quickly lost on the battlefield.

The war in Abkhazia started when the commander of the National Guard decided to move beyond his military objective (which was to free hostages and unblock railroad barricades) and attacked the capital of Sukhumi. Here again, the National Guard proved to be effective at looting and plundering but was soon defeated on the battlefield. Earlier, a power-sharing arrangement that Gamsakhurdia (perhaps while under the impression that Ossetia had been defeated) and his counterpart Ardzinba had worked out, broke down, because Gamsakhurdia lost power in a coup where his own National Guard had turned against him.

In this light, war was neither inevitable nor the direct result of mutually exclusive national projects. Rather, what transformed competing mobilization and then the war of laws into shooting wars was the inability of the new Georgian nationalist leadership to close its ranks, to co-opt paramilitary forces into state control, and to consolidate state power.

One reason for the failed consolidation of Georgian statehood is that politics in Georgia was traditionally very highly personalized and dominated by many personal rivalries and animosities, especially within the national movement. Gamsakhurdia's awkward personality was also not suited to uniting an already divided national movement. After April 9, 1989, when Russian army units killed 19 demonstrators and wounded hundreds more, the national movement became even more radicalized, opposed to any compromise with the Soviet establishment, but at the same time remained internally fragmented.

Yet another step toward fragmentation was taken when parts of the national movement boycotted the elections to the Supreme Soviet but elected an alternative national assembly. As a result, there were two "parliaments" in Georgia: one, the Supreme Soviet, was dominated by Gamsakhurdia and national populist followers; the other was dominated by an equally nationalist opposition and by the commander of the only meaningful armed group, the paramilitary Mkhedrioni. In neither

assembly were the liberal intelligentsia represented. Perhaps more significant, there were no representatives of the influential nomenclature patronage-networks, which had shaped politics in Georgia over the previous decades and which commanded the large shadow economy. Hence, Gamsakhurdia, who dominated the parliament, could never tap into the economic or organizational resources of the old elite. He could only fall back on ethnonational mobilization as the key resource for retaining power, with, as it was to become clear, disastrous consequences.

Radical nationalist discourse, the factual loss of the state monopoly of violence, and the clear tendency of the Georgian “rump state” to employ the services of private violent entrepreneurs paved the way for the ascendance of paramilitary groups with obvious criminal-economic interests. Both the National Guard and the Mkhedrioni “taxed” the economy, engaged in criminal activities, and, when sent to war, did more looting than fighting. Both groups de facto operated beyond the control of the state and remained undisciplined paramilitary organizations, loyal only to their commanders, who combined “patriotic” with purely profit-seeking motivations. The escalation of the wars in Ossetia and Abkhazia was related less to a Georgian “grand policy” than to the fact that the Georgian rump had to rely on these loot-seeking groups, which it never could control.

This narrative of the Georgian wars has very much focused on domestic politics and especially on the fragmentation and radicalization of the national movement. The period was dominated by the very clear primacy of domestic policies, and events were shaped by local institutional structures and their interaction with the center in Moscow. None of the political actors normally thought to have an interest in the South Caucasus—Turkey, Iran, Armenia, Azerbaijan, the United States, and the European Union—significantly influenced Georgian domestic conflicts between 1988 and 1993.

An exception is obviously the Soviet Union and—after its dissolution—Russia. It would be wrong to deny the influence of Moscow on the events in Georgia, but it is equally wrong to attribute all of Georgia’s misfortunes to a malicious, well-planned imperial policy, as many Georgians and some Western observers did and still do. In fact, from at least the summer of 1990 on, Moscow was not capable of formulating a coordinated policy, let alone implementing one, due to the country’s accelerating economic collapse and the ongoing power struggles in the Kremlin. In the Caucasus, poorly planned and executed operations to

“restore” peace multiplied, such as the actions taken against demonstrators at Yerevan Airport in July 1988 and in Tbilisi on April 9, 1989. In the final analysis, these operations served only to speed the erosion of the Soviet monopoly of violence and the collapse of statehood, and to give momentum to the national movements. All this, in turn, added fuel to the conflicts within Georgia but certainly was not the intended consequence.

