

To the memory of my Father

VICKEN CHETERIAN

War and Peace
in the Caucasus

Ethnic Conflict and the New Geopolitics



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While Cornell's remark about the interrelation between minority mobilization and institutional structures of autonomy is highly interesting, I would like to introduce a clear difference between minority mobilization and ethnic conflict. One does not necessarily lead to the other, at least not in a mechanical way. At the time of the Soviet collapse there were dozens of territorial disputes, various forms and levels of ethnic mobilization, and luckily only a few of those led to bloody confrontations. To move from ethnic mobilization to conflict we need a violent intervention to trigger a bloody conflict. This trigger often came in the form of military intervention by republican or central authorities (Baku in the case of Karabakh, Tbilisi in the case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and Moscow in the case of Chechnya) to suppress the political movements of minority groups, transforming the conflict from a political level to a military one. This we will see even more clearly in the chapter on Georgia, while discussing the conflict in Abkhazia.

The cease-fire agreement in May 1994 reflected a power equilibrium reached after several years of war. On the one hand the Armenian side could bring its control over Karabakh, and also occupy vast regions of Azerbaijan proper. The dramatic defeat of Azerbaijan, plus the failure of the last offensive in 1993-94, reflected the creation of a military balance difficult to break. Equally important is the leadership of Heydar Aliiev, who could repress the power struggle in Baku under his leadership and impose on the country a cessation of hostilities. Aliiev knew that the greatest harm his opponents could do him was to attack him on Karabakh issue. But he was also conscious that three leaders of Azerbaijan before him had fallen from power as their forces were beaten on the front. Aliiev was already strong enough in May 1994 to sign a cease-fire agreement.

GEORGIA, FROM NATIONAL LIBERATION TO STATE COLLAPSE AND BACK

Georgia's specific features

Georgia was not an ordinary Soviet republic. It was the country where Stalin or Josef Vissarionovich Jugashvili was born, the person who has shaped the Soviet Union more than any other character. Georgia profited much from the fact that Stalin and several other Soviet leaders who ruled this vast country from the 1920s to the 1950s were of Georgian origin, including Lavrenti Beria, Sergo Ordzhonikidze and Abel Yenukidze. Under Stalin the country enjoyed privileges that other union republics did not have, with living standards higher than elsewhere in the Union, and became the Soviet republic with the highest percentage of its population completing university education. True, Stalinist purges hit the Georgian intelligentsia hard, but nevertheless Georgian attitudes towards the Soviet dictator remained ambivalent even in the age of *glasnost* and heated debates; in spite of his crimes Stalin was Georgian, and was defended by Georgian authors as "a statesman and military leader".¹ Georgia also went through national consolidation under Soviet rule, reinforcing the place of ethnic Georgians in the republic, as a result of out-migration of ethnic Russians and Armenians starting

1 Elizabeth Fuller refers to an article by Levan Khaindrava in defence of Stalin published in *Literaturnaya Gruzija*, No. 1, 1989, in her article: "Filling in the 'Blank Spots' in Georgian History: Noe Zhordania and Joseph Stalin", *Report on the USSR*, 31 March 1989, p. 21.

from the 1950s.² Rapid urbanization was not accompanied by mass Russification as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, and the central role of the Georgian language was preserved in the cities and the provinces alike.

The fall from grace of Stalin and Beria was a heavy blow to Georgian public opinion, which saw into this event a plot to disgrace the hero of the Soviet Union, and the son of Georgia, by political foes.³ Zviad Gamsakhurdia, one of the most famous of Georgian dissidents who later became the first freely elected president of Georgia, made the following comment to a Russian journalist in the last months of the USSR: "All in all, the mid-1950's were a time of intellectual ferment in Georgia, associated in part with the Stalinist movement. Young people at the time protested out of a sense of national pride, seeing how Stalin was being reviled."⁴ On 9 March 1956, protest demonstrations erupted in Tbilisi as the new Soviet leadership in Moscow publicized the crimes of Stalin, leading to violent clashes with the armed police forces causing the death of 22 with an additional 400 people suffering wounds, according to an official count.

After the 1950s the Georgian economy went through unparalleled liberalization. The central authorities permitted much liberty in Georgia, unseen in neighbouring Soviet republics: "In the immediate post-Stalin years, central political interference in the economy of Georgia was notably reduced. The aim of the central government appeared to be gradual reform, rather than the preservation, of Stalinist practice."⁵ This relative economic autonomy led to the development of a parallel or "grey" economy, widespread corruption among the state bureaucracy, the party members and even the local KGB. Retrospectively, Soviet policies are seen as a premeditated effort at the creation of a par-

2 J.W.R. Parsons, "National Integration in Soviet Georgia", *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4, October 1982, pp. 552-3.

3 Apart from the Stalin factor, the Georgians had various other references for their national pride. This includes being an ancient nation, an early convert to Christianity (fourth century), and a feeling of being the easternmost Christians encircled by Islam, having a distinct alphabet and a rich literary tradition.

4 See Pavel Voschanov's interview with Zviad Gamsakhurdia in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 21 February 1991.

5 Roland G. Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, Second Edition, 1994, p. 301.

allel economy in Georgia; according to the social psychologist Giorgi Nisharadze, "...in the sixties, after de-stalinization, Communism was dead in Georgia. Georgia was alienated from Communism. The authorities pushed people to put their energy in another direction, in the grey economy."⁶ This parallel economy, next to the tourism income of the Black Sea towns such as Sukhumi, Pitsunda and Gagra on the Abkhazian coast, ensured a higher standard of living and the availability of black market consumer goods, which Soviet citizens in other parts of the country had no access to. Georgia also enjoyed cultural freedom unparalleled in other republics. As a result, painting, sculpture, theatre and film production blossomed hand-in-hand with the development of the grey economy and mafia-like structures. Georgia's warm climate and rich earth permitted the development of agricultural products that were in high demand within the closed economy of the USSR: citrus fruits, tea, tobacco, etc. Georgia's Black Sea coast, and especially Pitsunda and Gagra in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, were highly prized tourist destinations. For Georgian public opinion, the Georgian way of life in the Soviet context was one superior to the standard of other Soviet peoples, while for those living in other parts of the USSR, Georgia was equivalent to a privileged land and where sandy beaches and luxury sanatoria carried pleasant memories of past holidays.

De-Stalinization had curious effects on Georgia. Vasili Mzhavanadze, a deputy commander of military affairs in the Kiev military district, who had worked directly with Nikita Khrushchev, was appointed the First Secretary of the Georgian CP in 1953. He was sent to Tbilisi by Moscow to get rid of the close collaborators of Beria, in power in Tbilisi by that time. The fall of Khrushchev in 1964 did not lead to the fall of Mzhavanadze—which proved the development of locally rooted, stable rule of national elite dominating over Georgia. During his rule Georgia witnessed economic progress but also widespread corruption, to a degree that one scholar labels it "capitalist restoration".⁷ In the early 1970s corruption had started to have a negative effect on overall economic

6 Interview with the author, Tbilisi, 27 February, 1996. For further discussion on the effect of de-Stalinization on Georgian public consciousness, see Theodor Hanf and Ghia Nodia, *Georgia Lurching to Democracy*, Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000, pp. 23-5.

7 R.G. Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, p. 304.

performance, and Georgian production did not meet the designed targets. A *Pravda* article in 1972 accused the Georgian leader personally of mismanagement, and of economic under-performance. Mzhavanadze was forced to resign in disgrace, probably with some "help" from his Interior Minister eyeing a career move.

The 44-year-old rising star of the Georgian CP, Eduard Shevardnadze, who had spent the last four years (1968-72) heading the Interior Ministry of Georgia, replaced Mzhavanadze. Shevardnadze's rule was characterized by a long fight against corruption and a crackdown on dissidents. As soon as he came to power, massive purges were organized to clean the party and the state from systemic corruption, leading to the arrest of twenty-five thousand people, among them seventeen thousand party members and seventy-five KGB officers.⁸ Shevardnadze's rule was characterized by seemingly contradictory policies, on the one hand reacting to the demands of Soviet policies—economic efficiency, action against corruption, Russification and repression of nationalist expressions—and on the other hand reacting to Georgian public opinion, and especially the urban intelligentsia which was demanding increasing cultural autonomy in reaction to Soviet policies of modernization and assimilation.

In the early 1970s, there appeared a small but vocal group of dissidents based mainly in Tbilisi. Among the most famous were Merab Kostava, Valentina Pailodze, and Zviad Gamsakhurdia. The last-named was the son of a famous writer and diplomat of the independent republic of Georgia, Konstantin Gamsakhurdia. Zviad Gamsakhurdia was a lecturer in English and American literature at Tbilisi State University. In 1974, Kostava and Gamsakhurdia formed the Human Rights Defence Group in Tbilisi, and observed human rights violations in the republic and reported to Russian dissident networks and the Western media. The Georgian dissidents, although a small group of a few dozen, were to have a big impact on the development of the political scene in Georgia in late *perestroika* times. Their ideological field was a mixture of two trends which took coherence in their anti-Soviet struggle. On the one hand they followed the human rights discourse, exposing the Soviet regime and its contradiction with the Helsinki Accords, and violations

8 Nicolas Jallot, *Chevardnadzé, Le renard blanc du Caucase*, Paris: Belfond, 2005, p. 44.

of basic rights within the Soviet regime; the human rights discourse was oriented more to the external players, whether they were the Soviet authorities, dissidents in Moscow or Kiev, or Western capitals. Then there was a second discourse focused around the defence of the Georgian national symbols, language and culture. More specifically, the Georgian dissidents campaigned for defence of architectural monuments, defence of the natural environment against industrial projects, highways and railways, and defence of the position of the Georgian language against policies of imposing Russian in education and public life. The dissidents were also sensitive towards the question of ethnic relations between Georgians and minorities in Georgia, and often adopted a Georgian nationalist perspective.

For the Georgian dissidents, the Soviet rule in Georgia was illegal and the state institutions illegitimate, going back to its origin which was the armed invasion of 1921 and the overthrow of the Georgian Republic. The dissidents' struggle for the defence of the Georgian culture and language had a large audience and support. For example, by the early 1980s there was strong resistance against the use of Russian in Georgian universities. A decree of the Soviet Ministry of Education in 1975 required that all doctoral dissertations written in the Soviet Union must be submitted in the Russian language. There were several acts of resistance against this decree, including petitions signed by 365 leading intellectuals, protesting that the rule would push out the Georgian language from scholarship and lead to its impoverishment.

The field of vision of the Georgian dissidents' struggle, seen through the prism of the struggle between Soviet "cosmopolitanism" and Georgian national heritage, had a problem: it excluded a third of the population of Georgia by the fact that they did not belong to the titular nation. Those ethnic minorities feared that weakening the position of the Russian language and strengthening that of the Georgian language and culture would undermine their own social status, and political power, within Georgia and in the Soviet context in general. While the Georgian intelligentsia felt threatened by the Soviet-Russian assimilation thrust, minority groups felt the pressure of Georgian policies, but also felt threatened by demographic trends and internal migration. The ethno-linguistic minorities in Georgia feared Georgian nationalism, and considered Moscow the guarantor of the *status quo*.

Acts of resistance and sabotage expressed the malaise in Soviet Georgia; in 1973 the Tbilisi Opera was put on fire, and there followed a series of explosions in administrative offices. In 1977 there was a crack-down on dissidents, and leading figures such as Kostava and Gamsakhurdia were arrested. Gamsakhurdia publicly confessed his "mistakes" on Soviet television: "I sincerely regret what I have done and repent of what I have done and condemn that crime I committed, (...) I want to note that after long reconsideration I understood that I was deeply misled and that my activities were seriously harmful. Materials produced by myself were illegally distributed in the Soviet Union as well as published in the foreign press and broadcast by radio stations abroad, as a result of which I gained 'popularity.' This, for its part, stimulated my anti-Soviet activities," he was reported as saying.⁹ As a result, he received a mild punishment; and was exiled to a mountain village in neighbouring Daghestan. He was released after three years. This action by Gamsakhurdia left a deep division among Georgian dissidents, many of whom would never pardon him and considered him a "coward". Kostava, who refused to confess "mistakes", was exiled to Siberia and set free only in 1987 thanks to *glasnost* and the new policies of Gorbachev.

The arrests of Gamsakhurdia and Kostava led to an international outcry; members of the US Congress nominated them for the Nobel Peace Prize, though the prize went to Menachem Begin and Anwar al-Sadat instead. In his memoirs, the leading Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov writes that he intended to fly to Tbilisi to attend the trial of the two Georgian dissidents, but when he arrived at the airport he "learned that Gamsakhurdia had disavowed his human rights activities" and therefore cancelled the trip. While refraining from criticizing Gamsakhurdia's act, Sakharov is full of admiration towards Kostava who "refused to yield, and continued to conduct himself with courage and dignity in camps and exile."¹⁰

The most important mobilization in the Shevardnadze period took place in 1978, and it presents the essence of the Georgian dilemma. During debates on the new Soviet constitution, a draft constitution for Georgian SSR was prepared which had left out a clause mentioning the Georgian language as the official language in the republic, and replaced

9 Seth Mydans, *Associated Press*, Moscow, 19 May 1978.

10 Andrei Sakharov, *Memoirs*, London: Hutchinson, 1990, p. 483.

it with Russian. This led to demonstrations of up to five thousand, mainly university students, who gathered in central Tbilisi in protest. Shevardnadze first tried to discuss with the demonstrators, was booed, and later returned to inform them that the leading position of the Georgian language would be retained in the new constitution. This popular victory gave the Georgian activists new courage and self-assertion.

The other side of the coin was that ethnic minorities in Georgia also wanted to voice their own concerns. The Abkhaz mobilized strongly in a series of demonstrations in 1978 with demands similar to those of the Georgians: linguistic and cultural rights, political representation, etc. Some Abkhaz leaders went further and demanded the separation of Abkhazia from Georgia, to make it either a union republic or a part of the Russian Federation. Some of their demands were met, especially in the cultural field; the Pedagogic Institute in Sukhumi was enlarged and turned into the Abkhaz State University with three sections (Abkhazian, Georgian, and Russian); Abkhazian TV programmes started (though only two half-hour news programmes per week). But the Kremlin made it clear that it would not revise the status of Abkhazia, and would not alter Abkhazia's territorial subordination. This half victory of the Abkhaz did not calm tensions, but postponed the confrontation in Abkhazia.

The withering away of Soviet power

Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* opened new political possibilities in Georgia, the like of which was not seen in seven decades of Soviet rule. One of the early topics for mobilization was the defence of the environment. An old project known as the Caucasian Mountain Railway was reactivated in the 1986-90 five-year plan, a project that aimed at facilitating rail connections between Tbilisi and the North Caucasus, cutting down the journey time by several hours. The planned project included the construction of a new line stretching over 500 kilometres, the piercing of eleven tunnels, and the construction of eighty-five bridges.¹¹ Georgian intellectuals mobilized and prepared a petition addressed to Moscow with 800 signatures, protesting against this project. They criticized it because of the potential damage to mountain flora and

11 Stephen Jones, "The Caucasian Mountain Railway Project, A Victory for Glasnost?" *Central Asia Survey*, Vol. 8, 1989, p. 49.

fauna, but also because of fears that the project would lead to bringing hundreds of workers and engineers from Russia who would eventually settle down in Georgia.

