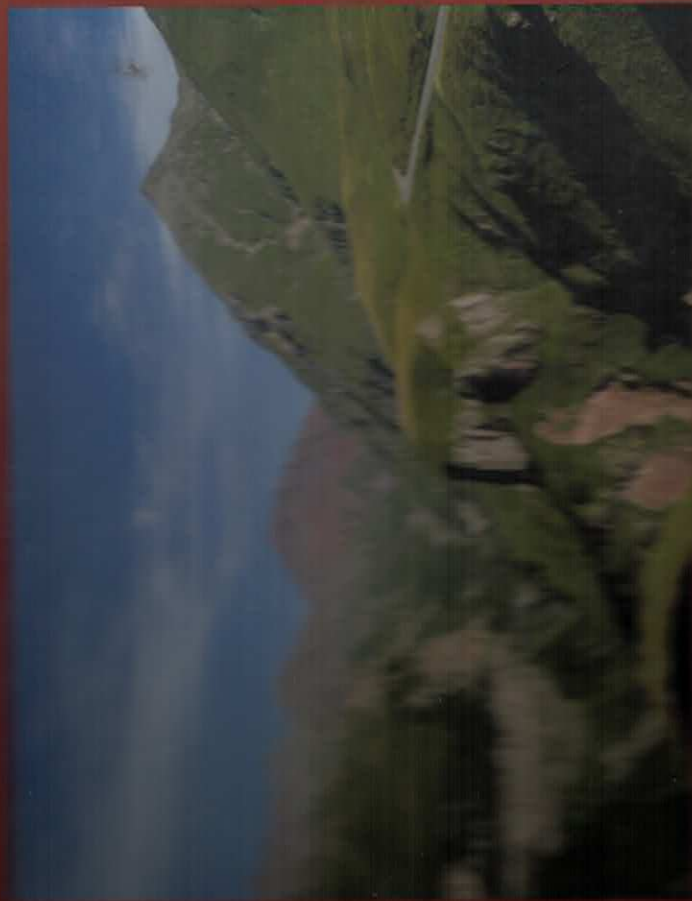


Understanding Ethnopolitical Conflict

Karabakh, South Ossetia, and
Abkhazia Wars Reconsidered



Emil Souleimanov

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'Emil Souleimanov presents a definitive work on conflict in the region, analyzing a wealth of hitherto unexamined issues and sources. Drawing on a range of case studies, Souleimanov offers a rich, thought-provoking, and empirically grounded account of local and regional political dynamics. In so doing he enhances our understanding of the theories of ethnic conflict and civil war, analyzing the onset and escalation of conflict, presenting a scheme for understanding periods of conflict, and exploring the crucial role of elites and their perception of opportunity in transforming low-scale ethnic riots into fully-fledged civil war. The book deserves to be, and will be, widely read and frequently cited.'

— **Cerwyn Moore**, *University of Birmingham, UK*

'This book is one of the fullest accounts to date about ethnopolitical conflicts in the South Caucasus. It is an impressively theorized explanation set in a comparative perspective and explicitly related to the key debates in the field of ethnic politics, contentious mobilizations, and civil wars. Its findings are rigorously formulated, they are informed by advanced theoretical thinking, and these findings clearly have relevance to understanding the current political transformations in many countries both inside and outside the South Caucasus. A statement of theoretical maturation, empirical complexity, and unbiased analysis, Souleimanov's book is definitely worth a read.'

— **Georgi Derlugian**, *Northwestern University, USA*

'This highly professional book provides us with a comprehensive account of the regional conflicts as well as their controversial dynamics. It is a valuable work demonstrating how the Caucasus risks impact on the wider international security environment.'

— **Sergey Markedonov**, *Visiting Fellow, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, USA*

This book seeks to explore the relevance of major theoretical and methodological approaches currently dominating the field of ethnic conflict and civil war research, testing their efficacy by applying them to three major South Caucasus conflicts of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Souleimanov explores the causes and dynamics of ethnic conflict and civil war, distinguishing between onset-based and process-based theories. He introduces a scheme of periodization which links the phase of low-scale inter-ethnic violence with the phase of sustainable organized violence, asserting the crucial importance of elites and their use of opportunity in power asymmetry as a key factor in instigating full-scale civil war.

As a merger of theoretical and empiricist approaches, this book focuses on the case-specific contextual richness of the local conflicts in Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia to draw solid theoretical conclusions as well as providing suggestions for the improvement of current theories.