In its struggle against the secessionist union republics, it is undeniable that the Soviet central government sought a tactical alliance with national movements in autonomous regions and republics. It thus provided incentives for South Ossetia and Abkhazia to push for their own independence from Georgia. However, a prominent role for Soviet or Russian politics is not visible in any of the crucial watershed decisions on Georgia’s road to war, and neither the fragmentation of the national movement nor Gamsakhurdia’s radical nationalist populism and the emergence of national-patriotic paramilitary forces can be blamed on Russia. Once war started, the Russian army enforced a cease-fire in South Ossetia, and it militarily supported the Abkhazians against the Georgian forces. Thus, while Russia cannot be blamed for the wars in Georgia, it does bear some responsibility for the outcomes of these wars.

The story of the Georgian wars is the story of a weak transition state quickly degenerating into a failed state. However, Georgia’s fatal state weakness is not a direct consequence of the Soviet collapse. Rather, it is the consequence of a transition that could not be managed because the new ruling elites could not rule: they were internally too fragmented, they were challenged by two separatist national movements, and they could neither compromise with the old *nomenklatura* nor use the remaining state structures because their fierce anti-Soviet politics had deinstitutionalized what was left of the Soviet institutions.³⁰ Deprived of any meaningful tools for ruling, the new Georgian elites relied on their only resources—nationalist populism. The power of nationalism that had mobilized hundreds of thousands to demonstrate in the main squares of Tbilisi, Sukhumi, and Tskhinvali, and that had swept away the Communist *nomenklatura*, was not powerful enough to unite the national movement or to consolidate statehood. The national movement remained loosely organized, highly fragmented, without a broad social base, and plagued by bitter quarrels among charismatic patrons and their clientele. As a result, paramilitary forces that were equally

good at tapping into nationalist sentiments and into the shadow and criminal economy emerged. The Georgian rump state gladly embraced the offers of these groupings to add muscle to the national cause.

Georgia has no lootable natural resources, and hence the various armed groups in Georgia needed to finance themselves in other ways. The Mkhedrioni, but also the National Guard, engaged in lucrative criminal activities: they dealt in arms and weapons, smuggled tobacco and alcohol, "taxed" the formal and even more so the informal economy, manned roadblocks and extorted road fees, and took control over legal segments of the economy, such as the gasoline trade. The main entrepreneurs of violence were no newcomers to this business; they all had a track record as criminal entrepreneurs within the Soviet shadow economy. Once war started, all groupings started to loot and plunder. One factor that may explain the relatively short duration of the wars in Georgia was that the base for looting was small (especially since Ossetia was poor) and diminished quickly, which greatly reduced incentives for fighting.³¹

Diaspora groups and ethnic kin groups certainly helped to sustain the secessionist wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Ossets received substantial financial assistance and, more important, supplies and manpower from their ethnic kin across the High Caucasian Mountain Range in North Ossetia.³² The Abkhazian fighters were helped by fighting units of North Caucasian volunteers and received further support from the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey. Among the most prominent and effective of these units was the Abkhaz battalion of Chechen rebel leader Shamil Basayev. Basayev and his approximately 300 fighters—who later became the most formidable of the Chechen secessionist forces—actually gained their first combat experience in Abkhazia fighting the Georgians.

Demography and ethnic settlement patterns are also significant factors. Within Georgia, the Georgians made up the absolute majority, 70 percent of the population in 1989. The nationalist rhetoric and a whole raft of legal acts, which the Georgian Supreme Soviet passed before 1990, led the Abkhazian and Ossetian minorities to conclude that the Georgians in an independent Georgia would use their numerical superiority to change the status of the minorities, which had until then been privileged and had enjoyed protection from the Soviet Union. In reaction to this, they strived to secure control over the state in their autonomous regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, initially through an in-

crease in the status of these regions, then by means of a transfer to Russia, and finally with the attempt to establish an independent state. The increasingly strong, secessionist tendencies of the autonomous regions were regarded in Georgia as a threat to the newly won state sovereignty. Consequently, both sides radicalized their discourses. This spiral of ethnic mobilization led to the organized violence in Ossetia and Abkhazia.