As early as the autumn of 1987, Georgian intellectuals established the Ilia Chavchavadze Society, which initially worked around the familiar themes of the Georgian dissidents going back to the 1970s—the defence of Georgian language and heritage, protection of historic monuments, and the fight against Russification. Later, in 1988, new organizations started appearing, including the Society of Saint Ilia the Righteous, which was led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and the National Democratic Party, led by Giorgi Chanturia. Those two groups were considered as “radical”, because of their views considering the Soviet rule illegitimate, and their demand for Georgian independence, but also because of their uncompromising political positions, whereby any cooperation with the existing political order was regarded as morally unacceptable. Both groups would play a key role in later events. In the autumn of 1988 those societies organized a number of protests in major cities such as Tbilisi and Kutaisi to protest against the destruction of architectural monuments.

The authorities tried to limit the influence of the informal societies by creating yet another society, called the Shota Rustaveli Society after the famous Georgian medieval poet, in March 1988. The new society had aims very similar to those of the informal groups, but differed in being under the control of figures close to the authorities. Yet, with the rise of the political activism of the wider public, this policy did not last long. In one year the Shota Rustaveli Society’s membership grew to 30,000 members. But the attempt by the Georgian authorities to impose their candidates at the head of the society at its second congress in March 1989 did not succeed, and several hundred members demonstrated in front of the Tbilisi Opera building to support the candidature of the independent pro-nationalist thinker Akaki Bakaradze.

In November 1988, debates on constitutional changes led to new protests. In Tbilisi 200,000 people demonstrated against proposed changes in the Soviet constitution, whereby the republics would have lost the—so far theoretical—right to secede from the USSR. Moscow rapidly withdrew the proposal, fearing that nationalist mobilization would grow as well as lead to clashes. The capitulation could only rein-

force the nationalist camp in Georgia, while the local Communist Party had by now lost all initiative.

There was a sense of urgency in Georgia in these days, a feeling of history unfolding, and the desire to capture the occasion and realize the suspended dream of 1918. For the first time for many decades the independence of Georgia was not just desirable, but possible. In an interview given to a foreign journalist, Akaki Bakaradze said: “I wish for the imploding of the Soviet Empire as soon as possible.” When asked whether he was not playing with fire, the Georgian intellectual answered: “It is better to play with the fire than to sit calmly next to the ashes.” Then he added: “Today we have the unique occasion, for which we waited seventy years, to realize our national aspirations. Why not seize the occasion?”¹²

In parallel with the Georgian national awakening, the Abkhaz national movement mobilized in its turn around its old themes: the Abkhaz dream of independence from Georgia. This new campaign started when a letter demanding the secession of Abkhazia from Georgia, signed by fifty-eight leading Abkhaz CP members, was addressed to the Nineteenth All-Union Party Conference, held in June 1988. On 17 March 1989 the Abkhaz activists took steps to mark their separatist intentions. On 18 March a mass meeting was organized in Lykhny, a village at the site of the old Abkhaz capital of the Middle Ages, where thousands of people signed the letter of the fifty-eight as a petition demanding Abkhaz sovereignty.¹³

In reaction to Abkhaz demands, mass demonstrations were organized in Tbilisi. Georgians claimed that the Abkhaz, who represented only 17 per cent of the overall population of Abkhazia, already had extensive privileges and discriminated against ethnic Georgians, who composed nearly half the population of the province. In April the demonstrations grew in volume, reaching 100,000 people on 8 April 1989. The day before the tragic events the Patriarch of Georgian Orthodox Church, Ilia II, addressed the crowd demonstrating in Rustaveli Avenue in central Tbilisi, calling them to respect public order, but in vain; the

12 Quoted in Amnon Kapeliouk, “La difficile déstalinisation de la Géorgie”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, June 1989.

13 Elizabeth Fuller, “New Abkhaz Campaign for Secession from Georgian SSR”, *Report on the USSR*, 7 April 1989, pp. 27-8.

patriarch was booed and his message was rejected by the demonstrators. The local authorities seem to have panicked before the massive demonstrations, and decided to use force at an opportune moment to disperse them. The Georgian Communist Party leader Jumbar Patiashvili, with permission from Moscow, introduced martial law. In the early hours of 9 April 1989, as some 8,000 activists continued their vigil on Rustaveli Avenue opposite the Central Committee building, Interior Ministry forces supported by the Soviet Army's 345th Parachute Regiment attacked the crowd with shovels and a toxic gas.¹⁴ This bloody repression, and the attempt by the Soviet leadership in Moscow to escape assuming responsibility, put an end to what was left of Soviet legitimacy in the eyes of the Georgian public.

The 9 April events left 19 dead, and was the last straw that destroyed any legitimacy that Soviet institutions or the Georgian Communist Party still enjoyed among the Georgians. For the Soviet authorities, the fault was to be found among "extremist-minded unofficial groupings who managed to aggravate the situation in Tbilisi"¹⁵ and who shouted anti-Soviet slogans and called for the secession of Georgia from the USSR. Yet, the repression stopped short of crushing by force Georgia's drive for independence, while being ineffective in reviving Soviet authority there. It only led to the total discredit of the Soviet Georgian authorities, who after the events were completely abandoned by Moscow and accused of having ordered the crackdown without the former knowledge of the Politburo.¹⁶ The military were also pointed at as responsible for the casualties; in a meeting between Eduard Shevardnadze and representatives of "the republic's scientific and creative intelligentsia", participants stressed that "there could be no justification" for the tragedy and that the "methods used to disperse the demonstrators ... were unacceptable for a society that has chosen democratization and

14 Harold Elletson, *The General Against the Kremlin, Alexander Lebed*, London: Warner Books, 1998, p. 99. The regiment, which was the first to be deployed in Afghanistan and the last to leave, had just been brought back and based at Kirovabad (Ganja) in Azerbaijan. Lebed himself took part in the operation, although he says that he arrived to Tbilisi few hours after the assault had started.

15 *Pravda*, 11 April 1989.

16 Anatoly Chernyaev, *My Six Years With Gorbachev*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000, pp. 218-20.

glasnost ... and in essence were a stab in the back of restructuring."¹⁷ The army in its turn refuted charges that it used poison gas, and indirectly put the blame on the Internal Ministry troops, who were also present in central Tbilisi during the repression of the demonstrators. Shevardnadze put the blame for the decision to use force on the head of the Georgian Communist Party, Patiashvili; the latter presented his "voluntary" resignation, and was replaced by Givi Gumbaridze.

The behaviour of the Soviet leadership did not leave any doubt that the driver's seat was vacant: Gorbachev in his memoirs writes: "How many times I have had to withstand 'searching glances', or listen to direct reproaches that 'the General Secretary must have known everything that was undertaken by the Georgian leadership'. In March 1994, Gavril Popov [then mayor of Moscow] declared in an article: 'I will never believe that Gorbachev did not know.' And yet the truth is: the decision to use force was taken without consulting me."¹⁸ An official commission formed to investigate the tragic events, with the Leningrad Mayor and human rights defender Anatoly Sobchak at its head, reached no conclusions and could not give an adequate answer to: "Who gave the order?"

The half-way repressive measures taken after the bloodshed could not calm spirits. Following the April massacre, the leaders of Georgian unofficial movements were arrested, among them Gamsakhurdia, Kostava, Chanturia, Sarishvili, Tsereteli and Khukhunashvili. Strikes spread in Tbilisi and provincial towns, and acts of violence against Soviet army servicemen became sporadic. Young men attacked Soviet bases and plundered weapons, which served for the formation of multiple armed groupings. By mid-1989 nationalist movements were already spreading elsewhere in the Caucasus, and in other parts of the USSR. In the summer of that year inter-ethnic violence erupted in Uzbekistan, in the Ferghana Valley, and later led to clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan. Similarly, tension was high in Abkhazia in summer 1989 when clashes erupted in Sukhumi between ethnic Abkhaz and Georgians. The idea of the break-up of the USSR and the secession of certain republics was already in the air, and openly discussed by scholars and journalists. As one scholar put it: "[W]ithin a relatively

17 *Pravda*, 11 April 1989.

18 Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoires*, New York: Doubleday, 1995, p. 443.

short but very intense period of history the idea of the disintegration of the Soviet state moved from the wholly unimaginable to the completely inevitable within the popular mind."¹⁹

The events of 9 April had two dimensions: the struggle against Moscow and the struggle for the unity of Georgia—the demonstration on that day was in favour of the preservation of Abkhazia within Georgia. These two themes were to play a pivotal role in the formation of Georgian political current leading to its independence, and continue to play a central role in Georgian politics now, a decade and a half after the fall of the USSR. The lesson Georgian militants drew in 1989 was that to preserve the territorial integrity of Georgia, they had to move away from Moscow and achieve national independence as the only guarantee for self-defence against the repression of the Soviet state.

A triangular power struggle: the Communists, Gamsakhurdia, and the National Council

When Merab Kostava died in a car accident in October 1989, Zviad Gamsakhurdia was left as the leading charismatic leader of Georgian nationalist movement.²⁰ Gamsakhurdia played a leading role among Georgian dissident movement and left his fingerprints on the political framework of Georgian nationalist movement which led the country into independence as the Soviet system started crumbling. The personal animosity that he shared with a large number of former dissidents who, very much like Gamsakhurdia, became leaders of various political groupings by the late 1980s divided the Georgian national movement into two main fronts, and poisoned the political atmosphere of Georgia on the threshold of building an independent state.

While all the political groups in Tbilisi agreed on their political objectives, severe and often violent competition arose. This division was not ideology-based, like the polarization between Communists and nationalists; the nationalist, pro-independence political currents were divided between “radicals” and “moderates” basically on questions of

19 Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 5.

20 Gamsakhurdia accused the KGB of organizing the accident, and plotting to kill him as well. See Carey Goldberg, “Prominent Georgian Dissident Dies in Accident Friends Say Was Suspicious”, *Associated Press*, 13 October 1989.

political tactics on how to achieve independence. According to Ghia Nodia, the radicals

were led mostly by former political prisoners and joined by young enthusiasts. They thought in moral rather than political terms, and these morals were based on the simple and clear values of Gulag life. There were ‘us’ and ‘them’ and the line dividing the two sides was sacrosanct.²¹

Unlike in other Soviet republics where moderates dominated the political movement while the radicals were at the margin, in Georgia the radicals of the national movement were the dominant current. For them, their anti-Soviet struggle and the realization of Georgian independence were more important than certain principles like human rights, democracy, or the political stability of Georgia.

A year after the Tbilisi repression, Georgia was ready to mobilize its forces that would prepare the post-Soviet political field; on 23-25 May 1990 some 6,200 representatives of 150 political groups and organizations met in Tbilisi and formed the National Congress, which was meant to be an alternative national parliament. The main aim of the Congress was to “open negotiations with Moscow on Georgia’s secession from the USSR”.²² Among Georgian political formations there was a consensus that all legal documents after 7 May 1920, the date of a treaty between the Georgian Democratic Republic and Soviet Russia, were illegal. A special commission of historians and legal experts, formed by a decree of the Supreme Soviet of the republic, declared the Sovietization of Georgia as military intervention and occupation. The Congress refused any cooperation with local Soviet institutions, since it rejected the foundations of Soviet Georgia, and considered Soviet rule as “occupation” and any collaboration with existing authorities and political institutions as “treason”.

Gamsakhurdia, finding himself in a minority position, left the Congress to set up his own Free Georgia Round Table. Soon he changed his previous stand towards Soviet structures and prepared his supporters for the October 1990 Supreme Soviet (parliament) elections. The “radicals”

21 Ghia Nodia, “Political Turmoil in Georgia and the Ethnic Policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia”, in Bruno Coppieters (ed.), *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, Brussels: VUB Press, 1996, p. 75.

22 Elizabeth Fuller, “Georgia Edges towards Secession”, *Report on the USSR*, 1 June 1990, p. 14.

refused to take part in elections they considered illegal and illegitimate, seeing their own Congress as the real expression of the independent will of Georgia. As a result, political leaders such as Giorgi Chanturia, the head of the National Democratic Party, and Irakly Tsereteli, the leader of the National Independence Party, boycotted the elections. While the radicals stayed out of the parliamentary elections, and while Georgian Communist Party functionaries were completely discredited and disoriented, Gamsakhurdia's Round Table recorded a sweeping victory, receiving 54 per cent of the votes. While the number of political parties and clubs numbered close to two hundred, the 1990 parliamentary elections led to a two-party system in which Gamsakhurdia supporters occupied 155 out of 250 seats, the rest going to the remnants of the Georgian Communist Party and to eleven independent candidates, who formed the nucleus of the future opposition to Gamsakhurdia's rule.

The pre-election contest was marred by violence, which created further divisions between political forces struggling for Georgian independence. The offices of two parties, the National Democrats and the National Independence Party, both on the centrally situated Rustaveli Prospect, were raided and put on fire. On 26 October, two days before the elections, unidentified gunmen opened fire on Chanturia and wounded him. After the elections Chanturia declared:

Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the Helsinki Union he heads [...] are playing the role of a Trojan horse in the national movement. Having earned cheap political prestige from the man in the street, Gamsakhurdia is successfully controlling all the news media in the republic, denying others the right to express their opinion. We must not allow a new dictator to come to power in Georgia.²³

Similar accusations between Gamsakhurdia and his opponents, each side accusing the other of being agents of the KGB, poisoned the political atmosphere, and destroyed the last bridges of dialogue between the various political forces in Tbilisi.

The Gamsakhurdia leadership, now dominating the parliament and with strong public support, took steps to impose its rule over the republic. Gamsakhurdia appointed Tengiz Sigua as Prime Minister, who in turn made a number of important changes in November 1991, including appointment of a new head of the Interior Ministry and a new di-

23 *Izvestia*, 10 November 1990.

rector for the Georgian KGB. This latter step drew harsh criticism from Moscow; a letter from Gorbachev demanded an end to "illegal" actions, but nothing more followed. Gamsakhurdia had a two-sided political project: to regain the independence of Georgia from the hegemony of the Soviet power, and to strengthen the ethnic Georgian primacy in the republic, and especially in the regions of ethnic minorities and autonomous structures. To realize his project, Gamsakhurdia increasingly used undemocratic political methods, like the appointment of regional prefects which led to the anger of minority elites. Gamsakhurdia did not hesitate to use force and violence to impose his vision of Georgia on ethnic minorities, as well as on Georgian political forces who did not share his policies, including Georgian nationalists who disagreed with his vision or political tactics.

Following the parliamentary elections, the power of the Georgian Communist Party collapsed. Although the GCP had 63 deputies in the new parliament, it formed no opposition to the ruling Round Table. On the contrary: one journalist remarks that the GCP "has so far shown an enviable unanimity with the ruling Roundtable bloc".²⁴ The new ideologue of the Georgian CP, Vazha Gurgeneidze, described the position of his party as a "national party that places Georgia's interests above Party concerns", adding that the Party had promised to declare independence if it had won the elections.²⁵

Tbilisi-based Georgian dissidents were conscious of the problem of national minorities in Georgia, and the danger of instability and inter-ethnic clashes in case of any mishandling of relations with them at a time of political change. The events during the first Georgian Republic, and more recent memories of clashes in Sukhumi in 1978, were enough warning of this. Many leaders of the "radical" wing of Georgian nationalist movement tried to establish contacts and dialogue with ethnic minorities, including the Abkhaz and Osset authorities, to ensure their support for the project of Georgia's independence. Yet Gamsakhurdia tried to instrumentalize the ethnic issue and to frame it in a more extreme way for his populist aims: to win popularity and dominate the newly developing political scene. And he was very successful in this. "Ethnic populism had helped him to become the leader of the

24 Tatyana Nedashkovskaya, *Postfactum*, Moscow, 2 January 1991.

25 *Ibid.*

independent movement," writes one leading Georgian analyst.²⁶ The ethnic discourse of Gamsakhurdia found large resonance among the population of Georgia, "fearing" for their status in certain regions of the country or "demographic trends" among certain minority groups. Soon after he came to power, in December 1990 Gamsakhurdia abolished the autonomous status of South Ossetia, a decision that paved the way to the first war in Georgia.