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South Ossetia: chronology of escalation

Phase A: Mobilization – latent conflict

As with the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians' demands, the South Ossetians pointed to the socioeconomic underdevelopment of their autonomy as a compelling grievance; they claimed that their level of economic development only equated to half that of the Georgian average at the time. An enduring source of the South Ossetians' discontent was the republic's inferior administrative status by comparison with that of Ajaria or Abkhazia: whereas these constituted autonomous republics, South Ossetia only had the status of autonomous *oblast* – which only permitted its inhabitants a lower degree of self-government.⁷⁹ In an attempt to remedy this situation, South Ossetians occasionally organized petitions to Moscow, while more militant South Ossetian nationalists were inclined to suggest a more radical approach: that being secession from Georgia and their region's unification with North Ossetia, thereby becoming part of Russia. The most notorious attempt to achieve this had taken place in 1925, when Ossetian Communist elites from Vladikavkaz and Tskhinvali sent a joint petition to Stalin. The South Ossetians expressed discontent with the fact that, in many areas of the republic, the leaders of local administrations were appointed by Tbilisi, and in a majority of cases, these appointees were Georgians, either from within South Ossetia or outside it. This was regarded by the South Ossetians as a sign of an orchestrated policy, on Georgia's part, of weakening South Ossetians in political terms. Symbolic issues also played a role in the South Ossetians' quest for more autonomy, or secession (as had been the case with both the Karabakh Armenians and Abkhazians): South Ossetians advocated more classes in the Ossetian language and history, for example. However, their attempts to introduce history textbooks written in North Ossetian into the South Ossetian educational system ultimately failed.

Tbilisi's supposedly perennial assimilatory policy with respect to the South Ossetians aroused serious concerns on the part of the Ossetians themselves. It is worth noting, in fact, that in 1989 the population of the South Ossetian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Oblast was as a whole only one hundred thousand – of which Ossetians constituted about two thirds (66 per cent), while less than a third (29 per cent) were Georgians; and of these, "half of the families were of mixed Georgian–Ossetian origin."⁸⁰ As has already been noted, during the Soviet era this fact had in itself facilitated the conflict-free coexistence of the two ethnic groups

in the area, where there had been ethnically mixed villages, with only very rare instances of ethnic violence. Moreover, as noted above, there was also a high percentage of ethnically mixed South Ossetian–Georgian marriages throughout Georgia, as an additional hundred thousand South Ossetians were distributed across the country.

Of the three cases of ethnopolitical conflict under consideration here, the South Ossetian case seems to have been the most spontaneous. Unlike the Armenian-led case of Nagorno-Karabakh secession, which seems to have been a thoroughly organized initiative (albeit with a certain degree of spontaneity), the creation in 1988 of *Ademon Nykhas* (the National or People's Front) in South Ossetia resembles rather the establishment of similar (trans-national) movements throughout the North Caucasus at the time.⁸¹ The aim of these movements was to gather influential co-ethnics under the umbrella of a centralized institution, so as to foster ethnic solidarity and be capable of effectively advocating for perceived ethnic or regional interests, while at the same time not necessarily seeking secession. Indeed, as detailed below, prior to the escalation of the Georgian–South Ossetian conflict no single statement was made by either the official South Ossetian authorities in Tskhinvali, or by Ademon Nykhas members regarding the republic's incorporation into Russia.

Tension in relations between South Ossetians and Georgians began to escalate, however, after Tskhinvali, influenced by developments in Abkhazia, issued a declaration, in the spring of 1989, supporting the separatist demands of the Abkhazians. From August of that year, Tbilisi attempted to formalize Georgian as the sole official language of the country. This would have implied a significant weakening of the position of the Ossetian and Abkhazian languages, as well as of Russian, which served as a lingua franca amongst the South Ossetians (only 14 per cent of whom spoke Georgian as of 1989), the Abkhazians, and members of other ethnic minorities.⁸² Tbilisi's move was regarded as constituting an implicit attack on South Ossetian (and Abkhaz) identity: for the Ossetians and Abkhazians, it signaled that Georgian ethnonationalism, with all of its xenophobic overtones, was in the ascendant. Furthermore, Abkhazians and Ossetians interpreted this move as another step in Tbilisi's ongoing attempts to assimilate the country's ethnic minorities. Accordingly, a few weeks later, Tskhinvali produced a proposal to give Ossetian, Georgian, and Russian, equal status as official languages of the region: however, in the light of intensifying clashes within the autonomous region between South Ossetians and Georgians, this moderate proposal was soon abandoned, and Ossetian was declared

as the sole state language in South Ossetia. At the same time, Ademon Nykhas appealed to Moscow to request the autonomous oblast's unification with North Ossetia. Simultaneously, in November 1989 the South Ossetian authorities unilaterally adopted a law elevating the status of autonomy from that of an oblast, to that of a republic within the borders of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic – that is to say making it equal in status to Abkhazia.

