

Chapter II

CONTESTED BORDERS IN THE CAUCASUS

Political Turmoil in Georgia and the Ethnic Policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia

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1. Introduction

In October 1990, Georgia was the first Soviet republic to introduce free parliamentary elections on a multi-party basis.⁽¹⁾ In May of 1991, it was the first to organize free presidential elections. Georgia was the second, after Lithuania, to declare formally its full secession from the USSR, on 9 April 1991. At the end of 1992, it was also the first Soviet republic to demonstrate what a real civil war in the post-communist world could be like. Georgians began to kill fellow-Georgians because of a different understanding of political issues. The liberation from a communist and imperial regime was also attended by ethnic conflicts. All the former Soviet republics (save the ethnically homogeneous Armenia) which brandished the slogan of sovereignty were challenged by the problem of preserving their own territorial integrity. But Georgia was the first where the struggle for independence - and, later, the establishment of new international borders - was accompanied by bloody ethnic turmoil.

Many analysts predicted that after the defeat of the communists in free elections, a new kind of authoritarianism, based on nationalism, could take communism's place. For some observers this was an undesirable but likely prognosis; for others, a period of transition (to the market economy, to independence, or both) had of necessity to involve a strong executive power. Such a thesis was first put forward from an anti-Western position by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and from a pro-Western position by the Russian political scientist, Adranik Migranian.⁽²⁾ Georgia provided an example of evolution to authoritarian rule: an anti-communist intellectual was lawfully elected president and, because of his intolerance of ethnic minorities and the political opposition, acquired the image of a post-communist dictator. He was

militarily ousted in the name of democracy, his supporters continuing to wage a kind of guerrilla warfare in several regions of Western Georgia. Later, similar actions against lawfully elected presidents - with varying outcomes - took place in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan. Similarly, President Yeltsin found it necessary to launch a military assault on the legally elected parliament in order to maintain democracy.

Aleksandr Kabakov's anti-utopian story "No Return" gained widespread recognition in the latter days of the Soviet Union for showing a nightmare scenario for post-communist development: it painted a picture of total anarchy and chaos, with a number of armed gangs representing the only authority. Destroying, in Gamsakhurdia's regime, the last remnants of a political order, Georgia was the first to come close to this image. The Georgian state found itself at the mercy of different militias, which were reluctant to merge into a single regular unit and were opposed by armed groups of Gamsakhurdia supporters, Ossetian and Abkhazian separatists, and ordinary criminals.

With Gorbachev's glasnost, "independence" and "democracy" became keywords in Georgian political discourse. At first, both aims were conceived as identical: democracy meant independence, or at least the possibility of fighting for independence or speaking aloud about independence. Independence was never an issue that divided Georgian society. Even communist hard-liners did their best to avoid proclaiming that they were against it. It was differences over the means of achieving independence that became the main issue in Georgian political discourse. The romanticist "radicals" proudly called themselves "irreconcilables" and rejected any compromise with the existing authorities. The "moderates", on the contrary, favoured a cautious and gradualist approach.

The radicals defended the thesis that the existing political structures represented the "regime of occupation" and that any participation in them, including taking part in official elections - even if they otherwise met democratic standards - was morally and politically unacceptable. The radicals even denounced the Lithuanian declaration of independence by the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet in February of 1990 as an "immoral" act, as it was declared by an institution of the "regime of occupation". On the other hand, an armed rebellion against the Soviet empire, although morally justified, was considered to be suicidal. They proposed peaceful acts of civil disobedience: strikes, rallies, hunger-strikes, sit-ins (the last two were especially typical of the Georgian movement). The young intellectuals who developed this ideology of "irreconcilable opposition" were influenced by some of the writings of Mahatma Gandhi. They based their programme on the tactics of non-violent resistance, without, however, accepting the philosophy of non-violence. A key term, reminiscent of Gandhi's legacy, was, for example, the idea of a "National Congress": this meant an unofficially but popularly elected body, without any links with the "forces of occupation" and lawfully representing "the will of the Georgian people" in the international arena.

The moderate opposition (which was called "liberal" in Georgia) shared the view of events in 1921 as an unlawful annexation of Georgia by a foreign country, but agreed to take part in official elections and to continue to make use of the existing power structures. Their keyword was "reasonable".

The split between radicals and moderates was typical of the opposition movements emerging all over the Soviet Union. 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. They despised the "liberals", who questioned the existence of such a line by looking for a compromise in order to make life in the Gulag (the Soviet Union) more bearable. Morally, the latter were considered to be even worse than outright oppressors. The radicals' strategy of non-participation was simply a logical extension of their moral stance.