The first armed groups of several dozen people started to form in Georgia in 1989, and one of them, which had legal recognition by the GCP, was formed as early as 1990; holding the status of a "Rescue Corps" under the GCP ruler Givi Gumbaridze in 1990, it was regarded as a nucleus for the future armed forces of Georgia. The Mkhedrioni (Horsemen) group was formed under the leadership of Jaba Ioseliani, who had been convicted of bank robbery and manslaughter in Leningrad, and had later become a playwright and arts professor. On December 1990, under a parliamentary decree, the National Guard was set up, with the objective of defending the country's "territorial integrity". The National Guard was led by another former artist, Tengiz Kitovani, and already in April 1991 it boasted of 12,000 recruits.²⁷ These two groups were initially in opposite camps; while the National Guard was loyal to Gamsakhurdia, Ioseliani was a member of the National Congress and therefore up to two thousand Mkhedrioni fighters were on the side of the opposition, and formed their central armed structure.

The difficult personality of Gamsakhurdia added a final aggravating factor to an overcharged political atmosphere. Gamsakhurdia thought that Georgia had a messianic role, as a country mediating between East and West. He even claimed that the Holy Grail was in fact in Georgia. Although he described his political orientation as "Christian Democrat", he behaved like an autocratic ruler who did not tolerate negotiations and bargains, creation of alliances and building of consensus, which hindered him developing his political project. When presidential elections were held in May 1991 Gamsakhurdia, having complete domination over "administrative resources" and the mass media, won by a landslide 87 per cent of the votes. Gamsakhurdia had successfully

26 Ghia Nodia, "Political Turmoil in Georgia", op. cit., p. 81.

27 David Darchiashvili, *The Army and Society in Georgia*, Tbilisi: CIPDD, February-March 1998.

manoeuvred himself to become the leader of Georgia, now a country polarized not between pro-USSR and pro-independent, but between pro- and anti-Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

Conflict in South Ossetia

Yet the first conflict to explode was not in downtown Tbilisi between the former comrades-in-arms of Georgian dissidence, and not even in Abkhazia, where tension had long since been high and acts of violence continuous since the 1989 demonstrations and counter demonstrations. Curiously, the first conflict exploded in the mountainous and agricultural region of South Ossetia, with its "capital" Tskhinvali.²⁸ In a region deprived of any geopolitical significance, this is an identity conflict *par excellence*.

Descendants of the Alans, Iranian-speaking warrior-tribes who inhabited the northern and eastern shores of the Black Sea and came into contact with the Greeks and Romans, the Ossets were driven to the Caucasus Mountains by further invasions by Turkic tribes (Huns) from Central Asia in the fifth century, and later by the Mongol invasions. Following the Russian Revolution an Osset Autonomous Republic was formed, which was later incorporated into the Mountain Republic. After the Sovietization of Georgia, South Ossetia was declared an Autonomous Region within the Georgian SSR (1922). Most Ossets are Orthodox, while a minority (Digors who were the former noble caste) is Sunni Muslim. Although armed clashes and massacres took place between Georgians and Ossets during the Georgian Republic, after the Sovietization of the Transcaucasus relations between the two sides were calm and peaceful until 1989. Both Georgians and South Ossets share the Christian Orthodox faith (the Digors live the western part of North Ossetia) and the rate of intermarriage between the two groups was high.

28 South Ossetia has a surface of 3,900 sq km, and in the 1989 census had a population of 99,000, of which 67 per cent were ethnic Ossets (roughly 65,000), and 29 per cent were ethnic Georgians. Another 99,000 ethnic Ossets lived in Georgia outside the territories of the South Osset Autonomous Republic. In Georgian, the region is considered part of "Shida Kartli", while in Osset it is called "Khosar Iriston".

For Georgian public opinion, political demands from Abkhazia or South Ossetia were seen through the prism of the ongoing Georgian national liberation struggle, and conceived as manipulation by conservative forces in Moscow to apply pressure against Georgia's drive to self-determination. The Georgian public did not recognize the legitimacy of the autonomies, considering their creation as an artificial political manoeuvre by the Bolsheviks to divide and weaken the Georgian nation. Among the Georgian public, other ethnic and cultural groups living in the republic were considered as "guests", and any political demands expressed from them were simply surprising and unacceptable. Stories of abuse and discrimination against Georgians in Abkhazia or South Ossetia were abundant in the Georgian Republic press, while historians published numerous papers and pamphlets about the Georgianness of those territories (see Chapter 2).

In parallel with the Georgian national revival, which in itself was the expression of its times and a reflection of similar national mobilization elsewhere in the Soviet Union, the Osset intelligentsia mobilized around its own national question to reaffirm its group identity. For Ossets, the geopolitical shifts taking place posed two problems. One was the separation of the Osset nation into two political units, the first being North Ossetia, encompassing Osset inhabited regions on the northern slopes of the Caucasus chain, with an Autonomous Republic within Russia, and the second being South Ossetia within Georgia. The second problem, with the rise of Georgian nationalism, was whether independent Georgia would tolerate Osset self-rule, and the form of the Georgian-Osset relations should take as a result.

From an Osset perspective, their drive for separation from Tbilisi and unification with North Ossetia was as legitimate as Georgia's drive for national independence. The revival of Osset nationalism renewed hopes for reunification with their brethren in the north, combined with fears of a Georgian nationalist backlash. South Ossetia feared Georgia's independence from the USSR. Independent Georgia could abolish the status of South Ossetia, which was an Autonomous Region within the USSR. In their struggle for independence, Georgian nationalists were mobilizing to return to the constitution of Georgia of 1920, when Georgia was an independent republic under Menshevik rule. Yet in this constitution neither South Ossetia nor Abkhazia had had its own ad-

ministrative structures with guarantees to preserve its ethnic character and ethno-cultural institutions. Moreover, during anti-Moscow mobilization the bulk of the Georgian mass movement feared and clashed with the Osset and Abkhaz national movements, instead of creating bridges and negotiating a new deal with them.

Often rumours coming from Sukhumi talked about clashes between ethnic Georgians and ethnic Abkhaz there, with exaggeration of the number of victims. Following such rumours in August 1989 about seventy Georgians killed in Sukhumi, Gamsakhurdia reacted emotionally in front of a foreign journalist: "The Abkhazians are terrorists. They are agents of Moscow, instructed to kill innocent Georgians."²⁹

As the nationalist movements grew in strength, clashes between Osset and Georgian armed groups increased in intensity in 1990-91. The region was also put under a state of emergency, and Soviet troops were stationed there to separate the conflicting sides, in an attempt to freeze the conflict. But a political solution within the context of weakening of state (Soviet) institutions, and the instability it unleashed, was simply impossible to reach.

The prospect of losing Moscow as the overlord was a destabilizing factor for Ossets, as in other contexts in the Caucasus. Moscow played the role—among others—of the judge, the mediator, and the reference that preserved the balance during contradictions and conflicts between local entities. In the past, Moscow intervened for the distribution of resources, for solving of land and water conflicts, and for easing of political tensions. Without Moscow Ossets were left face-to-face with their bigger Georgian neighbour, in the absence of traditions of direct negotiations and mechanisms of conflict resolution.

The first expression of Osset nationalism came in the spring of 1989 in the form of a letter published in an Abkhazian newspaper, by Alan Chochiev, a historian at the Tskhinvali Pedagogical Institute, and head of the informal "South Osset Popular Front, Ademon Nykhas".³⁰ In his letter, Chochiev expressed his support for the Abkhaz call for sovereignty. Although local Osset authorities denied any link to Chochiev's letter, tension started rising between Ossets and Georgians. This was fol-

29 Carroll Bogert, "People Feel No Restraint", Guns, strikes and ethnic feuds in Soviet Georgia", *Newsweek*, 14 August 1989.

30 Ademon Nykhas means "popular shrine" in Osset.

lowed by clashes between those two peoples in Tskhinvali on 26 May 1989, the anniversary of the independence of the former Georgian Democratic Republic, encouraged by Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Further resolutions by the Georgian parliament, such as a law in August 1989 on the introduction of the Georgian language as the only language to be used in public spheres, further angered Ossets as only a minority of them spoke Georgian.³¹ Interestingly, in the same period (1989) a similar language law in Moldova making Moldovan (Romanian) the state language and imposing the Latin alphabet instead of the Cyrillic throughout the republic led to the clashes in Transnistria. Ademon Nykhas organized strikes to protest against Georgian policies, and appealed to Moscow to bring South Ossetia into Russian jurisdiction.

But it was Gamsakhurdia's decision to take radical steps in the legal controversy with South Ossetia that was to be fatal for stability in Georgia. As Tbilisi started its legal undoing of Soviet legitimacy, by revising all treaties between Georgia and the USSR after 1921, including the 1922 Union Treaty and the Transcaucasus Federation treaty, it carelessly damaged the position of the Osset and Abkhaz minorities, since those treaties were the legal basis for the autonomous structures in Georgia. In reaction, the South Osset Soviet of People's Deputies adopted a decision to upgrade its status from "autonomous region" to "autonomous republic". This "war of laws" was fuelled by the marginalization of ethnic regions during the October 1990 parliamentary elections; a law barred regional political formations from participating in the elections, practically preventing minority formations from having representatives in the parliament. The Georgian reaction to that step did not wait long; the Georgian parliament passed a law dissolving the autonomous status of the region, on 11 December 1990. And while Georgia boycotted the March 1991 referendum on the future of the Union, Ossets massively participated with 99 per cent of the votes supporting the preservation of the USSR.

A further step towards escalation came when Gamsakhurdia organized a popular march on Tskhinvali under the slogan of defending eth-

31 One report puts the number of Ossets who "claimed fluency in Georgian" at 14 per cent. See "Report on Ethnic Conflict in the Russian Federation and Transcaucasia", *Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project*, Harvard University, J.F. Kennedy School of Government, Cambridge, MA, July 1993, p. 95.

nic Georgian rights in South Ossetia. On 23 November 1990, twenty thousand people armed with light weapons but also with armoured vehicles marched on the town. They were stopped at the southern suburbs of Tskhinvali by Soviet Interior Ministry troops. At a meeting with the South Osset party leader Kim Tsagolov, Gamsakhurdia threatened: "I shall bring 200,000-strong army. Not a single Osset will remain in the land of Samachablo [South Ossetia]. I demand that the Soviet flags be removed!"³² Although the interposition of Soviet troops prevented a bloodbath, the march polarized to the extreme the situation between ethnic Osset and ethnic Georgian villages in the region. Some of the participants in the march, members of the "Merab Kostava Society" loyal to Gamsakhurdia took up positions in the vicinity of Tskhinvali, and a low-intensity war started between Osset and Georgian villages of the region.

South Ossetians created their own national guard, and fighting continued throughout 1991. Tbilisi accused Russian authorities of supplying arms to Osset militants. The unstable situation led to the displacement of Osset civilians from the front line, and over a hundred thousand refugees moved to North Ossetia, where they would later play a decisive role in the Osset-Ingush conflict. Similarly, over ten thousand ethnic Georgians fled Tskhinvali and villages around it. The situation calmed down relatively as tension increased in Tbilisi

	1959	1979	1989
Georgians	2,600.6 (64.3 per cent)	3,433.0 (68.8 per cent)	3,787.4 (70.1 per cent)
Abkhaz	62.9 (1.6 per cent)	85.3 (1.7 per cent)	95.9 (1.8 per cent)
Ossetians	141.2 (3.5 per cent)	160.5 (3.2 per cent)	164.1 (3 per cent)
Russians	407.9 (10.1 per cent)	371.6 (7.4 per cent)	341.2 (6.3 per cent)
Ukrainians	52.2 (1.8 per cent)	45.0 (0.9 per cent)	52.4 (1.0 per cent)
Azerbaijanis	153.6 (3.8 per cent)	255.7 (5.1 per cent)	307.6 (5.7 per cent)
Armenians	442.9 (11 per cent)	448.0 (9 per cent)	437.2 (8.1 per cent)
Jews	51.6 (1.3 per cent)	28.3 (0.6 per cent)	24.8 (0.5 per cent)
Assyrians	...	5.3	6.2
Greeks	7.9 (1.8 per cent)	95.1 (1.9 per cent)	100.3 (1.9 per cent)
Kurds	16.2 (0.4 per cent)	25.7 (0.5 per cent)	33.3 (0.6 per cent)
Others	42.0 (1.0 per cent)	45.0 (0.9 per cent)	56.7 (1.0 per cent)
Total population	4,044.0 (100 per cent)	4,993.2 (100 per cent)	5,400.8 (100 per cent)

Table 3: Population of Georgia by ethnic origin in 2002.

Source: From Britta Korth, Marina Muskhelishvili and Arnold Stepanyan, *Language Policy in Georgia*, Geneva: CIMERA, 2005, pp. 13-14.

32 Quoted in Alexei Zverev, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994", in Bruno Coppieters (ed.), in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, Brussels: VUB Press, 1996, p. 43.

between supporters of Gamsakhurdia and the opposition following the attempted putsch in Moscow in August 1991.

The fall of Zviad Gamsakhurdia

Gamsakhurdia's personality, his politics, and the power struggle he caused in Georgia under his rule left their deep mark on Georgian political culture and statehood. Although Gamsakhurdia's Free Georgia Round Table won 54 per cent of the seats in the parliamentary elections of October 1990, and although Gamsakhurdia himself was elected President of Georgia on 26 May 1991 by 86 per cent of the votes, his political manoeuvres, his suspicious character, and his lack of diplomatic skills led to his political isolation in Tbilisi after just a few months of exercising power.

A major problem Gamsakhurdia suffered from, which led to the creation of unnecessary enemies and the loss of allies, was his notorious inconsistency. Although he was the founder and the head of the Georgian section of the Helsinki Union, an organization dedicated to the defence of human rights and therefore the freedom of expression and the press, once taking control of the parliament he closed down all Communist Party publications, but also the independent minded *Molodiozh Gruzii* newspaper. During his campaign for the Supreme Soviet elections, Gamsakhurdia promised preservation of the autonomous status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, yet barely a few weeks after the elections, in December 1990 the Georgian parliament abolished the autonomous status of South Ossetia. His chauvinistic policies, which earned him a bad press abroad, included a pronouncement about restricting citizenship to those who could prove their ancestors lived in Georgia before the Tsarist Russian invasion, and about distribution of land only to those who had citizenship, practically excluding a large portion of ethnic minorities who made up 30 per cent of the entire population.

The Georgian leader failed to grasp the complex developments in Georgia and the USSR, and had easy explanations: all problems were the result of plots by KGB agents. One analyst has the following description: "...to judge by Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric, any setbacks, whether the defiance shown by the Ossetians or the failure of kolkhozes to fulfil milk delivery quotas, will be interpreted as deliberate sabotage directed

against the new parliament to the detriment of the interests of the people, and those responsible will be considered agents of the Kremlin."³³

Gamsakhurdia had a personality problem as well. He alienated people, was aggressive to foreign correspondents, rejected dialogue with Georgian political forces. Nodar Natadze, the head of the Georgian Popular Front, a group in opposition to Gamsakhurdia, described him as "a politician who changes his views every twenty-four hours and his principles once a week, who makes fundamental mistakes, who places his own personal interests above those of his party..."³⁴ Another Georgia observer remarks that "Gamsakhurdia convinced the world that he was a dictator even before he became one."³⁵ Gamsakhurdia's constant manoeuvring and uncompromising political positions provoked the antagonism of the Tbilisi elite when he had accumulated numerous enemies, such as the ethnic minorities in Georgia and the Soviet authorities in Moscow.