Tbilisi, however, immediately rejected Tskhinvali's action.

Phase B: Radicalization – sporadic violence

Throughout this period, the interethnic situation in South Ossetia had been steadily deteriorating, marked by a series of armed clashes between groups of local village militias; the response of the nationalists in Tbilisi was not long in coming. The Georgian nationalists moved to smother any outbreaks of separatism from their inception. The so-called "March on Tskhinvali," organized by Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the parliamentary deputy, Givi Gumbaridze, was held at the end of autumn in 1989: the instigators of this march intended to convene a meeting, on the central square of the South Ossetian capital, calling for the unity of Georgia. Participating in the "march" were up to 10,000 Georgians, mostly pugnacious youths, who were eventually halted in the suburbs of the South Ossetian capital by troops of the Soviet interior ministry and by South Ossetian militias and civilians. Clashes could not be averted entirely, however, since fighters from nearby Georgian villages, began carrying out "punitive" attacks against the local Ossetians: they used firearms and the South Ossetians fought back, which claimed fatalities on both sides.⁸³ By the beginning of the next year, however, it seemed the conflict was over, and that Tskhinvali would no longer try to escape the jurisdiction of Tbilisi, so most of the Georgian formations were withdrawn from the area. The influence of Ademon Nykhas was growing, however, and after the spilling of blood, nationalists and radicals gained more influence within the movement. They likewise began the intensive formation of armed home defense units.

The seeds of mutual mistrust had now been sown, while several further factors soon contributed to a worsening of the situation. In fact, the situation was rapidly deteriorating because of a triangular scheme of confrontation: the Georgians' emancipatory activities, aimed at loosening their dependence on Moscow, would in response bring about negative reactions from the government in Tskhinvali, concerned about the deepening of the security crisis vis-à-vis Georgian nationalists, which

would in turn radicalize Tbilisi. As an example of this, when the Georgian parliament adopted a bill, on May 9, denouncing the Union Treaty of 1922 and outlawing every juridical act since then (thereby paving the way for the formal announcement of independence), the South Ossetian authorities were quick to adopt a series of laws *reconfirming* the applicability of Soviet laws and the Soviet constitution, within the administrative borders of South Ossetia.

Then, in April 1990, the party leadership in Moscow enacted a new law requiring the strengthening of the rights of the autonomous regions and republics. This move was mainly aimed at restraining the emancipation efforts towards autonomy within the union republics, however the outcome was the exact opposite. In Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, each of which was faced with separatist or irredentist campaigns by ethnic minorities, the law was received with distrust and merely served to worsen antagonism towards both the central union authorities and the minorities, who were now regarded as a part of a "big politics," the ultimate goal of which was the undermining of the territorial integrity of the autonomous regions and republics and the strengthening of their dependence on Moscow. These repercussions to the new Soviet law manifested most clearly in Georgia, where after four months the parliament enacted a law banning regional parties from taking part in Georgia-wide elections – thereby eliminating, *de jure*, the ethnic parties of the Abkhazians and South Ossetians from the political life of the republic – even while public support for political autonomy was growing amongst these ethnic groups in direct proportion to the escalation of the conflict with Tbilisi.

In retribution, the government in Tskhinvali decided to adopt an extreme measure: in September 1990 it proclaimed the foundation of the South Ossetian Soviet Democratic Republic and requested that Moscow annex this new republic to the U.S.S.R., with the status of a union republic *entirely independent of Georgia*. That decision, however, was overturned by the Georgian government the very next day. The Georgian public, agitated by the events of the previous April and by the escalating crisis in Abkhazia, interpreted this act as yet another attempt to cast doubt on the country's territorial integrity. Meanwhile, the South Ossetian authorities boycotted the all-Georgian election of the republic's Supreme Council, held in October and won by Zviad Gamsakhurdia's nationalist Round Table.⁸⁴ Intriguingly, one of Gamsakhurdia's first public pronouncements in his newly acquired post included his notorious assertion: "Georgia is for Georgians! Ossetians, get out of Georgia!"

