

Pass, and did take part in the fighting. Following a series of tragic incidents of ethnic violence:

The relationships between Georgians and South Ossetians worsened insofar that the idea of South Ossetia's secession from Georgia, prior to early 1991 floated only by part of Georgia's South Ossetian community, found support with the overwhelming majority of [the] Ossetian population. From this moment on, those South Ossetian politicians championing the conception of the "Ossetians' organic bond" with Georgia came to lose support.⁹⁴

Abkhazia: chronology of escalation

Phase A: Mobilization – latent conflict

The similarity between the Abkhazians' arguments and those of the Karabakh Armenians and South Ossetian was striking. Firstly, given their small populations of only approximately 100,000 people, alongside what they perceived to be the Georgians' policies (which allegedly dated back to the nineteenth century) of the gradual Kartvelization of Abkhazia, the Abkhaz community had devoted a great deal of effort to the prevention of their possible assimilation into the demographically far stronger Georgian community. According to the last Soviet census (1989), Abkhazia had a population of about half a million people, of whom Georgians accounted for 45.7 per cent of the population; while Abkhazians accounted for just 17.8 per cent, and Russians and Armenians each represented around 14 per cent (3 per cent were Greeks).⁹⁵ This unfavorable ethnodemographic composition of the republic was explained by the Abkhazians as being a result of the expulsion of the majority of (Muslim) Abkhaz families following their anti-Russian rebellion in 1864. From that time onward, the area – known for its paradise-like scenery where mountainous landscapes intermingled with the warm waters of the Black Sea – became a much-sought destination for successive waves of immigrants from all over Russia and, most particularly, as far as the Abkhazians were concerned, from neighboring and remote Georgian regions. Indeed, there is some evidence that Abkhazia's Megrelian community had been settled in the country's south for centuries; yet, the process of population influx, which began in the aftermath of the tragic year of 1864, and subsequently intensified during the interwar period, is described by Abkhazians as constituting a well-organized invasion by the Georgians, who were deliberately seeking to shift the country's demographical balance in their favor.⁹⁶ By the end of the nineteenth

century, the Abkhazians, with 53 per cent of the population, comprised the majority of Abkhazia's autonomy, whereas the proportion of the Georgian ethnic population ranged between one fifth and one fourth of the entire population.⁹⁷

An additional cause of Abkhaz discontent was their relative degree of economic underdevelopment. Speaking in strictly economic terms, the level of Abkhazia's industrial development was lower in comparison with Georgia's other areas: the autonomy's agricultural sector was significantly larger as compared with the national average in Georgia (33.2 per cent versus 28 per cent of total employment as of 1978), while the employment rate in industry lagged behind (13.7 per cent versus 19.5 per cent of total employment in the same year).⁹⁸ This was partly caused by an uneven distribution of investment in industry and infrastructure on the part of the Tbilisi authorities.⁹⁹ However, what the statistical evidence from the Soviet period failed to register was the share of real income which was accumulated in the autonomy's *shadow* economy. Importantly, Abkhazia's tourist sector provided local inhabitants with substantial amounts of income, upon which they were never taxed: Soviet-period common wisdom had it that the richest people in Georgia – and perhaps in the whole of the South Caucasus – lived on Abkhazia's shores, as they were able to rent out their apartments and dachas for high rates to masses of seasonal tourists from across the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, Abkhazians claimed that, owing to Tbilisi's partisan support and to widespread corruption, the most valuable real estate located on the coastline was in fact owned by Georgian "profiteers,"¹⁰⁰ with Abkhazians being gradually displaced and compelled to move up into the mountains. To sum up, according to the Abkhazians' argument, the autonomy's "subjugation" by Georgian authorities was a proven detrimental factor with respect to the prevailing socioeconomic conditions within their own land.

Nonetheless, it appears that by comparison with the cases of Nagorno-Karabakh and (especially) South Ossetia, purely *economic* arguments played a relatively minor role in the Abkhazia case, even though these arguments were, rhetorically, adopted by Abkhaz nationalists to advance their cause. Rather, the identity – or symbolic – dimension seems to have constituted a more important factor in the arousal of Abkhaz fears and demands. In addition to the previously mentioned assimilation argument, many Abkhazians seem never to have completely accepted the 1931 abolition of the republican status of their country by Josef Stalin (another *Georgian*, as the Abkhazians would readily point out), which originally led to the imposition of Tbilisi's formal rule over