As Gamsakhurdia's political about-turns became increasingly brusque, and as he lost support, more repressive measures were taken by his administration; the first major arrest was of Jaba Ioseliani, the head of the Mkhedrioni paramilitary group, who was followed by Grigori Chanturia, head of the National Democratic Party and a main political rival of the President. As political contradictions polarized the Georgian public, the August putsch in Moscow was the spark to ignite the fire.

On 19 August 1991 high officials and close collaborators of the Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, regrouped under the name of a State Emergency Committee, organized a coup d'état in Moscow. Among the putschists were the Vice-President of the USSR, Gennady Yanayev, who was named acting President; the Prime Minister, Valentin Pavlov; the head of the KGB, Vladimir Kryuchkov; the Minister of Defence, Dmitry Yazov; and the Interior Minister, Boris Pugo. Thus the majority of the ruling figures organized a coup against the head of the state! Their aim was to preserve the Soviet Union by establishing a military dictatorship a few days before the signing of a new union treaty, but their

33 Elizabeth Fuller, "Gamsakhurdia's First 100 Days", *Report on USSR*, 8 March 1991, pp. 10-11.

34 Elizabeth Fuller, "How Strong is the Georgian Opposition", *Report on the USSR*, 18 October 1991, p. 27.

35 Ghia Nodia, "Political Turmoil in Georgia", op. cit., p. 87.

failure in the matter of two days—thanks to resistance from the head of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, and the refusal by troops to obey putschist orders—precipitated the collapse of the Soviet Union itself.

Gamsakhurdia's position towards the putsch was highly controversial. On the day it occurred, the Georgian presidential office issued an order to the population to remain calm and continue to carry on their duties. Gamsakhurdia also ordered the National Guard to be put under the authority of the Interior Ministry, seen by his adversaries as a gesture towards the putschists. The hesitant behaviour of Gamsakhurdia could have been justified politically, yet the defeat of the putsch gave his rivals an opportunity to counter-attack. In mid-August, a number of high ranking officials of his government resigned, and joined the ranks of the opposition. Among them were Tengiz Sigua, the Prime Minister, Giorgi Khoshtaria, the Foreign Minister, and Tengiz Kitovani, the commander of the National Guards. Kitovani refused to obey Gamsakhurdia's orders and moved to the Shavanabada military camp on the outskirts of Tbilisi with a thousand of his comrades. In September Vazha Adamia, the head of the Merab Kostava Society, a paramilitary formation which had participated in the clashes in South Ossetia, defected from the government camp and moved to the opposition with a group of armed fighters. Gamsakhurdia now had more enemies than ever before and was completely exposed.

From September onwards Tbilisi descended into chaos. The opposition organized a demonstration calling for the resignation of the government; the police opened fire, wounding several people. The existing embryonic army structure had been divided, between one section led by Kitovani which moved to the ranks of the opposition, and other units which remained loyal to the President. The Zugdidi Battalion was called to Tbilisi for the defence of the parliament building where Gamsakhurdia's offices were situated. Zugdidi is a town in Mingrelia in western Georgia, to the south of Abkhazia. Gamsakhurdia's ancestors were from Mingrelia, and the region remained loyal to him during the civil strife and even long after his defeat and death. Opposition armed groups took control of the state television building, while a hundred metres away were the positions of pro-government armed groups. Busloads of Gamsakhurdia supporters were transported from the country side, and organized demonstrations in support of their President in front

of the parliament building. The city plunged into chaos, with clashes between regime supporters and opposition activists increasing in intensity. Armed groups of various political colours or of criminal character took control of Tbilisi. Communal services were interrupted, electric supply in the country became irregular, while the economy came to a stand-still.

As the opposition pressed for the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia, the first freely elected President of Georgia, who had won 86 per cent of the votes in the spring, his popularity remained quite high, especially outside the capital. Even Tengiz Sigua—the renegade Gamsakhurdia Prime Minister—recognized the popularity of the President, as he answered a journalist's question: "At present the alignment of forces is approximately as follows: in Tbilisi, nine to one against Gamsakhurda, and in the countryside, six to four in his favour."³⁶ Yet armed pressure and the threat of a widespread civil war increased. In December 1991 the opposition regrouped itself in a "Military Council" led by Sigua, Kitovani and Ioseliani, encircled the centre of Tbilisi, and opened fire on the parliament building to dislodge Gamsakhurdia and his supporters. The Georgian President contacted the "Soviet" Transcaucasus troops, whose headquarters were situated in Tbilisi itself, to intervene, but in vain. Moscow preferred not to be part of a conflict where its sympathies were with the Georgian opposition. After 16 days of fighting, which left much of Rustaveli Avenue in ruins, and left 200 people killed, Gamsakhurdia was forced to flee Georgia on 6 January 1992. With some of his supporters he first drove to Azerbaijan, then to Armenia, from where he flew to Grozny to live in exile in Chechnya as a guest of Djokhar Dudayev.

Gamsakhurdia and his supporters called the rebellion a Russian military coup. For Gamsakhurdia, the rebellion coincided with his refusal to participate in the Alma Ata summit to lay the basis of the Commonwealth of Independent State (CIS).³⁷ Although it is a fact that the Russian military based in Georgia detested Gamsakhurdia and sympathized with the opposition, and that they did supply the opposition

36 Interview by Tatyana Malkina, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 26 September 1991.

37 Zviad Gamsakhurdia, "The Legally Elected and Legitimate President of Georgia, Describes the Evil Revenge of KGB & the Nomenklatura", *Soviet Analyst*, Vol. 21, No. 9-10, 1993.

with arms and ammunition, the coup was entirely due to Georgian political factors.

In the debate on the correct way to Georgia's independence Gamsakhurdia seems to have been right, and Chanturia and Tsereteli wrong. By utilizing Soviet institutions Georgia under Gamsakhurdia acceded to independence, while the National Council remained no more than a political movement without much impact on the events. Yet as Georgia was celebrating the collapse of the USSR and its accession to independence, allies of Chanturia and Tsereteli were raiding the parliament building to chase out the first freely elected, and still somewhat popular, president of Georgia, and to invite the former Soviet boss of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, to return to take power in Tbilisi, this time to rule an independent and much troubled native land. Yet the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia did not put an end to the political divisions within the Georgian elite. "The anti-Gamsakhurdia coalition was as disunited as the nationalist movement from which it emerged."³⁸

Worse, Georgia had entered a new historic phase with fractured institutions. In early 1992 the political institutions of Georgia were living a period of political vacuum, its armed forces disintegrating, its territory divided under the rule of multiple warlords loyal to a set of political projects, and its economy in bankruptcy. Without massive humanitarian aid starvation would have been a major problem. In its first year of independence, Georgia presented a classical case of a "failed state".

Shevardnadze returns home

Following the departure of Gamsakhurdia from the parliament building, the Military Council claimed power. It later called itself the State Council, and was formed by the victors Kitovani, Ioseliani and Sigua, unofficially known as the "Triumvirate". Although the State Council was composed of artists-turned-warlords, they were hesitant about assuming the political leadership in the country. The cohesion of the council was another problem, as tension remained high between the men of the National Guard loyal to Kitovani and the Mkhedrioni fight-

38 Ronald Grigor Suny, "Elite Transformation in Late-Soviet and Post-Soviet Transcaucasia, or What Happens When the Ruling Class Can't Rule?" in R.G. Suny, *The Structure of Soviet History, Essays and Documents*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 503.

ers of Ioseliani, the two major armed groups among others that controlled Georgia in the early 1990s. Kitovani twice travelled to Moscow to meet Shevardnadze and propose that he should return to the country and take the political leadership. Under Gamsakhurdia Georgia had remained isolated, and few countries had established diplomatic relations with it. Shevardnadze, with his extensive international contacts, inspired hope of bringing Georgia into rapid recognition, and receiving much needed support from Western countries and international organizations.

Shevardnadze, marginalized in the new capital of independent Russia, accepted the offer and returned to Tbilisi in March 1992. Shevardnadze promised to upgrade the image of Georgia abroad and receive much needed help from Western capitals. Georgia became a member of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in March, and in May James Baker, the US Secretary of State and a personal friend of Shevardnadze, whom he knew very well from the days when the latter was Soviet Foreign Minister, flew to Georgia for a visit to Shevardnadze and to show American support to the new-old Georgian leader.

Yet Shevardnadze's internal position was a very difficult one. He had to share power with three new partners, each having veto power over decision making. Having made all his career in Soviet Communist Party structures, now he had to deal in day-to-day matters with a former convict who had spent half of his life in jail (Ioseliani), a sculptor-turned-rebel (Kitovani), and a former-engineer turned nationalist (Sigua). Pro-Gamsakhurdia activists continued to protest against the new regime, while their newspapers were closed down and activists arrested. The most serious problem was the lack of a disciplined military or police force. In the early days of Shevardnadze's rule of the now independent republic, Georgia might have had the form of a state (international recognition) but still needed the development of its content (armed forces, territorial unity, legitimate institutions, etc.). While Kitovani was the Defence Minister, he commanded several thousand badly armed and undisciplined gunmen, whose authority in Tbilisi was challenged by the Mkhedrioni bands. Neither of those armed groups had much influence outside the perimeters of the capital. In April 1992, the State Council adopted a resolution creating unified armed forces out of the National

Guard and the Mkhedrioni, with a total force of 20,000 men, a hasty decision which did not make much headway in creating disciplined armed forces with central command and control. All through 1992 and beyond, Shevardnadze was nominally the head of the state, yet he did not have much real power. Kitovani and Ioseliani did have armed forces, although their control over their own men remained very relative.

Shevardnadze's problems were not limited to the power-sharing arrangements with the triumvirate. He had a legitimacy problem at home, although the image of Georgia abroad improved somewhat. To gain legitimacy, he organized new legislative elections in October 1992, during which mass irregularities were reported. According to official results, 60 per cent of the voters participated and in an uncontested vote Shevardnadze was elected the Speaker of the new parliament with 89 per cent of the votes. Curiously, only a year and a half before a majority of the voters had selected Shevardnadze's rival Gamsakhurdia; this revealed the fragility of the institutions and cast doubts on the reliability of the elections process in a Georgia in the process of independence. The new parliament was heavily dominated by the former Communist Party *nomenklatura* and the new warlords of Georgia. As we will see in more detail later, these elections took place as Georgian troops were at war in Abkhazia, and had just lost the strategic town of Gagra and regions in the north-western part of the province. Under the circumstances, it is improbable that the voters gave massive support to Shevardnadze and his supporters.

The elections did not bring an end to internal turmoil. During the year 1992, the internal contradictions developed on three levels: resumption of hostilities in South Ossetia until the signing of the Vladikavkaz cease-fire treaty; confrontation between "Zviadists" or forces loyal to the overthrown president and others loyal to the State Council, mainly in western Georgia; and the largest military confrontation in Georgia, the invasion of Abkhazia by the National Guard.

The "final march" on Tskhinvali that Gamsakhurdia had called on 28 November 1991 did not materialize, because of internal quarrels within the Georgian nationalist camp. The change of regime in Tbilisi brought new hopes for a peaceful solution. Shevardnadze's declarations introduced a new conciliatory tone, criticizing the policies of his predecessor towards ethnic minorities and especially his encour-

agement of violence in South Ossetia. Osset prisoners were released, among them Torez Kulumbegov, the Chairman of the South Ossetia Supreme Soviet, who was arrested while negotiating with the Georgian side and imprisoned under orders from Gamsakhurdia. In March 1992 a Georgian delegation travelled to Vladikavkaz, in North Ossetia, and achieved a cease-fire agreement with a South Osset delegation. Events took a downturn in April, as Tskhinvali was once again the target of heavy Georgian shelling from military positions in neighbouring villages, accompanied by attempts to advance towards the town. In May Shevardnadze himself visited Tskhinvali and held direct talks there. Yet even when Shevardnadze and Ioseliani were present in Tskhinvali, the town came under fire from Georgian positions (presumably from uncontrolled elements of the Georgian National Guard). Massive refugee movement of Ossets from Georgia to North Ossetia in the Russian Federation risked destabilizing the situation in the North Caucasus and increasing the pressure on the Russian administration to intervene. Attacks by South Osset militants on arms depots in Vladikavkaz became regular events, often causing casualties, and increasing political tension in the Republic of North Ossetia.³⁹

On 15 June Ruslan Khasbulatov, the Chairman of the Parliament of Russia, made a heavily worded threat of military intervention against Georgia. Khasbulatov accused the Georgian side of breaking former engagements with the intention to force a change on the ground, and of organizing "genocide" against the Osset people. He told Georgia to find a negotiated solution, threatening that otherwise "Russia is prepared to take urgent measures to defend (...) the peaceful population and the Russian troops."⁴⁰ Three days later Russian helicopters attacked Georgian armoured vehicles, while a column of Russian tanks moved out of Tskhinvali to take positions on its suburbs. For the Georgian side, Khasbulatov's declaration and the military aggression were tantamount to a declaration of war. A few months after the collapse of the USSR, a Russo-Georgian war seemed to be in the making, while wars were flaring up all over the former Soviet periphery, from Karabakh to Tajikistan.

39 Mikhail Shevelyov, "War Spreads Northwards", *Moscow News*, 21 June 1992.

40 Quoted in Julian Birch, "Ossetia: a Caucasian Bosnia in Microcosm", *Central Asian Survey*, London, 1995, 14 (1), p. 46.

The tension was defused by a direct call from Yeltsin to Shevardnadze on 22 June, and two days later the two leaders met in Dagomys in Russia. A decision was reached which included a cease-fire agreement effective from 28 June 1992; the withdrawal of Georgian troops and lifting of the siege of Tskhinvali; and the setting up of a peacekeeping force composed of Russian, Georgian, and Osset troops to monitor the contact line between South Ossetia and Georgia. The Osset leaders of North and South were present in the negotiations, yet did not sign the agreement. South Ossetia was demanding the incorporation of the region into the Russian Federation, and considered the agreement between Moscow and Tbilisi as "treason" from the Russian side. Nevertheless, two weeks later the first contingent of the 500 Russian peacekeepers entered the region.

The damage left behind by the two-year conflict was impressive for such a small territory. The number of casualties is put between 700 and over 1,000 dead, the official count of ethnic Osset refugees from Georgia to North Ossetia was put between forty thousand and as high as a hundred thousand people, and the number of the internally displaced ethnic Georgians at 40,000⁴¹ (although those numbers could be exaggerated somewhat by the local authorities for the purpose of receiving larger quantities of international aid, they nevertheless reveal the extent of the tragedy).

The political damage was even greater. From a Georgian perspective, Tbilisi had cancelled the autonomous status of South Ossetia without having an alternative model to propose, had initiated a military struggle and lost South Ossetia, had reached a cease-fire agreement and paid for it by having Russian soldiers as guarantors of stability in South Ossetia. Even worse, the South Osset experience had antagonized other minorities who were highly suspicious of Georgian intentions now, whether the president was called Gamsakhurdia or Shevardnadze. The cease-fire agreement was very successful in suspending the military phase of the conflict, yet no political solution has been found. Clashes occurred in

41 Neil MacFarlane, Larry Minear and Stephen D. Shenfield, *Armed Conflict in Georgia: A Case Study in Humanitarian Action, and Peacekeeping*, Thomas J. Watson Institute For International Studies, Occasional Paper Number 21, Providence, 1996, p. 8. On return of refugees and IDP's since, see "Georgia-South Ossetia: Refugee Return the Path for Peace", International Crisis Group Policy Briefing, *Europe Briefing No. 38*, Tbilisi/Brussels, 19 April 2005.