Needless to say, Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric, along with some of his consequent initiatives, further intensified the South Ossetians' anxieties. At the end of the year, Tbilisi not only put South Ossetia under a blockade, but also terminated its autonomous status and declared a state of emergency in the region. Although these actions were soon *formally* negated by the Kremlin, Moscow's decree was obeyed neither in Tbilisi nor in Tskhinvali.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, Tbilisi's decision further strengthened the South Ossetians' existing fears that "their language would be in jeopardy if the autonomy were abolished. As a proof, they referred to the anti-Ossetian linguistic policy of the Georgian authorities in the 1930s-1950s," writes Anatoly Isaenko.⁸⁶ Moscow then made an agreement with Tbilisi to the effect that "its policy was subordinated to the Soviet policy of Interior, in return for an opportunity to deal with South Ossetia as it saw fit."⁸⁷

Phase C: Armed conflict – civil war

In early January, armed clashes erupted in Tskhinvali and its outskirts, as well as in the Java district in South Ossetia's northwest, following the deployment of around 3,000 troops of the Georgian ministry of the interior. The situation worsened still further late in January of 1991 after Torez Kulumbegov, chairman of the Supreme Council of South Ossetia, was arrested while at talks with the Georgian side and taken to jail in Tbilisi, (while Russian mediators looked passively on); this arrest appears to have been carried out on orders from Zviad Gamsakhurdia. The South Ossetian public, fired by fresh memories of recent interethnic clashes, then actively participated in a union-wide referendum on the new Union Treaty (supposed to delegate greater powers to the union's republics in order to save the disintegrating Soviet state) which was then being promoted by Moscow: according to South Ossetian sources, the treaty was approved by 99 per cent of the votes. At the same time, however, the South Ossetians (like the Abkhazians) ignored the referendum on independence, which was held two weeks later, in March. Under the terms of a Russian-mediated ceasefire, Georgian armed formations had partly departed the region as early as February – even though they still controlled Georgian-populated villages to the north of Tskhinvali, were able to besiege the city, and continued to engage in armed clashes with varying degrees of intensity.

The conflict escalated in this time, as armed groups of Georgians, often members of the Vazha Adamia movement and the Merab Kostava Society, attacked the local South Ossetians they wished to drive out of

the area. The clashes intensified further, as Georgians forced Ossetians out of their homes, and vice versa. During the clashes, there were reports of dozens of deaths and injuries.⁸⁸ From June of 1991, Tskhinvali was subjected to artillery fire by Georgian paramilitary units from nearby hills, and in the autumn it was nearly encircled by Georgian forces. This encirclement took place despite the presence of some 500 Soviet interior ministry troops, who had been deployed in South Ossetia from April 1991.⁸⁹ The massive final attack which was planned on the South Ossetian stronghold was averted only by the outbreak of civil war in Georgia, which resulted in the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia. Eduard Shevardnadze then seized power.⁹⁰

The breakup of the Soviet Union – and the unprecedented weakening of Moscow, formerly the supreme arbiter that might have been able to exert some restraining influence upon Tbilisi's actions – continued to cause South Ossetians increasing degrees of anxiety. In January 1992, a referendum was held in South Ossetia on the proposal of annexation to the Russian Federation, with about 90 per cent of the voters of South Ossetian origin voting in favor.⁹¹ The South Ossetians repeatedly rejected the pleas of the government in Tbilisi, demanding firstly the withdrawal of all Georgian armed forces from the area, and the lifting of the blockade. Fighting eased after an uprising by backers of Zviad Gamsakhurdia in the West Georgian Samegrelo (Megrelia) region, which coincided with an attack by Georgian forces in Abkhazia, and the beginning of the Abkhazian war. Georgian artillery, strategically deployed on hilltops near Tskhinvali, opened fire on the South Ossetian capital, taking the lives of dozens of civilians. Thereafter, there was a succession of cease-fires, none of which was respected. An especially outrageous incident, certainly in the eyes of the South and North Ossetian publics, occurred on 20 May, near the Georgian village of Kekhvi, where Georgian commandos attacked a bus full of South Ossetian civilians, who were fleeing the bombardment of Tskhinvali.⁹² This event galvanized Vladikavkaz into action, with a temporary shutoff of the supply of natural gas to Georgia, while behind the scenes in Moscow there was now intensive lobbying on behalf of the South Ossetians. The Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus was also roused into action.⁹³ Its chairman at that time, the Chechen Musa Shanibov, favored the sending of North Caucasian volunteers to the aid of the South Ossetians. This did not, however, take place because of the influence of the pragmatic Askharbek Galazov, president of North Ossetia at the time. He wanted to prevent further escalation of the conflict and its potential spread into surrounding regions. Nonetheless, a number of North Ossetian volunteers did go to South Ossetia through the Daryal

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 Megrel 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