The leaders of the Georgian "irreconcilables" (who were also former political prisoners - Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Merab Kostava, Giorgi Chanturia, Irakli Tsereteli, et al) had quite close contacts with radicals from other Soviet republics, such as the "Democratic Union" in Russia and radical nationalist groups in the Baltic republics, Ukraine and Armenia. But Georgia was the only Soviet republic where the "irreconcilable" mentality dominated the opposition. Elsewhere, the mainstream opposition movements accepted the rules of the political game, set by Gorbachev.

Groups committed to a "reasonable" form of political activity were unable to awaken much popular response from Georgian public opinion and, although they called themselves "parties", they were in fact small clubs of intellectuals who argued about political theory rather than initiating concrete political action. The only comparatively strong organization of moderate opposition, the Popular Front of Georgia, had its own "radical" wing and was torn apart by factional strife.

The policies of the Georgian Communist Party also contributed to the "radical" domination. Two of its leaders had quite dissimilar attitudes: Jumber Patiashvili, an old-fashioned hard-line provincial apparatchik, would tolerate no opposition of any kind, while Givi Gumbaridze, his successor after the massacre of 9 April, initiated a policy of dialogue with the opposition and even claimed to share its basic values. But neither communist leader made any real compromise with the opposition, and this was clearly to the advantage of the "radicals". Gumbaridze, in particular, tolerated anti-government rallies and criticism in the media, but only when this was expressed in an aggressive and radical way. Almost all the radical organizations forcibly occupied buildings previously owned by communist, Komsomol and other official organizations, to use them as their headquarters. The government did not dare to protest against such unlawful actions. By contrast, it refused to grant the "moderate" organizations legal permission to use any offices. Again, the authorities did not even attempt to oppose the creation of armed groups in support of different "radical" parties. And the same, communist-controlled, media, which readily conceded space and time for the sharpest criticism of the communist regime or the Soviet empire, was extremely cautious about printing or broadcasting anything which was critical of the "radical" leaders, especially Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

Some Georgian opposition politicians claimed that the communists deliberately encouraged the "radicals" and, in particular, helped one of them - Zviad Gamsakhurdia - to achieve popularity.⁽³⁾ The communist authorities clearly had good reason for doing so. The Baltic example showed that the

moderates - striving for power through official elections - were potentially more dangerous than the "radicals" who just "walked in the streets" and "shouted a lot". On the other hand, the communist attitude to the opposition may also be explained by the fact that the weak and morally bankrupt government yielded where it was pushed hardest, and that its undemocratic character made it incapable, in any case, of distinguishing between legal and illegal methods of political struggle.

The predominance of radical philosophy could be explained by the Georgian political heritage. Historical memory traced Georgia's glorious past as an independent country to medieval times. Decades of communist rule had destroyed the elements of civil society and civic consciousness that had emerged before the forcible Soviet occupation of 1921, and had left the intellectual elite, and the general public, with mostly medieval ideals of political behaviour. The heroic "irreconcilable" stance had a much stronger appeal than the search for concrete political means of achieving specific ends. The radical mood was characterized by a lack of (if not contempt for) political sobriety and tolerance. Revolutionary radicalism based all political strategy on an enemy image, and was constantly on the look-out for "agents" and "provocateurs" of the omniscient and omnipresent "Kremlin".

2. Zviad Gamsakhurdia

Zviad (4) soon became the recognized leader of the Georgian independence movement. He was the son of Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, a prominent writer famous for his novels about medieval Georgia. He began his dissident activities as early as 1956, as a teenager, and suffered short-term detention several times, the authority of his father saving him from more severe persecution. After Gamsakhurdia senior died, Zviad, together with other members of the Helsinki Human Rights group, was arrested in 1977. The would-be saviour of the Georgian nation did not behave in an heroic way: he recanted his dissident activities on Soviet TV and later testified against two Western reporters who had alleged that his public recantation was a KGB forgery.(5) After this, he was let off with short-term exile to a high mountain village in the Northern Caucasus, while his long-time companion, Merab Kostava, was serving a full sentence in prison and was released only by Gorbachev's perestroika. Later, Gamsakhurdia justified his behaviour by the necessity to avoid orphaning the Georgian dissident movement. At home again in Tbilisi he did not, however, plunge back into political activity(6), preferring to deepen his knowledge of the German mystic, Rudolf Steiner, until Kostava and younger dissidents returned from prison and new opposition groups were formed. It was at Kostava's insistence that other activists consented to overlook his past oscillations and accept him into "the movement". Gamsakhurdia and Kostava became two "patriarchs" of the Georgian dissidence, the former representing predominantly its reason and the latter its unbending spirit. After Kostava's death in a suspicious car accident at the end of 1989, Gamsakhurdia remained the main charismatic leader of the independence movement.