their territory. Already, during the years of Soviet rule, Abkhaz intellectuals and party officials had been attempting to raise the status of Abkhazia to the level of a Soviet Socialist Republic, or to have it directly attached to the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. To this end they appealed repeatedly (1957, 1967, and 1978) to the leaders in Moscow, – virtually all these appeals being paralleled by manifestations of public support by local Abkhazians in Sukhumi. Although their principal status-related demands were not met, the central government in Moscow did respond by gradually improving the status of the Abkhaz minority, and of Abkhazia's language and cultural rights (this was especially so in the Brezhnev era). In the autonomous republic itself, where Abkhazians constituted less than one fifth of the total population, Abkhazians nevertheless held important administrative posts and had their own television and radio broadcasts and educational system, more or less independent of Tbilisi. Since the 1960s, the first secretary of the central committee of the local Communist Party was always an Abkhazian – whereas, beforehand, the highest post in the autonomous republic had traditionally been held by a member of the Georgian community. Similarly, Abkhazians were at the head of 8 of the 12 ministries, while the ministry of internal affairs, the prosecutor's office, and the premiership remained in the hands of ethnic Georgians. This was in itself an unprecedented state of affairs in Soviet history given Abkhazians' tiny share in the autonomy. For Georgians, the (supposedly privileged) standing of Abkhazians in Abkhazia, at the expense of the status of the near majority of Georgians themselves, was generally connected with Moscow's continuing efforts to weaken and undermine the Georgian state. "In Abkhazia in particular, Georgians were all the more upset by their lack of influence in policy-making and regional institutions as they actually formed a demographic plurality, just short of a majority in the autonomous republic."¹⁰¹ Accordingly, during 1981, a few unprecedentedly large nationalist demonstrations took place in Georgia, at which the issue of this alleged anti-Georgian discrimination in Abkhazia was raised once again, along with issues related to the defense of Georgian cultural heritage – specifically their language and history. Meanwhile, the Abkhaz elites continued to appeal to Moscow.

As in Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia, excesses of interethnic violence were relatively rare in Abkhazia, as the Soviet authorities did their best to prevent ethnic riots from occurring; in terms of daily life, as mentioned above, Georgian–Abkhaz relationships were rather peaceful, although, as with the Nagorno-Karabakh situation, they were marked by a certain degree of mutual mistrust and anxiety.¹⁰² According to

numerous eyewitness reports, there were quite frequent cases of Abkhaz–Georgian marriages being frowned upon by Abkhaz nationalists, which seems never to have been the case in South Ossetia.

As detailed below, Abkhaz elites were at some points in favor of the notion of a broader degree of autonomy – or perhaps attaining the status of a Soviet republic – without necessarily defying the overall principle of Georgia's territorial integrity. Yet their longest-standing – and most preferred – aspiration entailed Abkhazia's complete secession from Georgia, and the establishment of Moscow's direct control over Sukhumi. Over time, and simultaneous with the deepening of Abkhaz–Georgian anxiety, there was a fading of the already half-hearted notion of a federative state in which Abkhazians would coexist with Georgians. As with South Ossetia, Abkhaz nationalists never sought for secession from the Soviet Union, as they regarded Soviet institutions – and subsequently post-Soviet Russia – as the guarantor of their ethnic aspirations (especially in the light of what they considered to be ever-growing Georgian nationalism and aggressiveness). In this respect, the personality of the main herald of Abkhaz sovereignty, the charismatic Vladislav Ardzinba, deserves attention. He was the director of the Sukhumi Institute for the Abkhazian language, history, and literature, during the period 1987–99 – having previously obtained his degrees in history and Middle Eastern civilizations from Sukhumi and Tbilisi Universities, and having spent 18 years in Moscow, where he worked in the Institute for Oriental Studies led by Yevgeny Primakov (who is believed to have had links to Soviet intelligence and security services). An orthodox Communist, and a devoted Abkhaz nationalist who, according to a common Georgian belief, helped to stir up the July 1989 riots (see below), Ardzinba possibly developed close ties to a number of Moscow hardliners. As Ben Fowkes put it, "[Ardzinba's] evident Russian connections have given rise to the suspicions that the movement for Abkhazian secession from Georgia is really a Russian way to make sure that the pleasant seaside resorts of the Black Sea do not fall into Georgian hands."¹⁰³ Already at the time of conflict onset it was obvious that Ardzinba himself, as well as the secessionist movement largely led by him, enjoyed a certain degree of unofficial support among high-ranking Russian politicians, military, and pro-reformist intellectuals.¹⁰⁴ After all, the Georgians' separatist agitation, coupled with Gamsakhurdia's verbal attacks upon the central Soviet authorities, appear to have instigated serious anxieties amongst Soviet Russian elites, which eventually led to Moscow's backing for the consequent Abkhaz war of independence.¹⁰⁵ The widespread Georgian belief that Abkhaz secessionism was a product of the Russian intelligence

and security services attempting to reaffirm their grip over Georgia, is less likely however: in spite of the relatively peaceful coexistence which had previously been the norm between ordinary Georgians and Abkhazians, latent conflict centering upon political and symbolic issues had nevertheless existed during the Soviet period – as exemplified by the Abkhazians' efforts to reverse the republic's status obtaining independence from Tbilisi, and the Georgians' commitment to hamper them at any cost.