South Ossetia after the Rose Revolution and the coming to power of Mikheil Saakashvili, when Georgian forces tried to advance towards Tskhinvali and were faced by fierce resistance in summer 2004.

War erupts in Abkhazia

In early 1992 the State Council did not have much control outside Tbilisi. Moreover, several armed militias, either groups linked to political movements or simply localized armed groups, divided the countryside into fiefdoms. The State Council faced the serious challenge of putting the country together, a task further complicated by the inconclusive end of the South Ossetia confrontation.

The actions of the State Council in 1992 often led to catastrophic results; they were badly thought out, hardly planned, and chaotically carried out. This chaotic political management led to the tragedy of war in Abkhazia, and the defeat of the Georgian forces with tragic human consequences. While those events should be scrutinized through a highly critical optic, one should not underestimate the challenge Shevardnadze was facing, and the dilemma of how to bring the bits and pieces of Georgia under a central state. The means available to the Georgian leader were too rudimentary for the difficulties he faced: the State Council did not enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of an important portion of the population of Georgia, perhaps the majority; the embryonic armed forces were fractured, had opened fire on their own parliament and on their own comrades, and had led an inconclusive war in South Ossetia; and the economy was in free fall. In order to go out of Tbilisi and impose the authority of the Georgian statehood, the State Council had neither the means to persuade, nor the means to impose its authority by force.

While the situation in South Ossetia was going through dramatic upheavals, dangerous events were unfolding in western Georgia. Ajaria, Mingrelia, and Abkhazia were all in turmoil in early 1992. Georgia was going through a process of disintegration on the image of the Soviet disintegration itself. The Soviet Union collapsed and as a result various pieces came out of this immense crash like a crystal vase hitting the hard ground, varying according to the texture of the object itself: in some places whole Union Republics came out in one piece, in others the tex-

ture was even more fragile and the pieces that came in their turn broke into smaller and much more numerous bits.

Ajaria, an autonomous republic, had an advantageous geographical position, and its main town Batumi was a port city on the border with Turkey. Most of the cargo traffic of Georgia passed through Batumi, making the city an important asset. Tension was first noted in Ajaria under Gamsakhurdia when an Orthodox priest went there to convert the population of Ajaria, of Muslim tradition in the majority, to Christianity. Various influential leaders in Tbilisi, such as Kitovani and Ioseliani, attempted on various occasions to enter Ajaria, but the presence of a Russian military base and the good relations between the Ajaria leader Aslan Abashidze and the Russian military had preserved the status quo.

Several regions in western Georgia remained under the control of "Zviadists", militants loyal to Zviad Gamsakhurdia, including Zugdidi, the main town of Mingrelia, Poti, a seaport on the Black Sea, Abasha, and Khoni;⁴² this meant that the rail communications between central Georgia and Russia (which pass through Abkhazia) and with the Black Sea ports in Ajaria, were cut. The population of Mingrelia were staunch supporters of Gamsakhurdia, and did not recognize the legitimacy of the State Council, considered by them an illegal formation that had taken power through a coup d'état. Many of the fighters who had defended Gamsakhurdia in Tbilisi in December 1991 and January 1992 were Mingrelians and had returned to their region of origin at the end of the hostilities. Among them was Gocha Bakhia, the former head of Gamsakhurdia's personal guards, who commanded a force of 250 fighters and operated between Mingrelia and the Gali region of Abkhazia.⁴³ In early August 1992, Bakhia took hostage the Deputy Prime Minister of Georgia, Alexander Kavsadze, who was in Mingrelia for negotiations with armed Zviadists. When Tbilisi sent a 12-men delegation headed by the Interior Minister Roman Guentsadze for talks for the release of the hostage, they in turn were kidnapped. The Georgian Ministry of Defence sent a force of 3,000 men to Senaki, in western Georgia, and threatened military action if the hostages were not released. While the

42 *Yerkir*, 1 April 1992.

43 The Gali region of Abkhazia is the southernmost region of this province, adjacent to Mingrelia, and its inhabitants before the conflict were predominantly Mingrelians.

Georgian National Guard entered Mingrelia to release the hostages and secure the communication lines from the danger of banditry, events precipitated rapidly, leading to what became to be known as the Abkhazia war.

On 14 August 1992 up to five thousand fighters belonging to the Georgian National Guard, supported by five tanks and ten armoured vehicles,⁴⁴ crossed the Inguri river and advanced into Abkhazia. They took Gali, the first town on the main coastal road, and Ochamchira, and by midday entered Sukhumi, the capital of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic, and camped in front of the Supreme Soviet building. An amphibious force landed in the Gagra region and brought this town and villages to the north as far as the Russian border at the Psou River under the control of Georgian troops. The central coastal line around the town of Gudauta, and much of the mountainous villages in the north, central, and southern part of Abkhazia (excluding Gali region), were left out of the control of Georgian forces: they simply did not advance towards those regions of dense Abkhaz population. Minor clashes in Sukhumi and Gagra led to several casualties.

The goals of this large-scale military operation were not very clear, and the declared aims were often contradictory. The initial reason given for the operation was the liberation of government officials taken hostage by Zviadist fighters, and suspected to be hidden in the village of Kokhori in the Gali region. Later, Georgian authorities added another mission to their armed forces: to secure the railway and the highway that cross Abkhazia and link Georgia to Russia. In other words, officially the aim of the military invasion was a police operation to bring security to a chaotic region.

The security problems were not the only reason for the Georgian military operation. Relations between the Georgian authorities and the Abkhaz leadership had been tense for several years. The background of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and the history of the two nations have already been extensively developed elsewhere.⁴⁵ What is relevant for our

44 *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 15 August 1992.

45 On the history of the conflict, see: Stanislav Lakoba, "Abkhazia is Abkhazia", *Central Asian Survey*, 14(1), 1995, pp. 97-105; Evgeny M. Kozhokin, "Georgia and Abkhazia", in Jeremy R. Azrael and Emil A. Payin (eds), *U.S. and Russian Policymaking with Respect to the Use of Force*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996; Ghia Nodia, *Causes and Visions of Conflict in Abkhazia*, University of Califor-

analysis is the historic events that led to the antagonism between the Abkhaz and the Georgians, the direct background of the Abkhazian war. In the 19th century the Abkhaz took part in the Great Caucasian Rising, and were last to be put down by the Russian army in 1864, after which several Caucasian tribes kin to the Abkhaz, such as the Ubykhs, were deported in their entirety (45,000 individuals); others so punished were the Sadzians (20,000), the Shapsugs, and various Abkhaz tribes, often of Muslim tradition. The refugees, who left for the Ottoman Empire, became known as *muhajirs* (immigrants or refugees). Two years later the Abkhaz rebelled again, and there was a new wave of brutal repression, and yet another wave of *muhajirs*. A new insurrection in 1877 was punished by the deportation of an additional 50,000 Abkhaz. Half the population of Abkhazia was driven out in this way in the second half of the 19th century. The land being empty, nations loyal to the new rulers were given land to occupy, including Russians, Greeks, Armenians, and especially Mingrelians. According to an Abkhaz author, "a mass of landless peasants from Western Georgia was planted in central Abkhazia, in depopulated villages..." and "because of the endless flow of those resettled from Western Georgia, relations between Abkhazians and Kartvelians were becoming ever more complicated..."⁴⁶

	1897	1926	1959	1979	1989
Abkhazians	53 per cent	27.8 per cent	15.1 per cent	17.1 per cent	17.8 per cent
Georgians	24.4 per cent	33.6 per cent	39.1 per cent	43.9 per cent	45.7 per cent
Russians	5.6 per cent	6.2 per cent	21.4 per cent	16.4 per cent	14.2 per cent
Armenians	6.1 per cent	12.8 per cent	15.9 per cent	15.1 per cent	14.6 per cent

Table 4: The Ethnic Composition of the Population of Abkhazia (in percentage of the total population)

Sources: Roger Caratini, *Dictionnaire des Nationalités et des Minorités de l'ex-U.R.S.S.*, Paris: Larousse, 1992, p. 242; George Hewitt, "Abkhazia: A Problem of Identity and Ownership", in John F.R. Wright, Suzanne Goldenberg and Richard Schofield (eds), *Transcaucasian Boundaries*, UCL Press, 1996, p. 192; Viacheslav A. Chirikba, "The Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict", op. cit., p. 53.

nia, Berkeley, CA, 1997; Bruno Coppieters, Ghia Nodia, and Yuri Anchabadze (eds), *Georgians and Abkhazians, The Search for a Peace Settlement*, Cologne: Bundesinstitut für Ostwissenschaftliche und Internationale Studien, 1998; Jurij Anchabadze, "History: The Modern Period", in George Hewitt (ed.), *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

46 Stanislav Lak'oba, "History: 18th century-1917", p. 85, in George Hewitt (ed.), *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, op. cit.

For the Abkhaz mass psyche, the events of the 19th century left a deep trauma, similar to the effect of the mass killing and deportations of 1915 on the Armenians, or the deportations of 1944 on the mass consciousness of the Chechen people. The Russian massacres and deportations reduced the number of the Abkhaz to a point where the survival of the Abkhaz has become a delicate issue. But from the late 19th century the danger for the existence of the Abkhaz identity did not come from the Russians—who had already conquered and pacified the Western Caucasus—but from the Georgians; it took the form of mass colonisation and the increase in the percentage of the ethnic Georgian (more precisely Mingrelian) population, but also Georgian pressure to assimilate the Abkhaz culture and identity.

Politically, Abkhaz-Georgian relations went through various changes as a result of the new demographic reality, and as a result of the political ambitions in Tbilisi and Sukhumi. In the period of the Georgian Republic (1918-21) relations between the two sides were turbulent, occasionally leading to violent clashes. After the Sovietization of Georgia, from 1921 to 1930 Abkhazia was a Soviet Republic linked to Georgia in a federal union (within the Transcaucasus Federation), and after that its status became an autonomous structure within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. The Abkhaz contested their political status, wishing to have a different accommodation that dispensed them from being under the political hierarchy of Georgia. They did this through petitions sent to the Kremlin, or mass demonstrations on various occasions: 1957, 1964, 1967, 1977, 1978, and 1989. The collapse of the Soviet system led to a legal puzzle: what could the political status of Abkhazia be now that the Soviet Union had collapsed, and who was entitled to decide it? Under Gamsakhurdia—who considered the Abkhaz as autochthonous people and recognized their rights, unlike the Ossets whom he considered as "newcomers" and "guests"—a power sharing compromise was found, according to which the parliament of the republic was to have a quota system, with 28 seats given to the Abkhaz, 26 to Georgians, and 11 to other ethnic communities.

The Georgian side often alleges Abkhaz "separatism" to be the main reason that caused the conflict. The Abkhaz side denies this interpretation. According to Vyacheslav Chirikba, between 1990 and 1992 Abkhazia did not seek independence: "All acts undertaken by Abkhazia,

beginning in 1990, were designed to protect its autonomous political status, deemed necessary in view of numerous statements made by leading Georgian politicians that they doubted the legal character of Georgia's autonomies and even threatened to abolish all of them and transform Georgia into a unitary state.⁴⁷ To counter the "accusation" of separatism, this analyst coins the concept of "aggressive integrationism"—meaning the use of military means in an attempt to impose territorial integrity, leading to large scale bloodshed—to explain the causes of not only the Abkhazia war but equally those in South Ossetia and Chechnya. In other words, for the Abkhaz side the root cause of the war was not Abkhaz separatism, but the Georgian aggression to deny them their political rights and the autonomy they previously enjoyed.

In early 1992 Tbilisi substituted the Soviet constitution of 1978 with the Georgian constitution of 1921. This posed a particular legal problem for Abkhazia, which lost its autonomous status and the legality of its institutions under the new-old constitution. As a response, the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet in its turn suspended the 1978 constitution, and adopted the 1925 Soviet constitution which gave Abkhazia state attributes. Beneath this legal battle lay a political one: the State Council leaders were not very keen on respecting the power-sharing deal in Abkhazia, which they considered was unjust for the local Georgian population and strengthened the hands of the Abkhaz leadership. They also wanted to tear up an agreement devised by Gamsakhurdia and show it to have failed to serve the interests of the Georgian nation, at a moment when Gamsakhurdia was still highly popular in Abkhazia (among the Mingrelians) and in neighbouring Mingrelia.⁴⁸ In Abkhazia itself local Georgian militant organizations developed, often armed, rejecting the authority of the Abkhaz parliament and its Speaker Vladislav Ardzinba. Neither were they loyal to the new rulers in Tbilisi; they were often supporters of the former President Gamsakhurdia. For example, in February 1992 Georgian National Guard detachments of "250-300" soldiers entered Sukhumi with the agreement of the Ardzinba government to

47 Viacheslav A. Chirikba, "The Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict: In Search for Ways Out", in Bruno Coppieters, Ghia Nodia and Yuri Anchabadze (eds), *Georgians and Abkhazians, The Search for a Peace Settlement*, 1998, p. 54.

48 Ghia Nodia, *Causes and Visions of Conflict in Abkhazia*, University of California, Berkeley, 1997, 52 pp., p. 33.

put an end to the rail blockade imposed by Zviadists.⁴⁹ The conflict setting was ready, and it needed a small provocation. The Georgian military action of 14 August, the "original sin" of the conflict, provided that and even much more.

The military logic of the Abkhazia war

While reviewing and recognizing the historical background of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, it must be stressed that the explosion of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict was not "determined" as a fatality, but it was just one possibility out of many. Several other developments in the difficult relations between Georgia and Abkhazia could have been equally possible. But it was the introduction of the military element on 14 August 1992 that put an end to the possibility of negotiations or a new political arrangement, and polarized the situation into a state of no return. It is difficult to imagine the exact calculations of the Georgian leadership, yet the chronology of events suggest that the operation was planned to take place two months before parliamentary elections, with the aim of boosting the popularity of Shevardnadze and forces supporting him. A "small victorious war" in Abkhazia would have strengthened the hand of the leadership that issued from the January coup. Abkhazia seems to have been chosen as the easiest target; the Abkhaz were a small minority within their own republic, and could not count on the support of an Abkhaz state outside Georgia (in contrast to a military operation against the Armenians or the Azerbaijanis of southern Georgia). The bellicose declarations of the Georgian leadership reveals a high degree of confidence in Tbilisi in the early days of the Abkhazia adventure. Three days after the operation, in a televised speech Shevardnadze "said that as of today the jurisdiction of the Republic of Georgia has been restored throughout the territory of Georgia and that the authorities intend to continue resolute actions to restore order..."⁵⁰

There was a large discrepancy between the (various) objectives of the 14 August military operation and the deployment and the actions of the Georgian troops on the ground. This reflected lack of strategic thinking

49 Source: Russian Television, reported by *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 8 February 1992.

50 *Izvestia*, 17 August 1992.

and planning, as well as lack of material capability to reach the objectives through military means. If the aim was a security operation for liberating hostages from Zviadists active in Gali region, there was no point in sending troops to Sukhumi and Gagra; if the aim was to bring the railways and communication lines under governmental control, then it is strange that Georgian troops left large sections of the same lines, from the northern suburbs of Sukhumi to the southern entrance of Gagra, outside their control; and if the real objective was to hinder separatism in Abkhazia, then it is not clear why the Georgian forces were deployed on portions of the Abkhazian coast, leaving large sections of Abkhazia under rebel control—or why they used military means at all, since the Abkhaz authorities feared to lose the autonomy they enjoyed, and did not call for secession at the time.