This analytical narrative offers little support for the preferred factor in the classical script, the "history of wrongs suffered." Until 1988, when the construction of antagonistic nationalist discourses started, relations between Georgia and Abkhazia or Ossetia were to a large extent untroubled by stories of wrongs suffered. Although during the Soviet period competition for resources between Tbilisi and Sukhumi, as well as the Abkhazians' fear of Georgian demographic and political dominance, had repeatedly caused political friction, but over a long period of time, this had no effect on the notably relaxed relations between the local Georgian and Abkhazian populations. The Abkhazian elite had requested the transfer of Abkhazia from Georgia to Russia several times (in 1956, 1967, and 1978). Each time the Soviet center turned down this request but compensated the region with a package of concessions and investments, which the Georgians then viewed as discrimination against the Georgian majority in Abkhazia. After glasnost allowed a public sphere to unfold, the Abkhazian national discourse thematized, among other things, the conflicts between the Georgians and the Abkhaz in the early 19th century, and the illegal, in the eyes of the Abkhaz, incorporation of Abkhazia into the short-lived Georgian republic of 1918–1921. In the final analysis, however, it must be remembered that the nationalist discourses of Georgians and Abkhaz were situative, conditioned by the looming dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Georgian national discourse was anti-Soviet; hence, in view of the feared Georgian dominance of an independent Georgia, the Abkhazian discourse was to be pro-Soviet.

Until 1988, the history of Georgian-Ossetian relations was also largely free of tension. Only with glasnost did the Ossetian nationalist discourse begin to thematize the suppression of the Bolshevik uprising of the Ossets against Menshevik Georgia between 1918 and 1921. The nationalist Georgian discourse described the Ossets as guests in Georgia and disputed their status as an autochthonous people. But the emergence of this discursive friction also was not relevant for the organization of ethnic violence.

Finally, and contrary to one of the statistically most robust findings of mainstream conflict theory, geomorphological factors, such as mountainous terrain and woodlands, played no obvious role. Mountainous terrain makes up 65 percent and 85 percent, respectively, of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.³³ The character of the terrain obviously did not matter much at the start of the struggle for power, as the conflict was centered around the capital, Tbilisi. Terrain became important only when the western province of Mingrelia became the key theater of violence. Terrain was also not particularly relevant in the South Ossetian war, which was fought primarily around the capital, Tskhinvali. In fact, high mountains were more of a problem for the rebels since their vital connection with North Ossetia was blocked during winter. Even the war in Abkhazia was not influenced that much by the mountains and forests since it was fought primarily in the narrow corridor along the coast, with very little guerrilla activity.

After the Wars

Soviet ethnofederalism no longer exercises its destructive energy, but it has left open wounds. After a decade of stalled negotiations, a solution to the Ossetian and Abkhazian conflicts is still not yet in sight. In September 2003, Abkhazia celebrated the tenth anniversary of the victory in its “war of independence”—a “victory” that came at the price of heavy political and economic dependence on Russia and international isolation. Most Abkhazians have applied for Russian citizenship, which is widely perceived as a viable gateway to some social and political security. Violence erupts periodically, and dozens of Russian peacekeeping troops, Abkhazian officials, and civilians from the different national communities have been killed since the end of war. At present, Moscow controls the situation in Abkhazia through its military presence and its economic and political support—none of which can be matched by Georgia.

The situation in South Ossetia seems more fluid. Like Abkhazia, this tiny quasi-state has become a hub for informal trade, mainly in alcohol and tobacco. Its political elite is centered around one or two powerful political clans that exploit what is a quasi-private free economic zone. In contrast to the situation in Abkhazia, Georgia and South Ossetia did take practical steps to mend their relationship after 1992. Nonetheless,

a final settlement to the conflict remains out of reach. In May 2004, Georgia closed the huge and famous Ergneti Market in South Ossetia, where all sorts of goods were traded, most of them smuggled from Russia. Some analysts estimate that the Ergneti Market, essentially an illicit free economic zone, had yielded as much as US \$35 million annually, a substantial portion of which ended up in the hands of the South Ossetian political elite.³⁴

In short, both South Ossetia and Abkhazia remain unresolved conflicts. A solution still seems distant, given that Georgia has little to offer to the breakaway entities politically or economically and is too weak militarily to alter the situation by force. Furthermore, Russia has an interest in maintaining the status quo and in keeping its position as the veto player in the region.