In 1988, at the time conflict erupted in Nagorno-Karabakh, a group of Abkhaz intellectuals sent the party leadership in Moscow a letter complaining about pressure from Tbilisi, and requesting the renewal of the Abkhaz Soviet Socialist Republic which, from the Abkhaz viewpoint, had been terminated illegally. In their opinion,

the economic and cultural programs initiated ten years earlier had failed to meet their goals of Abkhaz cultural revitalization. They blamed Georgian hostility for these failures.¹⁰⁶

A year later the nationalist movement Aıdygylara was founded in Abkhazia, and in March 1989 it initiated the gathering of 30,000 Abkhaz inhabitants at a holy pagan site near the village of Lykhny. The so-called "Lykhny letter," the signatories to which included important representatives of Abkhazia's public life and persons of minority nationalities (including around 5,000 Armenians, Pontic Greeks and, surprisingly, also some local Georgians), was addressed to the Soviet leadership: it recounted the many years of the struggle of Abkhazians to return to the country's status of 1921 and called attention to the illegality of Sukhumi's continuing subordinate status with respect to Tbilisi.

For the already radicalized Georgian public, the Lykhny Declaration was like a red flag to a bull: mass demonstrations began to be held all over Georgia, organized by nationalist movements, at which there were demands for the appropriate punishment of the "treacherous" Abkhazians. This punishment was to include the termination of their autonomous status, which had in any case, long been a thorn in the flesh of many Georgians.

Phase B: Radicalization – sporadic violence

Abkhazia, too, was not spared the fate of violent conflict. Blood was shed there for the first time in July of 1989: at least 16 (predominantly Georgian) youngsters lost their lives in clashes, and hundreds more were wounded. The factors causing the clashes seemed nonsensical

to outsiders, yet they represented an important symbolic issue in the context of the local mindset, as they were directly related to questions of identity: the Abkhaz youths involved were energetically protesting the proposed establishment of a branch of Tbilisi State University in Sukhumi. Soviet interior ministry troops were deployed to the autonomous region, which succeeded in stopping further bloodshed. In August of the following year, a few months after the adoption of the new Union law which formally permitted autonomies to secede, the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet unilaterally declared the founding of the Abkhazian S.S.R. – a move which caused a serious split among Georgian and Abkhaz parliamentarians. Abkhazia did not, however, rule out possible future negotiations with Tbilisi on some sort of a (con-) federative arrangement. At the end of the same year, Ardzinba assumed the leadership of Abkhazia's Supreme Soviet.

The termination of ethnic autonomy, allied to Tbilisi's controversial language policy, together with the rhetorical exercises of the Georgian president and the increasingly dramatic developments in South Ossetia, all served to heighten the security dilemma of the population in Abkhazia, where the active formation of home defense forces had already begun. Georgian–Abkhazian antagonism increased significantly in early 1991, when the Abkhazians (like the South Ossetians) took part in a union-wide referendum on the new Union Treaty, while the Georgians generally boycotted the referendum. In an effort to bolster the standing of the union republics – and to avoid the potential breakup of the U.S.S.R., which would have resulted in their being outnumbered in a Georgian state where there was a growing mood of ultra-nationalism – most Abkhazians and South Ossetians cast their votes in favor of the new Union Treaty. This occurred in spite of the efforts of Tbilisi, where nationalists led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia had seized power, and where the referendum was rejected. On April 9, 1991, Georgia became one of the first Soviet republics to declare its independence: this step was justified as a return to the – illegally interrupted – tradition of sovereign Georgian statehood (as during the period 1918–21).¹⁰⁷