While the invasion was equivalent to murder of the Georgia-Abkhaz dialogue, it was also a military suicide, for the following reasons:

(a) The geography of the Georgian military invasion: the invading Georgian troops took most of the coastal shore, stretching from Gali to Sukhumi, and from Gagra to the Russian border; but they did not overrun the central part of the coast around Gudauta, with its dense ethnic Abkhaz population, and where the rebel Abkhaz government moved. Moreover, the mountainous villages remained under Abkhaz control. Militarily, this was a very bad position, to have a long, coastal-line exposed to higher mountainous positions.

(b) The Georgian troops did not have any further military initiative after the initial invasion, while their positions were completely exposed to Abkhaz guerrilla style attacks;

(c) While the Georgian National Guard was well equipped relative to the Abkhaz militia, thanks to the Soviet military hardware that Georgia inherited according to the Tashkent Treaty, it was ill disciplined, did not have a well structured control system, did not have enough logistic means and ammunition for a protracted conflict, and did not have qualified officers to run their operations;

(d) Tbilisi miscalculated the role that the Russian military would play in the conflict, although Russia's political sympathy towards the Georgian State Council had already disappeared in the South Ossetian crisis in June. The direct intervention of the Russian forces in the fighting in South Ossetia should have rung alarm bells;

(e) The war mobilized the Caucasus People's Confederation (KNK) and several thousand North Caucasian volunteers to come to the support of the Abkhaz side. The KNK, which had its headquarters in Sukhumi, was forced to move to Groznyy after the Georgian invasion, and from there mobilized North Caucasus resources to support the Abkhaz war effort;

(f) The bandit-like behaviour of the National Guard antagonized the population of Abkhazia of different ethnic backgrounds, including the "ethnic Georgians" there who were Mingrelians and often supporters of Gamsakhurdia, and often were suspicious towards the National Guardsmen and Mkhedrioni sent to Abkhazia from central Georgia and the Tbilisi area;

(g) Last but not least, the Georgian troops had to cross through Mingrelia, controlled by Zviadists, before reaching the front-lines in Abkhazia. This stretched the logistics of the Georgian troops from their bases in Samtredia across hostile Mingrelia to volatile Abkhazia, and led to disruption of Georgian military movements during decisive periods of the war.

The Georgian leadership, then, ordered the military adventure in Abkhazia while being in a state of civil war against Zviadists, while knowing that the Russian military would intervene as they had just done weeks earlier in Tskhinvali, while knowing that they would not control the mountainous part of Abkhazia and therefore face a guerrilla war, and all this without having a proper army!

There is one controversy concerning the start of the war, and more specifically the nature of the operation: whether there was an agreement between Shevardnadze and Ardzinba concerning the introduction of Georgian troops to the Autonomous Republic. In the days preceding 14 August there seem to have been intense contacts between Tbilisi and Sukhumi on the entry of Georgian troops to Gali and Ochamchira districts, with the objective of repressing Zviadist armed groups there. The night before the operation, Shevardnadze and Ardzinba discussed once again the next day's operation, and according to Ardzinba the head of the State Council gave guarantees that the National Guard would not enter Sukhumi itself.⁵¹ In spite of an agreement between the two sides, the National Guard violated the agreement by entering the capital of Abkhazia. Tbilisi went further by creating an "Abkhaz Military Council" composed of figures loyal to Tbilisi as the state organ recognized by

51 Author interview with Vladislav Ardzina, Sukhumi, 22 April 1994.

the Georgian authorities, headed by Tamaz Nadareishvili, the former Vice-Chairman of the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet. What was supposed to be a police operation turned into a military conflict with broad political aims: Tbilisi was clearly trying to press the Abkhaz leadership to agree to new political terms, in which the ethnic Abkhaz leadership in Sukhumi would lose its dominant position in the Autonomous Republic. As a result, ethnic Abkhaz members of the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet and their allies moved to Gudauta, 45 kilometres north of Sukhumi, and prepared for a major war.

In August, days after the Georgian invasion, the Abkhaz were already starting to form their own National Guard, from parts of the local police force of ethnic Abkhaz origin or elements loyal to the Abkhaz leadership. Georgia in its turn adopted a law on military conscription on December 1992, as a temporary measure for the security needs linked to the war in Abkhazia. Yet this decision was never seriously enforced, and six years after the adoption of the law the Defence Ministry put the size of the army at 30,000, which in reality meant less. Although the Georgian side had numerical and material superiority it suffered from chronic lack of discipline at the individual and the battalion level. According to a detailed report of the war prepared by Human Rights Watch:

Warfare in the Abkhaz conflict was characterized on both sides, most particularly in the beginning months and in rural areas, by a lack of formal, central military control over the operations of the rival forces. The command and control structures vital to military discipline and accountability were all but absent. Volunteers, mercenaries and other "outsiders" involved in combat in notable numbers collaborated with, but operated outside traditional military structures.⁵²

Moreover, different military units had different political affiliations, which translated into a highly pluralistic military behaviour on the battleground. "Kartvelian forces were never able to become a cohesive fighting machine (...). A lack of unit and individual discipline not only cost them on the battlefield, but also made the Kartvelian troops exceedingly unpopular amongst the local inhabitants."⁵³

52 "Georgia/Abkhazia: Violations of the Laws of War and Russia's Role in the Conflict", *Human Rights Watch* Vol. 7, No. 7, March 1995, p. 2.

53 Dodge Billingsley, "Military Aspects of the War: the Turning Point", in Hewitt,

On the other hand although the Abkhazians had fewer resources, both human and material, they showed high level of discipline and a unified will. They compensated for their numerical inferiority by receiving volunteers from abroad, including some from the North Caucasus through the Congress of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus (later renamed the Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus), from the Abkhaz Diaspora in Turkey, Syria and Jordan, and finally through volunteers from Russia, mainly Cossacks, and former Soviet Army officers. Most important, the Abkhaz were able to integrate all those fighters with different origins into a unified fighting force.

The Georgian threat and the Abkhaz trauma

A highly controversial declaration by a Georgian military leader was to have a profound effect: the commander of the Georgian military in Abkhazia, Colonel Giorgi Karkarashvili, in a televised address broadcast by the local Sukhumi channel on 25 August 1992, hardly two weeks after the invasion, gave the following warning: "We are ready to sacrifice 100,000 Georgians to annihilate 97,000 Abkhazians. We will leave the entire Abkhazian nation without descendants."⁵⁴ As the total number of ethnic Abkhaz residing in the autonomous republic was just a bit above 97,000, Karkarashvili's statement was received by the Abkhaz as a threat of genocide. The statement was not an isolated event, and did not reflect the opinion of the military only. Goga Khaindrava, Georgian Minister of Abkhazian Affairs, declared: "The Abkhaz have an interest to finish this war rapidly (...) They are just 80,000, that means that we

The Abkhazians, op. cit., p. 147.

54 *Report on Ethnic Conflict in the Russian Federation and Transcaucasia*, Harvard University, Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project, Cambridge MA, July 1993, p. 103. This often quoted declaration of Karkarashvili takes different forms in different sources. Viacheslav A. Chirikba puts it in the following form: "Even if the total number of Georgians – 100,000 – are killed, then from your [Abkhaz] side all 97,000 will be killed." See Chirikba, "The Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict: In Search for Ways out", in Bruno Coppieters, Ghia Nodia and Yuri Anchabadze (eds), *Georgians and Abkhazians*, op. cit., p. 50, footnote 1. The Russian *Ostankino Channel 1*, on 26 August 1992, quoted Karkarashvili as saying he was ready "to leave the entire Abkhaz nation without descendants, and (...) to sacrifice 100,000 Georgians to annihilate 97,000 Abkhazians" in case of resistance. Quoted by *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 27 August 1992.

can easily destroy the genetic basis of their nation by killing 15,000 of their youth. And we are perfectly able to do that."⁵⁵

Although the Georgian declarations sound like a threat of genocide, the Georgian leadership was not inclined to organize massacres in Abkhazia and destroy the Abkhaz nation. The Georgian fighters did commit mass violations of human rights, and in some localized cases ethnic cleansing, but there is no evidence that their objective was mass annihilation of the Abkhaz people. The leading Georgian scholar Ghia Nodia gives a somewhat different interpretation to those words. He says:

I happened to watch the interview of Karkarashvili which was quoted and, although I do not remember the exact wording myself, can say that what he meant was that it is silly on the Abkhaz side to fight, that Georgians will never give up Abkhazia, so the Abkhaz are putting their very existence in danger – even if one hundred thousand people died in the war on each side, Georgians would still be there, but not the Abkhaz. This may have been nasty statement, but Karkarashvili was merely expressing in his own way the idea that was always reiterated by Georgian officials at the time – that it was the radicalism of the Abkhazia's leadership, not Georgia's, that endangered the existence of the Abkhaz as a group.⁵⁶

The fact that those words were meant to be a warning rather than a threat does not make much difference, at least not for the Abkhaz audience, and still less after the Rubicon was crossed and the war erupted. For the Abkhaz mass psychology, wounded by the memories of the losses of the 19th century, faced with the threat of cultural assimilation and demographic marginalization, it was not necessary to recall so openly about the dangers with which they were surrounded. In a speech given in London Stanislav Lakoba, the Deputy Chairman of the Parliament of Abkhazia, said: "We are lost between life and death – to be or not to be, because defeat in this war is tantamount to the annihilation of a whole nation. We have proved to be a very 'inconvenient' people, but despite our small numbers it is not so easy to do away with us right away."⁵⁷ It needed less

55 Karel Bartak, "Moscou dans le bourbier caucasien", *Le Monde diplomatique*, April 1993.

56 Ghia Nodia, *Causes and Visions of Conflict in Abkhazia*, University of California, Berkeley, 1997, p. 10, footnote 8.

57 Stanislav Lakoba, "Abkhazia is Abkhazia", *Central Asian Survey*, London, 14 (1), 1995, p. 97. The paper was presented in London at a conference entitled "The Contemporary North Caucasus" at the SOAS on 22-23 April 1993.

than a hundred thousand dead on each side to destroy the Abkhaz people. The recent disappearance of the last surviving community of the Ubykh people in Turkey, who had left their ancestral lands after their defeat in the Caucasian War of the 19th century, reminded the Abkhaz and other peoples about the dangers of the conflict.

The practices of the Georgian fighters, often lacking discipline, only worsened the situation. Abkhaz institutions suffered under Georgian occupation. The burning down of the Abkhaz National Library and the State Archives in Sukhumi in October 1992 was seen by the Abkhaz as an attempt by the Georgians to destroy their historic memory and cultural institutions. Ethnic Abkhaz who had stayed behind under Georgian military rule also suffered physical aggression, and damage to their property, as well as other ethnic groups including Russians, Armenians and Greeks. The brutality of the Georgian irregular fighters did not even spare the ethnic Georgian civilians of the occupied province.

Georgian defeat

After their initial thrust, the Georgian forces lost the military initiative. They did not undertake a single major military operation in the 14-month-long war that followed. The Abkhaz on the other side regrouped their forces, mobilized all men capable of bearing arms, organized their logistics, and received volunteers from the North Caucasus and to a lesser degree from the Diaspora in the Middle East. They were motivated to fight, and had one objective: to restore the former boundaries of Abkhazia and chase out the Georgian forces.

The obvious target of the Abkhaz military activities was the town of Gagra, a pleasant town decorated with palm trees and squeezed between the waters of the Black Sea and the rocks of the Caucasus. Gagra had a strategic position since the distance between the sea and the mountains is very narrow here. The Georgian positions in this town blocked Abkhaz overland communication lines towards Russia and the North Caucasus (although they could use secondary mountain passes to transport volunteers and limited arms and ammunition). Moreover, Gagra was an isolated pocket of Georgian forces, where up to 1,000 Georgian fighters were stationed. Therefore, it was the most suitable ground for the Abkhaz side to test the force of their arms.

The Abkhaz offensive did not wait long. On the night of 24 August Abkhazian forces attacked Gagra, only ten days after Georgian troops entered Abkhazia. The fighting continued for some five days, and after receiving reinforcements Georgian troops went on the counter-offensive and repelled the Abkhaz. A cease-fire agreement was reached under Russian patronage on 26 September, calling for the withdrawal of heavy weapons from inside urban centres to their peripheries. According to some sources, following this agreement the Georgian troops withdrew their military hardware and most of their fighters from Gagra. A Russian officer, Lt-General Sufiyev Bepayev, the Deputy Commander of the Transcaucasus Military District which was based in Tbilisi, was quoted by *Izvestia* saying that following the cease-fire agreement, and two days before the Abkhaz assault on the city, the Georgian side withdrew its weapons and 1,200 fighters from Gagra, leaving only 200 soldiers armed with light weapons for its defence.⁵⁸ Yet this does not make much sense, because even after the signing of the agreement exchange of fire continued all along the lines of contact, from the Ochamchira region up to the suburbs of Gagra.⁵⁹ Withdrawing troops and heavy weapons from Gagra meant its doom. The second Abkhaz offensive against Gagra started on 2 October, in three directions. The Georgian defences collapsed in a matter of hours, and the Abkhaz controlled the town on the following day. A Georgian counter-offensive failed miserably, leading to a badly organized retreat of fighters and civilians from Gagra and from the villages up to the Russian border. According to Human Rights Watch, the number of the dead was between 100 and up to 300 in the battle of Gagra, and the Russian troops evacuated the rest of the Georgian fighters and their military commander, Karkarashvili, to nearby Russian territory.⁶⁰ In Tbilisi the press and politicians accused the Abkhaz fighters of massacres of Georgian civilians. Nine days before the parliamentary elections in Georgia (11 October 1992), Gagra fell to Abkhaz forces.

The battle of Gagra was a turning point in the war. It showed the determination of the Abkhaz and the disorder among the Georgian

58 *Izvestia*, 5 October 1992.

59 Dodge Billingsley, op. cit., p. 149.

60 "Georgia/Abkhazia: Violations of the Laws of War and Russia's Role in the Conflict", *Human Rights Watch*, Vol. 7, No. 7, March 1995.

troops. The outcome of this battle cast a long shadow over the next and the decisive battle for the control of Sukhumi. The Georgian authorities immediately accused the Russian side of being responsible for the outcome of the Gagra battle, although there is no clear evidence of immediate involvement of Russians there. Massive Russian military support, both in arms and military officers, started arriving to support the Abkhaz side after the battle of Gagra, after the Abkhaz had proved to be a fighting force. There is ample information about Russian support to the Abkhaz during 1993, both supplies of arms and ammunition and employment of Russian aircraft in direct military operations. The Gagra battle was also a warning about things to come; under Georgian control houses of Abkhaz, but also of other minorities such as Armenians and Russians, were looted and then put on fire. When the Abkhaz forces entered the town, the entire ethnic Georgian population of Gagra, as well as the villages north up to Leselidze to the north, was displaced, and its houses put on fire.⁶¹

The downing on 14 December 1992 of a Russian military helicopter, which was evacuating civilians from the besieged town of Tkvarcheli in south-east Abkhazia, caused relations between Moscow and Tbilisi to fall to a new record low. According to Russian sources, the helicopter was shot down by a Georgian surface-to-air missile, killing all 30 civilians and the Russian pilots on board.⁶²

A major Abkhaz military offensive against Sukhumi took place in mid-March 1993. Abkhaz forces crossed the Gumista river and initially succeeded in breaking through the Georgian defences. The battle lasted two days and the Georgian defenders threw back the assault. Artillery duels between Abkhaz positions in Novi Esher village and Georgian troops positioned in the northern suburbs of Sukhumi continued. Under heavy Russian pressure, mainly by the Defence Minister Pavel Grachev, a new cease-fire agreement was reached by the belligerent sides in the Russian town of Sochi on 28 July 1993, in which the Georgian side made substantial concessions including the withdrawal of much of its military equipment from the frontline and expression of readiness to recognize Abkhaz autonomy. The cease-fire was meant to lead to a political resolution of the conflict, yet five rounds of direct Georgian-

61 Personal observations, Gagra, 10 May 1993.

62 *Izvestia*, 15 December 1992.