At the time, he shared the "irreconcilable" philosophy of the radicals, excepting only where his attitude to ethnic minorities was concerned. According to the radicals, any involvement in ethnic conflicts with minorities should be avoided, in order to strengthen the struggle for the independence of Georgia. The first pro-independence rallies were supported by groups of

Armenians, Kurds and other minorities living in Georgia. Ethnic conflicts in the autonomous border regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were seen by the radicals as "Kremlin provocation" against the Georgian independence movement. The radicals wanted to divert public attention from ethnic to political issues by responding to this "provocation" with massive and radical pro-independence and anti-Kremlin actions. These tactics were called "politicization of the (ethnic) conflict" and were used in April 1989, when the Abkhaz demand to secede from Georgia caused public outrage and mass rallies. The radicals worked hard to change anti-Abkhaz slogans into pro-independence ones. There was no slogan which mentioned Abkhazia, for instance, in the rally that was bloodily crushed by Russian troops. The same policies were applied with less success in January 1990, when pro-independence rallies were held in an attempt to re-channel anti-Ossetian sentiment, triggered by the murder of a Georgian child in South Ossetia in obscure circumstances.

Gamsakhurdia defended another view of the ethnic problem. He considered that ethnic sentiment was at a level suitable for helping him to achieve popularity. He claimed to share the liberal values of ethnic tolerance and the equality of all citizens irrespective of nationality, but at the same time did not hesitate to pronounce vehement threats against minorities who "would not behave in a proper manner". Some of Gamsakhurdia's adversaries used his anti-minority stance to charge him with being a "KGB agent", as encouraging ethnic conflicts was supposedly a "KGB policy".

An open split in the radical opposition occurred in May 1990, when Gamsakhurdia and a group of his followers, finding themselves in a minority, walked out of the "National Forum", an umbrella organization of this opposition. At the same time, he abandoned the "irreconcilable" doctrine that had served him well in acquiring the image of a hero but was now leading him into a political dead end.

After the split in the radical opposition, the controversy between "radicals" and "liberals" gradually withered away to become a secondary issue. The remainder of the die-hard radicals were no longer able to attract more than a small bunch of supporters to their rallies. Gamsakhurdia's change of attitude towards parliamentary elections, as part of his political reorientation, attracted some of the moderates to him and caused a split among the latter group as well. Some joined the "Round Table" coalition created under his leadership. Others kept their separate identity but - seeing the communists and the remaining radicals as the greater danger - they avoided public criticism of the charismatic leader. They saw Gamsakhurdia's shortcomings but expected (quite correctly) that his populist message would divert the less politicized part of the electorate from voting for the communists.

A small section of the moderate opposition, united in a block called "Democratic Georgia", was more sensitive to Gamsakhurdia's authoritarianism and ethnic populism, regarding these as an indication of a threatening fascism. These "liberals" preferred to side with the politically less mature but morally more acceptable remnants of the "irreconcilable" opposition. This block was the only one which, in its pre-election posters, put "personal freedom" in first place and listed "national independence" second. The liberals even supported the idea of the "National Congress" and took part in both elections, in the hope of assuaging and civilizing the ardent radicals.

This attitude was severely criticized by other groupings, as the elections for two rival legislative bodies, both claiming to represent the "will of the nation", seemed to contain the seeds of civil war (even a strong paramilitary formation, "Mkhedrioni", declared its loyalty to the Congress).

3. The Dictator and his Opposition

In order to avoid being completely marginalized, the Georgian democrats - divided among tiny groups and unable to awaken any response from the "masses" - were compelled to ally themselves with the better organized radicals. This gave them illusory short-term advantages, but also helped to endorse either the authoritarian image of Zviad the Saviour - the only hero who could defeat the communists and lead the country to independence - or the politically groundless idea of the "National Congress". More and more liberally-minded intellectuals therefore became disappointed in politics and retired from political activity altogether.