For the time being Abkhazia was spared intensive fighting because Georgian commandos had been more engaged, since the second half of 1991, on the South Ossetian battlefield, as well as in civil war style clashes amongst the Georgians in Tbilisi in late 1991 and early 1992. Ardzinba, on the other hand, being aware of the Abkhazians' asymmetric weakness vis-à-vis the Georgians, made an effort to restrain the threat of concentrated military action; yet in the meantime he began

replacing Georgians in leading administrative and economic posts with fellow Abkhazians. Most importantly, however, Gamsakhurdia accepted, in mid-1991, a concession on the reform of electoral law which granted Abkhazians *over-representation* in their republic's Supreme Soviet: the Abkhazians, who comprised only one sixth of the republic's entire population, were now to obtain roughly one third of all parliamentary seats. In accordance with that agreement, ethnic quota-based elections took place in Abkhazia in September, in which Abkhazians took 28 seats and Georgians 26 seats, while the rest of the autonomy's ethnicities received 11 seats. Simultaneously, Ardzinba was instrumental in establishing the Abkhaz National Guard; units of ethnic militia that would become Abkhazia's main force in the upcoming armed conflict with Georgia. Because of the massive interference by Russian and Moscow-backed military forces in the course of the 1992-93 war in Abkhazia, a further analysis of the conflict is provided in the following chapter in the part dedicated to Russian-Georgian relations.

5 War and Diplomacy: Ethnopolitical Conflicts as a Factor in the Foreign Policies of South Caucasian Countries (1991-94)

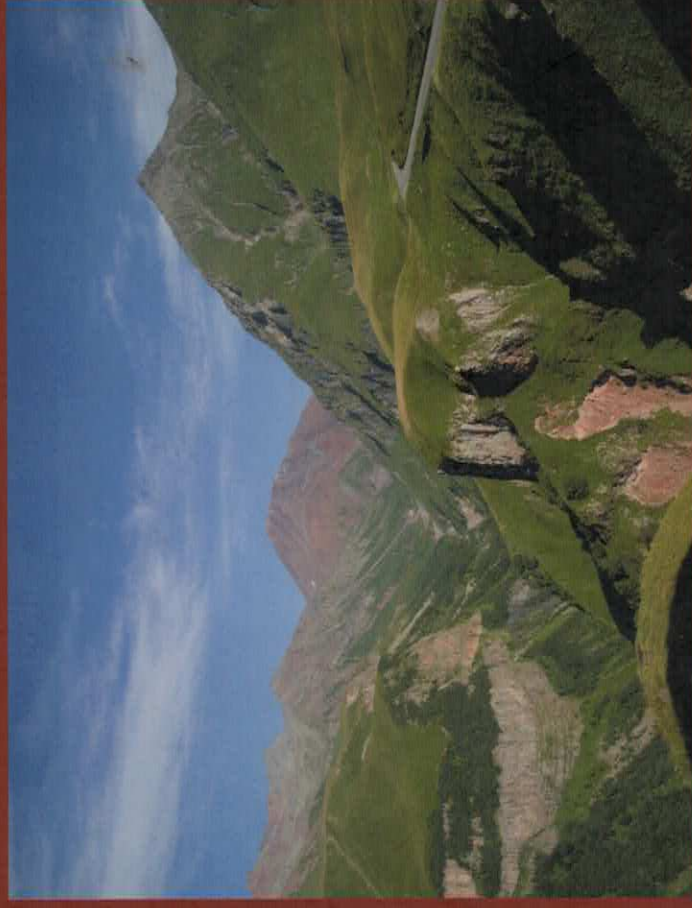
During the period 1991-94, the foreign policy of the Republic of Armenia, and to a somewhat lesser extent that of Azerbaijan, can be regarded as generally monothematic, centered on the issue of the evolving armed conflict.¹ The stage was set for an unavoidable Armenian-Azerbaijani-Turkish-Iranian-Russian chess match – enriched, from the mid-1990s onward, by the participation of the United States. Given this uneasy constellation of conflicting powers, the maintenance of state security was a difficult task for governments of both post-Soviet Azerbaijan and Armenia. From the very start of the 1990s, this task was made even more difficult by the efforts of Yerevan and Baku to maintain, or (re-) gain control over Nagorno-Karabakh: the conflict over that Armenian enclave which raged from the very first months of the existence of the independent state greatly deepened the geopolitical isolation of Armenia, contributing towards its nearly exclusive orientation towards Moscow, and causing the relatively early definition of camps of “friends” and “enemies” of Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Geographic and political ties have caused Russia to play an increasingly significant role in Georgia's ethnopolitical conflicts, while the roles of the other powers have remained quite limited throughout the years of Soviet collapse and post-Soviet transition.² None of the other countries – whether neighboring or remote – could compete with Russia with regard to the degree of influence over (post-) Soviet Georgia; likewise, no regional power had as many vital interests as Russia in strategically located Georgia, during the first half of the 1990s. The already

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