Russian negotiations did not lead to a conclusion, because of Georgian rejection of Russian demands which included Georgia's joining the CIS and the legalization of five Russian military bases in Georgia.

The failure of the State Council in Abkhazia strengthened Gamsakhurdia's popularity in Georgia. As a result, Zviadist activities increased in western Georgia in summer 1993. Several battalions in Sukhumi and Gali declared that they were withdrawing their allegiance from the State Council and joining Kobalia's forces after the "shameful" cease-fire agreement signed by Shevardnadze, which provided for withdrawal of armed forces of the two sides from urban areas. By the end of August, Kobalia's forces took control over a number of towns in Mingrelia, including Senaki, Khobi, and Abasha.⁶³ The government troops in Abkhazia were in complete isolation, politically disoriented, while facing a determined enemy.

On 16 September the Abkhaz broke the latest cease-fire on the pretext that the Georgian side had not respected its provision for the withdrawal of heavy equipment from Sukhumi, and launched a major offensive. An amphibious force of several hundred fighters landed in the Ochamchira district, to the south of Sukhumi, cutting down Georgian communication lines and besieging the city. The assault on the city itself from three fronts followed. A rebellion in Mingrelia after calls from ex-President Gamsakhurdia further complicated the situation of Georgian troops in Abkhazia. On 17 September a speech by Gamsakhurdia was broadcast by Abkhaz TV in Gudauta, in which he urged his supporters in Mingrelia to take up arms against the Tbilisi authorities.⁶⁴ Yet it was not clear how much the orders of Gamsakhurdia were followed. According to news reports, Kobalia, the head of the pro-Gamsakhurdia militia in Zugdidi, moved towards Ochamchira on 17 September with the aim of supporting the Georgian forces trapped in the Sukhumi area.⁶⁵ At this stage the Georgian forces in Abkhazia found themselves in complete chaos, and under a heavy attack from a vengeful enemy.

In the confusion Shevardnadze fled to the besieged Sukhumi, and later met Grachev in Adler, a small town north of the Georgian-Russian frontier where a civilian airport is situated, on 17 September. Shevard-

63 *The Georgian Chronicle*, CIPDD, Tbilisi, August 1993, p. 6.

64 *Moscow News*, 24 September 1993.

65 *Izvestia*, 22 September 1993.

nadze demanded Russian military intervention to return the fighters to their pre-16 September positions. Shevardnadze even consented to the positioning of Russian troops on the Inguri river, separating Abkhazia from Georgia. Shevardnadze was making last minute concessions to the Kremlin while in a desperate situation. At this meeting Grachev made bold promises in his typical style to the Georgian leader, promising to send two paratroop divisions and a brigade which would "after landing, separate, cut off and disarm the opposing sides and end the conflict in two or three days."⁶⁶ Later, similar declarations by General Grachev were to lead to even greater tragedies in the North Caucasus. Yet no Russian troops were sent, because the Russian parliament was against positioning troops in a situation where house-to-house fighting was destroying Sukhumi and devastating battles were raging in the villages of Ochamchira and Gali districts.

After the Georgian side had put up a last desperate resistance, Sukhumi fell on 28 September. The Abkhaz advance continued towards the towns of Ochamchira and Gali, and Abkhaz fighters reached the Inguri river on 30 September. The advancing Abkhaz fighters showed no pity; they executed the numerous Georgian fighters trapped in isolated buildings of Sukhumi, including the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the pro-Tbilisi government in Abkhazia, Zhiuli Shartava. Abkhaz fighters burned down those houses in Sukhumi that belonged to Georgians, or to individuals of other ethnic groups who had collaborated with the pro-Tbilisi government in Abkhazia. Similarly, entire villages in the south were torched, and the Georgian population of those villages was pushed out of Abkhazia. The displaced people escaped in two directions, one southward towards Zugdidi, and the other through mountain passes through the Kodori gorge towards Svaneti. The displacement of over 200,000 people created an acute problem in Georgia, at a time when the authorities could hardly feed and provide the basic services for the population of the capital. The destruction left behind by this 14-month war had turned the pearl of Soviet holiday resorts, with its villas, sanatoria, hotels and beach resorts, into a miserable, depressing heap of debris. The Abkhaz had lost 2,800 people, around two thousand of them ethnic Abkhaz, "over two per cent of the entire Abkhaz

66 *Sevodnya*, 21 September 1993.

population" in the words of an Abkhaz official, who continued: "This is a tragedy for a small nation!"⁶⁷ Georgian casualties were three times higher than the Abkhaz losses.

The enormous mistake of the Georgian leadership—what I called earlier "the original sin"—transformed a difficult political situation between Tbilisi and Abkhazia into a complicated knot that poisoned the relations and erected a wall of separation between the two neighbouring nations. The conflict further destabilized Georgia, and the entire Caucasus region. Thousands of Caucasian volunteers fought in Abkhazia, who acquired military experience and were later visible elsewhere, especially in Chechnya. The Abkhazia conflict also blocked communication lines, hampering trade and economic normalization: one of the two railway connections between Russia and the South Caucasus passes through Abkhazia, and still remains shut down a decade after the end of the armed conflict. This situation harms Georgia but also Armenia, a major economic partner of Russia in the South Caucasus. Last but not least, the Abkhazia conflict transformed and deformed Russian-Georgian relations, as we will see in more details below.

In the last days of the Sukhumi battle, during which Shevardnadze was himself in the besieged town, he made the ultimate capitulation: he sent a telegram to Moscow accepting that Georgia would join the CIS, which Shevardnadze defined as "Georgia's kneeling down", a desperate attempt to save the city from an assault planned "in the General Staff of the Russian Army".⁶⁸ Although this desperate political step did not save Sukhumi from falling to the Abkhaz fighters, in a few days Shevardnadze would appreciate Russian military help, saving his regime and saving Georgia from further dismemberment. A cease-fire agreement was finally signed between the two sides in Moscow on 14 April 1994, which included the separation of forces and the introduction of CIS peacekeeping forces on the border of the former administrative limit that marks the southern borders of Abkhazia.⁶⁹

67 Leonid Lakerbaya, Vice-Prime Minister of Abkhazia, author interview, Sukhumi, 22 April 1994.

68 *The Georgian Chronicle*, September 1993, p. 4.

69 The English translation of the agreement can be found at: http://www.usip.org/library/pa/georgia/georgia_19940514.html

War in Mingrelia

The defeat of the Georgian governmental forces did not end the internal conflict in Georgia. "Zviadist" forces, led by Vakhtang Kobalia, had regrouped, received arms and ammunitions during their participation in the war in Abkhazia on the side of the National Guards, and confiscated additional heavy weapons from the governmental forces retreating from Abkhazia. During the months of August and September 1993, they took control over most of Mingrelia. With the collapse of the government forces in Abkhazia, Zviadists felt it was the moment to push towards Tbilisi and reinstall Gamsakhurdia at the head of the Georgian state.

Zviadist forces continued their assault; on 2 October 1993 they took control of the strategic Black Sea port of Poti, where they took control of additional military equipment that the Georgian troops had evacuated from Sukhumi. Then they turned eastwards, and on 10 October attacked Khobi, which they brought under their control seven days later after violent clashes. They took control of Samtreda on 18 October, and continued their advance in the direction of Kutaisi, the second major town of Georgia.

The situation on the front line changed dramatically at the end of October. Governmental forces launched a counter-offensive and retook town after town from pro-Gamsakhurdia rebels. This change of fortunes was attributed to the newly established alliance between Georgia and Russia, and to considerable Russian military support to the Georgian side. Unofficial reports noted the arrival of much needed arms and ammunition from Russia, and the participation of Russian tank crews on the side of the Georgian government forces. Russian warships also patrolled the shores off Poti, to block any possible assistance to the rebels. Rebel positions fell one after the other, and on 6 November 1993 troops loyal to Shevardnadze entered Zugdidi, the stronghold of Gamsakhurdia, without a fight. Certain armed groups loyal to Gamsakhurdia laid down their arms and surrendered to the government, including those under the command of Soso Zhghenti and Akaki Eliava.⁷⁰

70 The life and death of Akaki Eliava illustrate the state of the Georgian armed forces in the 1990s. Eliava joined the Georgian National Guard in 1992, and later joined the Zviadist revolt in autumn 1993. He was amnestied a few months after the death of Gamsakhurdia, and he and his men joined the Geor-

Gamsakhurdia himself was found dead in obscure circumstances in the village of Jikhashkari, to the east of Zugdidi, on 31 December 1993, thus turning a page to a tragic period of Georgian history.⁷¹

Russia's role and changing image after Abkhazia

For the Georgian national liberation movement Russia—and not just the Soviet system—was the “enemy”. It was the Russian empire that had put an end to the last Georgian kingdom in the early 19th century. It was the Bolsheviks (in an invasion that was initiated by a certain Sergo Ordzhonikidze⁷²) who had invaded Georgia to put an end to the short-lived independent republic in 1921. The anti-Russian antagonism took a deep character after the Tbilisi repression of 9 April 1989. For Georgian nationalists, the Soviet/Russian Army was a force of occupation, and Georgia could only achieve its full independence after the departure of the last Russian soldier from its territories. The Georgian parliament even passed a law, following the failed putsch in Moscow, considering the Soviet troops in Georgia as “occupation forces”. Yet both Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze tried to co-opt and use the Russian military when this suited their agenda. During the days of confrontation in Tbilisi between the opposition and Zviadists, Gamsakhurdia had tried to get support from the Soviet military to suppress the Mkhedrioni militia.⁷³ Shevardnadze's Russia policy was even more contradictory and constantly oscillating.

Following the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia, and the coming to power of Russia-friendly forces led by Shevardnadze, Russian-Georgian relations seemed to be on the way to improvement. Shevardnadze back-

gean armed forces. Colonel Eliava led an army mutiny in October 1998, triggered by delays in pay, and took over the Senaki barracks. With 200 soldiers and 17 tanks he advanced towards Kutaisi, where he clashed with loyalist forces. After several casualties, the mutiny disintegrated, and the Colonel was on the run hiding in the Zugdidi region. He was arrested and shot in the Zestafoni police station in July 2000, ending the life story of the last of the Zviadist field commanders.

71 The official version of Gamsakhurdia's death was “suicide”, while supporters of the former president accuse government forces of having him executed.

72 Jeremy Smith, “The Georgian Affair of 1922. Policy Failure, Personality Clash, or Power Struggle?” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 3, May 1998, pp. 519-44.

73 David Darchiashvili, *The Army-Building*, op. cit., p. 27.

tracked the former Georgian parliament decision that considered the “Soviet” troops as occupying forces. Although the relations between the two sides reached a new low point in June 1992 over violent events in South Ossetia, direct negotiations between Yeltsin and Shevardnadze led to a cease-fire agreement and the introduction of peacekeeping troops there.

In May 1992 Georgia joined the CIS Tashkent Treaty on the division of Soviet conventional weapons between the newly independent states. Following this agreement, the Russian military started delivering to the Georgian armed forces their quota of Soviet weaponry.⁷⁴ (Abkhaz officials refer to those arms transfers to accuse Russia of having supplied the necessary means to the Georgian side for the invasion of Abkhazia.)

Russian-Georgian relations entered a new phase of difficulty after 14 August 1992, with Georgian troops entering Abkhazia. Initially, Moscow seemed to have been surprised by the events and did not have a clear policy. On the other hand, several factors on the ground were already shaping the “unofficial” Russian policy. The unlawful activities of the National Guard members and Mkhedrioni militias caused thousands of Russian-speakers to become refugees in southern Russia. Several thousand native North Caucasians crossed the Russian-Georgian border to join the struggle on the Abkhaz side. In addition, the local Russian officers sympathized with the Abkhaz and provided them with weapons even before the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence in Moscow had come to a policy conclusion on the conflict.

After the battle of Gagra, in which the Abkhaz forces supported by North Caucasian volunteers drove the Georgian troops from the northernmost coast of Abkhazia, a clear policy emerged in Moscow. By supporting the Abkhaz side and increasingly putting pressure on Tbilisi, the Russian leadership tried to impose political and military demands on Georgia. This including forcing Tbilisi to join the new Commonwealth

74 In the months of June-August 1992 the Georgian army received 109 T-55 Main Battle Tanks, 169 armoured vehicles, and 76 artillery systems, from the former Soviet military base of Akhaltsikhe. Although the equipment was rather old, it nevertheless provided the Georgian troops with armour and firepower enabling them to launch the Abkhazia operation. See David Darchiashvili, “The Russian Military Presence in Georgia: The Parties' Attitude and Prospects”, in *Caucasian Regional Studies*, Brussels, Vol. 2, Issue 1, 1997.

of Independent States (CIS), to legalize the Russian armed presence in Georgia under the mantle of "peacekeepers", and to reach an agreement for turning the former Soviet bases into Russian military bases in several strategic places such as Batumi, Akhalkalaki, and Vaziani.

Yet, while Russia was supporting the Abkhaz side of the conflict with arms, ammunition and mercenaries, including officers and pilots of the Russian military base in Gudauta, Moscow was also seeking to mediate between the two belligerents. Russia brokered cease-fire agreements in September 1992, and afterwards the cease-fires of May and July 1993. While being the guarantor for the cease-fire and the mediator for a political solution, Russia did not make any effort to stop the Abkhaz assault to take Sukhumi. On the contrary; many accounts, and even more so the chronology of events, suggest that the Russian side did not respect its engagements vis-à-vis the Georgian side, and in September 1993 it simply let the Abkhaz fighters regain their heavy weapons and facilitated their multiple movements to encircle the remaining Georgian forces in Sukhumi and southern Abkhazia.⁷⁵

The war in Abkhazia was a turning point in the West's view of Russia. After the initial Western sympathy towards democratizing and still anarchic Russia, now a new image emerged, that of the new-imperial, militaristic Russia imposing its weight over its smaller neighbours. Western analysts, who up to then had seen the role of Russia in the chaos of the Caucasus as a stabilizing factor, revised this script so as to show Russia as contributing to escalation of conflict.⁷⁶ Analysts in neighbouring countries also read the military developments in the war fronts of the South Caucasus as the result of Russian decisions, and a sign of a return of Russian military hegemony over the Near Abroad through the manipulation of inter-ethnic conflicts and civil wars from Karabakh to Transdnistria and Tajikistan. This image of a powerful Russian manipulator was to be somewhat corrected only a short while

75 *The Georgian Chronicle, CIPDD*, Tbilisi, September 1993, pp. 1-4; "Back in the USSR", op. cit., pp. 49-57; for a Russian point of view see Evgeny M. Kozhokin, "Georgia-Abkhazia", in Jeremy Azrael and Emil Payin (eds), *U.S. and Russian Policymaking with Respect to the Use of Force*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996.

76 Thomas Goltz, "Letter From Eurasia: The Hidden Russian Hand", *Foreign Policy*, No 92, Fall 1993; Charles Fairbanks, "A Tired Anarchy", *The National Interest*, Spring 1995.

later, with the direct Russian military intervention in Chechnya and its miserable defeat.

Russia's biased position confirmed the "enemy" image that Georgians had developed of Russia. On the official level, Shevardnadze tried to distinguish between the Russian civilian leadership's and President Yeltsin's policies towards Georgia, which respected country's territorial integrity, and conservative military elements seeking to take revenge against the former Soviet Foreign Minister, or neo-imperial elements trying to extend a new type of military hegemony over strategically positioned Georgia. Shevardnadze stubbornly kept thinking that reaching an agreement with the Russian leadership and satisfying Russian demands would be enough to stabilize the situation in Abkhazia. Yet although the Russians were a powerful actor in the Abkhazia conflict, they were not in a position of hegemony over the Abkhaz and North Caucasian forces on the frontline, nor could they change the Abkhaz political objective in the war, which was to bring Abkhazia under their total control by expelling the Georgian troops.