The anti-Zviadist coalition, which was to become the core of the pro-democracy movement, adopted a clear, pro-democratic identity only when Gamsakhurdia came to power and provided a negative reference point for the opposition. As a result of the two-round parliamentary elections held in October and November 1990, under a mixture of the proportional and majority systems, the proportional vote was divided between the Round Table (53%) and the Communist Party (29%), with none of the moderate parties crossing the 4% threshold. A number of democratic moderates were elected, however, by the majority vote, and they formed the "Democratic Centre", an eleven-member opposition faction in the 250-seat parliament. At first, this constituted the only parliamentary opposition to Gamsakhurdia, since the communists would not abandon their habit of voting with the majority. Many of the communist deputies soon quit their party and joined the ruling coalition, reducing the party to a small group of die-hard Stalinists. The Communist Party was finally banned after the Moscow putsch of August 1991.⁽⁷⁾

Gamsakhurdia became the chairman of a parliament completely obedient to his personal will. He strengthened his power, partly at the expense of the democratic freedoms that had been introduced during perestroika. From the communist regime, the new authorities inherited the official media with their guaranteed supply of newsprint at state prices and their monopoly of printing facilities. The opposition lost nearly all access to television and the established newspapers. Gamsakhurdia openly expressed his dislike of private enterprise, as represented by the co-operative sector, regarding it as potential support for the opposition. He was very reluctant to conduct reforms in industry and agriculture, proclaiming that the "good sides" of socialist centralization in the economy should be preserved. Bessarion Gugushvili, appointed prime minister in August 1991, announced a programme of "state capitalism"⁽⁸⁾ - the last Soviet prime minister, Pavlov, later used the same term to describe his economic credo.⁽⁹⁾ The renaming of "Soviet farms" as "national farms" symbolized Gamsakhurdia's transition policies. The preservation - and, in some cases, restoration - of the old system was well suited to his autocratic aspirations.

The tendency to reinforce the executive at the expense of the legislative and local authorities and the slow pace of economic reform were common to all

post-Soviet republics, regardless of whether they were led by anti-communists or former communists. Almost every freely elected post-Soviet leader has been criticized for an "autocratic style".⁽¹⁰⁾ Zviad and his supporters could refer to such experiences in order to show that their policies were not substantially different from those followed in other republics. Gamsakhurdia expressly avoided repressive methods in order to preserve a democratic image. The outrageous nature of his "dictatorship" was often exaggerated by the opposition and, on many occasions, by the international media. It was said for instance that he closed down all opposition newspapers, while he actually closed down only one of them, "Molodiozh Gruzii" - several others were being published up to the very end, and criticized his policy quite severely. The laws on the media and political organizations adopted by the parliament were fairly democratic, and were in any case no less acceptable than the ones adopted in other republics.

Also, to do him justice, it must be admitted that the "radical" part of the opposition often behaved provocatively, refusing to recognize the legitimacy of his power; this became especially serious when the paramilitary organization, "Mkhedrioni", which had previously been supporting the "radicals", refused to lay down its arms at the request of the elected president. Gamsakhurdia succeeded in repressing the Mkhedrioni (with the help of the Soviet army) and arrested its leaders. In this instance, it was hard to disagree with him that no democratic power could tolerate such an armed "opposition". As for other opposition figures: up to the last stage of the political crisis (at the beginning of September 1991) they did not suffer any persecution (apart from vilification in the media).

It was Gamsakhurdia's style more than his actions which have given him the image of a dictator. In upholding the principle whereby "they who are not for us are against us", he shared the old spirit of the "irreconcilable" opposition, labelled "Neo-Bolshevik" by some liberal critics.⁽¹¹⁾ Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric was clearly reminiscent of the communist classics of the thirties: "Enemy of the Nation" (Stalin's version: "Enemy of the People"), "Agent of the Kremlin" (Stalin's version: "Agent of Imperialism"). These terms were used in all his speeches and in the official media to label the opposition. A leading government newspaper, "Sakartvelos Respublika", had a special column entitled "Kremlin Agents in Georgia", "exposing" different public figures. In a striking continuity of Stalinist traditions, Gamsakhurdia endorsed and kindled "popular outrage" against "our enemies", while at the same time presenting himself as a restraining force.

One of the most bizarre elements of his populist style was a tent pitched in front of the Parliament building, where his fanatical supporters (mostly middle-aged women) were always on duty, ready to express indignation when anybody appeared to be against Zviad (i.e., Georgia). When "Mkhedrioni" members began a hunger-strike protesting against the detention of their leaders, the tent-ladies began to fast back, protesting at the fact that anybody dared to protest against the "legitimate government". It was "the people" themselves who, at the request of their leader and under the guidance of his loyalist parliamentarians, smashed the opposition barricades and brutally beat up the protesters in September 1991; afterwards "the people" and their president together celebrated the "victory" with folk songs and dancing in front of the Parliament building.

4. Ethnic-Territorial Wars

In Georgia, Gamsakhurdia's image as a "dictator" is due predominantly to his policies in relation to the opposition. His dictatorial fame abroad has resulted largely from his ethnic policies. Ethnic populism had helped him to become the leader of the independence movement. In December 1990, soon after he had come to power, the new parliament abolished the autonomous status of the South Ossetian Region. This decision was followed by a war, waged on both sides by irregular troops. Thousands of Ossetians, living outside the disputed region and loyal to the Georgian state, were evicted from their homes under the guidance of Gamsakhurdia's administrators.⁽¹²⁾ Many foreign (and especially Russian) observers accused Gamsakhurdia of coming up with the slogan "Georgia for (ethnic) Georgians", thus making discrimination against minorities the core of his policy. When his adversaries branded him as a fascist, they also wanted to denounce his ethnic policies.

These critiques of Gamsakhurdia's ethnic policies are to a large extent justified, but they generally fail to explain the motives for ethnic violence in post-communist societies. There are two main reasons why conflicts like the one in South Ossetia were hard to avoid in the process of the breaking-up of the Soviet Union. The first is that the absence of a civic consciousness, which expressed itself in an opposition between the concepts of citizenship and nationality. Nationality was considered to be a purely ethnic and non-political characteristic of individuals and groups, while citizenship, on the contrary, was seen as a mainly external relationship linking individuals and groups with the state. This opposition between nationality and citizenship was reinforced by the Soviet system of passport registration, which had a special entry for an individual's nationality as distinct from his or her citizenship. After the demise of the Soviet Union, it was difficult for both majorities and minorities in the newly independent republics to consider their belonging to new nations in a non-ethnic sense. Since 1988, the Georgian media has presented the issue of Georgian nationhood in predominantly ethnic terms. The minorities (usually called the "non-Georgian population") have routinely been described as "guests on our soil". They were quite welcome as long as "they behaved in a proper way" - though not everybody expressed confidence that they would. It was quite popular to discuss "demographic" topics, such as the possibility of increasing the birth rate among ethnic Georgians (who, according to the 1989 census, comprised 70% of the population), since this birth rate was much lower than that of the Armenian and, especially, Azeri minorities. Soviet-style settlement control measures (*propiska*) were demanded from the authorities to prevent the spreading of minority (mostly Azeri) populations from the densely populated areas to other parts of Georgia. The government was asked to encourage the resettling of ethnic Georgians in regions where non-Georgians constituted a majority. This settlement policy was intended to shift the ethnic balance in favour of the Georgians.

All these discussions and demands were deplorable expressions of an ethnic definition of nationhood and raised legitimate concern among the minority populations. In themselves, however, they do not suffice to explain the outbreak of ethnic violence. Despite all the manifestations of ethnic nationalism, almost nobody questioned the cultural rights of the minorities (such as the possibility of having an education, theatres, newspapers, etc., in their own languages). The political elite generally understood the need to

consolidate the independence movement across ethnic lines, and consequently encouraged minority representatives to participate in pro-independence parties and movements.⁽¹³⁾ Of course, the representation of minorities in the national independence movement was not proportional to its numeric importance in the population, but, even though its participation may be regarded as rather symbolic, it was nevertheless important in counterbalancing the impact of ethnic nationalism.

The second reason why conflicts like this were hard to prevent from reaching the violent stage was that territory, or "soil" was at stake.⁽¹⁴⁾ The newly independent states contained disputed territories, which were claimed by different ethnic communities as "theirs". It was these conflicting territorial claims, more than the alleged mistreatment of minorities by the majority, which lay at the heart of conflicts like those in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transdniestra. Mistreatment of or discrimination against minorities were used by the advocates of secessionism in order to mobilize their own communities or to gain recognition for their cause from the international community. And public opinion in modern democratic states is indeed sensitive to arguments that can be translated into the language of "minority rights".