Moscow did score temporary success out of its ambivalent role in the Abkhazia conflict. Georgia was defeated and humiliated, and asked Russia for help. Politically, Shevardnadze eventually agreed to join the CIS, Russia's political instrument intended to extend its new-old hegemony over the former Soviet republics. Militarily, it gained important influence in Georgia, by having its soldiers as peacekeepers separating the Abkhaz and the Georgian sides. It also gained wide influence over the Georgian military by the appointment of Vardiko Nadibaidze, a Russian-speaking officer of Georgian ethnic background from the Soviet army, as Defence Minister of Georgia, replacing Giorgi Karkarashvili, in 1994. It also took over the role of equipping and training the Georgian armed forces.

On the strategic level, through its role in Abkhazia Russia lost Georgia.⁷⁷ The Georgian elite, while collaborating with the Russian military in the period after 1993, stayed deeply anti-Russian. The Georgian anti-Russian position was not simply the result of ideological antago-

77 On Russian policies in the Caucasus, see Vicken Cheterian, "Russia and the Caucasus: Divide and Don't Rule", in Frédéric Grare (ed.), *La Russie dans tous ses Etats*, Brussels: Bruylant, 1996, pp. 147-69; Pavel Baev, *Russia's Policies in the Caucasus*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1997.

nism of the Georgian leadership influenced by the national liberation movement, but reflected political realities: by its divide-and-rule policies, Russia could offer no solution to the main problems of Georgia, either the problems of territorial integrity or those of the emergence of a central and efficient government. On a more general level, Russia had no model to propose to Georgia, nor to other post-Soviet countries, being itself in a "transition" period whose objective was to copy Western models in the political system and a market-based economy. Moreover, Russia had neither the necessary capital nor the technological means to propose solutions for the necessary economic modernization, infrastructure works, and industrial transformation that were necessary for post-Soviet states. As a result, Georgia had to look elsewhere, and this elsewhere could only be the West. As early as 1996, Georgia looked for military partners to replace Russia, and especially to the United States where it sent its young officers for training. And when the opportunity was presented after September 2001, this cooperation turned into a major alliance, and through a "Train and Equip" programme the US military, with the presence of over 200 military specialists on Georgian soil, replaced the Russians in military cooperation, including military reform and training and equipping of the Georgian armed forces.

From a failing state to a weak one

In 1992, following the collapse of the USSR and the coming of Shevardnadze to power, Georgia was recognized as an independent state and admitted to a number of international organizations and regional associations. Considering Georgia as a member of clubs of states, and from the perspective of an international law founded on the principle of state sovereignty and territorial recognition, the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia are seen, and often described, as "separatism". In other words, Ossets and Abkhaz were seen as having developed nationalist tendencies and, after reaching an extreme position, declared their separation from the Georgian state.

Although this interpretation makes sense from a legal point of view,⁷⁸ since the international community admitted Georgia and the other four-

78 Legal experts defending Abkhaz or Osset perspective argue that they declared their "separation" or sovereignty not from the Georgian state but from the Soviet Union.

teen Union Republics of the USSR, within the borders defined under Soviet administration, it fails to reflect the historical events. If one looks at the developments in Georgia over the period 1990-94 and wants to learn more about the causes of the conflicts, their development, and their results, this schema of separatism versus Georgian statehood fails us. Similarly, interpretations that see the source of the conflicts coming from Russia, in an attempt to weaken the emerging newly independent states and to bring them under the new hegemony of Moscow again, obscure much of the history of the Georgian-Abkhaz war and the history of the South Caucasus. Although it is true that the Russian military on the ground and some of the Moscow leadership did interfere in the development of the events, whether in the wars between the ethnic minorities against the central authorities or during the two rounds of Georgian power struggle, the Russian role remained limited to intervening in developing events, and not causing and containing them.

In the moment of Soviet collapse and the emergence of the independence of Georgia, the country was struggling to define its new political identity and impose it on the country. In this period, Georgian statehood was a political project, and at times one doubted whether it was achievable or not.⁷⁹ The Georgian project of building sovereign statehood clashed with several other forces. The most important clash was the internal division of this political project, between its various wings, one led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the other initially regrouped around the umbrella of the National Congress (Chanturia, Tsereteli), and led by the Military Council (Sigua, Ioseliani, Kitovani) and eventually by the State Council under Shevardnadze. The second major challenge came from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with their own national-statehood projects that were the mirror-image of the Georgian project itself. Yet the Abkhaz and Osset movements were defensive in their essence, trying to defend their institutional framework and local rule from a mounting Georgian national project that tried to incorporate them into a centralized state project. The third force that challenged the Georgian national project was Moscow. In the Soviet period Moscow's

79 Stephen Jones, "Georgia: A Failed Democratic Transition", in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (eds), *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, Cambridge University Press, 1993; Paul B. Henze, "Was Georgia Ready for Independence?", *Caspian Crossroads Magazine*, Volume 3, Issue No. 3, Winter 1998.

resistance to Georgian nationalism was weak and incoherent, and after the inefficient repression of the 9 April 1989 demonstration the central Soviet authorities, and their local instrument the Georgian Communist Party, simply had no Georgia policy any more, and surrendered their authority to the newly rising national movement there. Later, Russia was to find a new way of regaining influence in Georgia, through interfering in the little wars in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Mingrelia.

Following the Russian military intervention and the crushing of the Zviadist rebellion, Georgia entered a period of relative stability. In late 1993 Shevardnadze created the Citizens' Union of Georgia, a coalition of forces that became the political base of his rule and the ruling party in Georgia, composed by former *nomenklatura* members as well as young, Western-educated reformers: former Communists, the Green Party, and a wing of the Republican Party. Through various manoeuvres he weakened the warlords and eventually imprisoned Kitovani in early 1995, after this latter prepared armed formations to march on Abkhazia. Later that year, and after an assassination attempt, Ioseliani and dozens of Mkhedrioni fighters were arrested and imprisoned. At the same time the Georgian authorities accused Igor Gogsadze, the head of the Georgian National Security, of masterminding the assassination attempt. Gogsadze escaped to Moscow where he found refuge. Shevardnadze reinforced the police detachments but the Georgian army never became a real force under his rule.

But the dynamics of positive development ended there, and Georgia stagnated after 1997. Shevardnadze played the role of mediator between several power centres and economic groups that divided influence and resources among them. The control of the state over vast territories was no more than nominal: apart from the conflict-ridden Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the government had no control over Ajaria, Mingrelia, Samtskhe-Javakheti, Svanetia. The relative stability of Georgia was perturbed in February 1998 with an assassination attempt against the President, carried out by Zviadist fighters with probable Chechen support. Fighting erupted once again in May 1998 in the southern Gali district of Abkhazia as Georgian guerrilla troops tried to advance in the region, causing scores of dead and the expulsion of those refugees who had by then returned to their villages. The collapse of the Russian economy in the summer of the same year was yet another blow

to the economic stability of Georgia. Another attempt to attack Abkhazia, this time from the Kodori gorge with a multi-ethnic force led by the Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelayev in October 2001, was yet another sad chapter in Georgian-Abkhazian relations. The state structures were deeply corrupted, and the economy did not succeed in taking off. Shevardnadze failed to reveal a long term strategy to take his country out of the crisis. "Without that, his balancing act began to look like an exercise in opportunism."⁸⁰ Shevardnadze did avert the danger of disintegration of his country in 1992-93, but Georgia remained a weak state under his rule.

Ghosts of nationalism

The 2003 "Rose Revolution" revived hopes that Georgia would re-emerge like a phoenix from the ashes of a failing state and advance on the path of modernization. A group led by Mikheil Saakashvili and Zurab Zhvania, two former collaborators of Shevardnadze known to be leaders of the reformist wing of the ruling Citizen's Union of Georgia, broke with the regime of the "White Fox" by late 2001, when it was clear that staying with Shevardnadze would lead to a dead-end in their political careers. The parliamentary elections of November 2003, and the fraud associated with it, provided the appropriate moment to launch a mass movement to bring down the corrupt regime. In mobilizing of the masses the opposition discourse focused on the failures of the Shevardnadze administration, attacking his corrupt, semi-criminal regime as the source of all the ills of Georgia; the revolution promised to solve the problems of the Georgian society by toppling the criminal regime. Corruption, economic failure, unemployment and poverty would find their conclusion once the post-communist elite of Shevardnadze went. The national question, the issue of Georgia's territorial unity, was not a part of the political discourse of the opposition to Shevardnadze during the mobilization in the spring and summer and on to November in 2003. Nor was the question of a new policy towards ethnic minorities.

It did not take long to bring the national question to the central stage of Georgian politics. Two months after the Rose Revolution, in

80 Ghia Nodia, "Georgia's Identity Crisis", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 6, No. 1, January 1995, p. 114.

his inaugural speech following his victorious election to the presidency, Saakashvili promised “unification, security and well-being”.⁸¹ He promised to make Georgia “attractive” to the secessionist regions, and integrate them through its charm rather than use force to achieve the unification of Georgia.

The first area to test the new policies was Ajaria, an Autonomous Republic on the Black Sea shores. Ajars are ethnic Georgians, but of Muslim religion. After the collapse of the Soviet Union Ajaria was ruled much like a medieval fiefdom by Aslan Abashidze. Without declaring any secessionist ambitions, Abashidze made sure that the vast revenues that he collected thanks to the region’s favourable geographical position—situated on a major overland route between Turkey and the heart of Eurasian continent, besides having in Batumi a major port on the Black Sea—would stay with him to reinforce his clientelist and corrupt regime, and not a cent would go to the central authorities in Tbilisi. In April 2004 a combination of external pressure and opposition demonstrations in Batumi led to the fall of Abashidze regime. Tbilisi was lucky for once: Aslan Bek did not fight back, his police did not open fire on the crowds, and Russia tried to mediate instead of pushing for a military solution, avoiding a major bloodshed. After Ajaria was brought under the rule of Tbilisi, Saakashvili emptied the term “autonomy” of all sense by taking full control over the province. If the goal was to make Georgia attractive to other secessionist regions, than the policy in Ajaria sent the wrong message to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Next it was the turn of South Ossetia. There too Saakashvili aimed at combining external military pressure and provoking an internal “colour” revolution. First the market at Ergneti, a Georgian village few kilometres to the south of the Tskhinvali, where trade of all sorts took place, was closed down. The idea was that if the economic resources of the South Ossetian regime were cut off, then it would not take long to collapse. Instead, the external pressure led to military clashes in August 2004 with dozens of casualties, in the absence of a popular movement demanding a peaceful, pro-Georgian revolution. Saakashvili had badly miscalculated this time, and he stopped the confrontation at the right moment before it could get out of control. The 2004 clashes in

81 Quoted in Peter Slevin, “Saakashvili takes office after protests ousted Shevardnadze”, *The Washington Post*, 26 January 2004.

South Ossetia had shown how complicated ethnic conflicts are, and how counter productive military solutions could be. Twelve years after the 1992 cease-fire, while Ossets and Georgians were slowly building a new and peaceful life together, Saakashvili’s plan to unify Georgia had rekindled the old fires of inter-ethnic antagonism.

These two experiences reinforced belief in Tbilisi about the possibility of achieving unification in the near future. Once again the reasons for failure were seen in Russian interference in the internal affairs of Georgia: “If Moscow stops supporting the separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, these two regions would simply return to Georgia” seemed to be the line of thinking among the Georgian policy making elite. As a result, Georgia gave top priority to its integration into NATO, as the only way to neutralize Russian influence over Georgian territory. It also started a vast project of military modernization, by increasing its military spending tenfold in a matter of four years.⁸²

Emphasis on the issue of territorial unification has given a heavy nationalist overtones to the Rose Revolution, which otherwise would like to see itself as a democratic revolution and a Westernizing experience. Saakashvili initiated a youth movement called the “Young Patriots”, which organizes youth camps from among all the places near the fronts with the secessionist regions. Another example of the new nationalism of post-revolution Georgia is the rehabilitation of Zviad Gamsakhurdia. As early as 2004 Saakashvili, in a number of speeches, rehabilitated Gamsakhurdia as the “first president” of independent Georgia. In April 2007 Gamsakhurdia’s remains were transferred from Grozny to Georgia and, after an official procession through the streets of the Georgian capital, were buried at the Mtatsminda Pantheon, where prominent Georgian figures rest. It is easy to analyze the political calculations behind this act: by rehabilitating Gamsakhurdia the Georgian leadership is questioning the legitimacy of Shevardnadze, against whom they organized an extra-legal coup. Moreover, Saakashvili is returning the favour of pro-Zviadist supporters from western Georgia, who participated massively in the 2003 revolution.

82 In 2007, Georgia was spending a quarter of its state budget on defence, that is 513 million GEL (423 million euros) from the total state budget of 3.7 billion GEL. See Vicken Cheterian, “Georgia’s arms race”, *Opendemocracy*, June 4, 2007. http://opendemocracy.net/conflicts/caucasus_fractures/georgia_military

What is left out from the equation is the public opinion in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. By considering its main adversary to be the Kremlin Tbilisi is simply ignoring them. In the words of the President of North Ossetia, Alexander Dzasokhov, the rehabilitation of Gamsakhurdia "cannot but cause anxiety". He added: "Nothing has been done for nearly 14 years to overcome aftermaths of the conflict so as to raise gradually confidence between Georgia and South Ossetia. (...) I mean full rehabilitation of the first Georgian president who had been at the head of all 1991 dramatic events, (...) Of course this provokes concern. What is this line like, and will it help to settle the conflict?"⁸³

By rehabilitating Gamsakhurdia without the slightest debate about his controversial role in starting an unnecessary war with the Ossets, Georgia is revealing that it is not yet ready to face its past. Post-Rose-Revolution Georgia continues its strong references to nationalist symbolism, and continues to reproduce the mistakes of the late 1980s and early 1990s: to ignore the Abkhaz and the Ossets as the main sides of a conflict, and to consider them as simple expressions of the will of the Kremlin. Is modern Georgian history following a cyclical mode? Fifteen years after the events Eduard Shevardnadze recognized Georgian responsibility in starting the war in Abkhazia. On 14 August 2007, Georgian television Rustavi-2 broadcasted the following interview with him:⁸⁴

[Presenter] Was it possible to avoid the armed confrontation in Abkhazia 15 years ago? Fifteen years later, the then-commander-in-chief [of the Georgian army] speaks about insubordination. He says refusal to obey his order grew into an armed confrontation.

[Eduard Shevardnadze] I phoned and if I am not mistaken, it was Goga Khaindrava who answered or, no, it was Ivliane Khaindrava. Ivliane Khaindrava answered and I told him to tell [then Georgian Defence Minister Tengiz] Kitovani that on behalf of the military council, on behalf of the government I categorically forbade him from entering Sukhumi. Well, they told him this, but Mr Kitovani took a decision and said that he would still enter Sukhumi.

83 *Tass*, Moscow, 30 June 2004.

84 Rustavi-2, 14 August 2007, English text distributed by *Georgian News Digest*, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, Tbilisi, 15 August 2007.

And he did. If our army, our national guard, had not entered Sukhumi, the war might not have started at all.

[Correspondent] So Kitovani did not obey you?

[Shevardnadze] No, he did not. Kitovani did not obey me, because the actual commander-in-chief was Kitovani and not Shevardnadze.