In the case of Georgia, the allegations of the secessionist politicians from Abkhazia or South Ossetia were generally based on particular statements by some Georgian politicians or on reminiscences of ethnic strife in the past. Actual examples of mistreatment by the majority could not explain the origins of the ethnic conflict or the secessionist claims, as these sprang up almost as soon as the majority began its crusade for independence and before it had outlined its own ethnic policies, beyond some general declarations. The Georgian independence movement did not have time to do anything anti-Abkhazian or anti-Ossetian before the latter communities expressed their separatist ambitions. The Abkhaz and the Ossetes reacted negatively to the first actions by the Georgian independence movement because, as they said, the flag of the Georgian Republic of 1918-21, banned during the Soviet years but raised again by the new opposition movement, "reminded them of their ancestors killed under that flag".⁽¹⁵⁾

One can now only guess at how the independent Georgian state would have treated the Abkhazian and Ossetian minorities if their leaders had not opposed Georgian independence and sought protection in Moscow from the very beginning. In reality, the rationale behind these separatist movements was: this land belongs to us historically, hence it should be independent from any given larger state into which it is currently incorporated. The so-called "Matrioshka-style" structure of Soviet federalism - where most of the Union's republics contained autonomous republics and regions, but with a lower political status - created favourable conditions for the development of secession movements. The titular ethnic groups of these national entities - the composition of whose own administrations was based on ethnic quota systems - developed an awareness of themselves as would-be nations. In the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Georgian independence movement did not fail to raise the question of secession from Georgia: "If Georgia wants to be independent of Russia, why can't we be independent of Georgia?" The abolition of South Ossetian autonomy by the Georgian Parliament in December 1990 was an unwise political move (unwise as its only predictable result would be violent clashes, giving Russia further legitimation for

intervening militarily in Georgian affairs and ultimately contributing to South Ossetia's de facto separation from Georgia), but it should also be seen as an ill-considered retaliation for the declaration by the "South Ossetian Democratic Republic" of its separation from Georgia, which had been made several days before. What ensued was a territorial war in which both sides were defending "their land" and which the absence of regular armies made even more brutal.

Words and concepts have played an important role in the development of the conflict. The term "South Ossetia", for instance, has never been accepted by the Georgian side, as it seems to prompt demands for reunification with North Ossetia, which is a part of the Russian Federation. The Georgians have never acknowledged any parallel with the situation of both Germanies or both Koreas. They argue that, unlike the situation in Germany or Korea, a state comprising territories from modern-day North and South Ossetia never existed. The term "South Ossetia" was used in the 19th century in a cultural/geographical sense, but the area was granted administrative status only under communist rule. Although the rural population of the region has been predominantly Ossetian for the past few centuries, the Georgians consider the region a Georgian historical province, called Shida Kartli or Samachablo.

In addition to ethnic nationalism and historical territorial claims, Russian involvement and its perception by the Georgian side may be considered a third decisive factor which helps explain the eruption of violence in South Ossetia. From the point of view shared by most Georgians, it was Russia (or the Kremlin "Centre") that orchestrated all the ethnic conflicts in Georgia, as well as in other areas of the former Soviet empire. This perception was no doubt something of an exaggeration, but the role of Russia in aggravating the conflict cannot be overlooked. Gorbachev, who had committed the Soviet leadership to more or less democratic methods, supported the minority movements within the independence-seeking Republics as a way of struggling against the disintegration of the Soviet Union. His government tried to persuade the international community that the integrity of the Soviet Union was indispensable for the protection of minority rights on the whole of its territory. The central government of the USSR became a natural ally of the Georgian secessionist republics against the independence movement in Georgia. Active support for these movements became a political means of blackmailing the Georgian leadership.⁽¹⁶⁾ It was not only the Soviet presidency which supported the secessionist movement in South Ossetia: the Soyuz hard-line faction in the Soviet Parliament (whose major aim had been the preservation of the Soviet Union) included deputies from non-Russian Republics such as, for instance, Anatoli Chekhoev, one of the leaders of the faction and simultaneously spokesman for the South Ossetian movement.⁽¹⁷⁾ This political support from Moscow was a factor which encouraged the minority movements in Georgia to be uncompromising in dealing with their local "centre". It also goes a long way towards explaining the Georgian independence movement's insensitivity to minority concerns. The Ossetians - like the Abkhaz separatists - were seen not as fighting for their own rights, but as siding with "them" (the Kremlin) against "us" (Georgia). The Ossetians were branded as "ungrateful and treacherous guests". The more the minorities counted on support from the "centre", the more the majority denounced them for doing so, in their turn prompting the minorities to seek protection from Moscow. The warring parties failed to find an exit from this vicious spiral.

Moderate tendencies within the Ossetian movement had understood very well that secession from Georgia was a reckless move.⁽¹⁸⁾ Compromises with the Georgian government would have been possible, insofar as public opinion in Georgia had never opposed granting quite extensive cultural rights to the minorities. Only some groups within the Georgian independence movement attempted to co-operate with these moderate tendencies within the national minorities (this included the Ilia Chavchavadze Society in the years 1987-89, and supporters of the National Congress who invited minority movements to their session in May 1990). Unfortunately, such attempts were rare and inconsistent. The mood of ethnic populism prevailed, and a leader like Gamsakhurdia made great capital out of the Ossetian conflict in order to legitimize the strengthening of his power and the reduction of democratic freedoms. "When the fortress is under siege, it is no time to criticize the garrison commander", his supporters argued.

5. The Final Stage

Gamsakhurdia failed in the end to "unite the nation" under his leadership in the face of the "external danger", but he succeeded in imposing a spirit of civil war on the society. His supporters denounced anybody who disagreed with him as an enemy, as "Kremlin agents" or blind forces in the hands of "agents". The opponents of his policies, in turn, were driven to the radical edge. Gamsakhurdia united political forces whose co-operation had earlier seemed unthinkable: the "irreconcilable" radicals, pro-Western moderates and even members of the former nomenklatura. He united them on radical territory. This coalition, united as a movement for democracy against dictatorship, had only their "anti-Zviadism" in common. The champion of the radical opposition had ended up creating a radical opposition to himself.

Gamsakhurdia achieved an overwhelming victory in the presidential elections of May 1991, when he received almost 87 % of the vote. Even if possible election fraud and illegitimate pressure on the voters are taken into account, mass support for Gamsakhurdia was in fact higher than ever before. Since the parliamentary elections of October 1990, Gamsakhurdia had capitalized on his monopoly of the media and local power structures. But in a country where, after decades of communist rule, the vast majority was used to following the leading trend, these figures should not be overestimated; it is the activity of a comparatively small political elite that counts. On this level, Gamsakhurdia's support was already diminishing. For the presidential elections, all the other candidates - except the representative of the communist party - had conducted an aggressive anti-Gamsakhurdia campaign. In addition, discontent was already beginning to grow in the ranks of his own supporters.

Gamsakhurdia's political end came, not as the result of a spontaneous "popular rebellion", but after the defection of his closest adherents. The political crisis was triggered by two events. First, Gamsakhurdia's inconsistent, cowardly or, according to some interpretations, treacherous behaviour during the military putsch in Moscow in August 1991, of which he failed to give any clear political assessment, must be taken into account. During the August events, he tried to turn the National Guard - which may have been regarded as the core of a future Georgian army - into a unit subordinated to the Georgian Ministry of the Interior (later, Gamsakhurdia

justified the move as an attempt to save the Guard in the face of military danger). This act was considered by the National Guard, under the command of Tengiz Kitovani, as an act of high treason, and led to its breaking away, supported by the former prime minister, Sigua, and the former foreign minister, Khoshtaria. However, the Guardsmen refrained from attacking the Government immediately and camped outside Tbilisi (Kitovani later said that the people were not yet ready to depose their president by force). The second event which led to the defection of many of his adherents was police violence against peaceful demonstrators on 2 September 1991, during which several demonstrators were wounded. This police intervention led to mass rallies by the political opposition (supported also by a breakaway group from the Round Table coalition which called itself "Charter 91"), demanding Gamsakhurdia's resignation.

The two currents of the new opposition to Gamsakhurdia merged for a two-week period in September and October, when the Guard came to "protect" the protest action by TV employees and when the political opposition demanded the freedom of the media and occupied the TV building. The National Guard, however, withdrew from the city two weeks later, postponing the final resolution of the conflict. A lull lasted until December, full of hidden tension and failed negotiations. On 22 December, after another bloody incident in front of the Parliament building, the National Guard entered the city once more and stormed the building.⁽¹⁹⁾

6. Explaining the Civil War

A democratically elected president was militarily removed in the name of democracy. He was ousted by his own former supporters. The democratic opposition, which had on numerous occasions stressed its commitment to peaceful means of struggle, finally endorsed the military coup. Eduard Shevardnadze, the former communist boss and one of the leaders of the Soviet empire, came to the rescue of democracy and independence. In what terms may all these events be understood?

Gamsakhurdia's own conspiracy theory concerning the help Shevardnadze received from Moscow should not be dismissed out of hand.⁽²⁰⁾

Shevardnadze had been closely watching developments in Georgia and trying to influence them ever since he left Tbilisi in 1985. He was Gorbachev's chief advisor on Georgian affairs. He came to Tbilisi after the April 1989 massacre and designated the new leader of the Georgian Communist Party. After his resignation as foreign minister of the Soviet Union in December 1990, at a time when the Soviet Union was already disintegrating, he understood that Georgia was perhaps the only place where he could still hope for a political future. Shevardnadze's interests coincided with those of the former Georgian nomenklatura, and Zviad Gamsakhurdia appeared to be the main obstacle to his comeback. The "coup" could be presented as the result of a military plot, supported by the old bureaucratic and intellectual elites, against a popularly elected president. The old elites, deprived of their former privileges, would have been eager to replace the leader of the Georgian independence movement with a former communist, who would reinstate the former ties with Moscow and give the nomenklatura back their privileges.⁽²¹⁾

This conspiracy theory fails to explain the loss of support for Gamsakhurdia among his former adherents and even among his closest friends. Nor can the

fall of Gamsakhurdia be explained as the struggle of dictatorship against democracy. Gamsakhurdia's anti-democratic programme was clear from the very beginning, which makes his defectors' commitment to the democratic cause rather questionable. My thesis is that Gamsakhurdia was simply not qualified to be a president. He knew how to address rallies, how to appeal to the public, how to find active supporters; but his paranoid suspiciousness made him unable to keep his supporters on his side. He was obsessed with the problem of personal loyalty and failed to develop rational political behaviour. He did not master the art of making a temporary deal with less dangerous opponents in order to get rid of more dangerous ones. He was able to turn friends into enemies, but not the reverse. And, on the international scene, Gamsakhurdia seemed unable to gain recognition for the cause of Georgian independence. He convinced the world that he was a real dictator even before he became one. Gamsakhurdia would perhaps have acted more wisely by extending his personal power more gradually and presenting himself in a better light to Western journalists and politicians. This might have been bad news for the Georgian democrats, but it would have enabled Gamsakhurdia to retain his presidential office for a longer time.

Notes

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1. The elections in the Baltic republics, conducted earlier that year, lacked a formally introduced multi-party system.
2. The transition from an "ideal totalitarian system to democracy cannot be achieved overnight, in a single leap... until an especially complex process of building, forming and solidifying civil society in the economic and cultural spheres is under way, there exists an urgent necessity to maintain in the realm of politics a strong authoritarian power, which would permit a limited democracy": A. Migranian, 'Dolgii put k yevropeyskomu domu', *Noviy Mir*, 1989/7, p.169.
3. The leader of the Popular Front, Nodar Natadze, defended the thesis of communist support to the radical case: "communist propaganda, especially television, did everything it could during 1990... to identify the personality of Zviad Gamsakhurdia with the idea of national freedom for Georgia, so that the inevitable discrediting of the former would imply the discrediting of the latter". *Sakartvelos Respublika*, 20 February 1992.
4. It is a Georgian tradition to mention particularly popular public figures by their first names only.
5. David K. Shipler, 'Democracy is a System, not a Man', *New York Times*, 9 January 1992.
6. See Tamar Chkheidze, 'Murder or Accident?', *Sartvelos Respublika*, 20 February 1992.
7. *Tskhovreba*, 21 August 1991.
8. *Droni*, 4 November 1991.
9. *Kommersant* (Moscow), 10-17 February 1992.
10. On the case of Russia, see: Julia Wishnevski, 'Russia: Liberal Media Criticise Democrats in Power', *RFE/RL Research Report*, 10 January 1992.
11. *Sakhipato tendentsia* ("A Dangerous Tendency"), *Tbilisi*, 27 November 1989.
12. On 19 April 1991, the *Droni* newspaper reported on the manner in which inhabitants of the Ossetian village of Kitaani (outside the region of South Ossetia), in no way involved in any political activities, were forced to leave: "On 29 March, electricity was cut off, the bus route cancelled (the village is 6 kilometres from the motorway), bread supplies stopped and the kindergarten closed down. All plots of lands leased to peasants one year before were taken away".
13. With this aim in mind, the Georgian Popular Front created a branch called the 'Association for National Accord'.
14. The importance of the territorial issue leads me, in cases similar to the Georgian one, to prefer the term "ethnic-territorial conflict" to "ethnic conflict".
15. Independent Georgia had similar conflicts with Abkhazian and Ossetian separatist movements in the years 1918-21. The difference was that, at the time, Russia was not directly involved and Georgia managed to impose its will by military means until the entire country was occupied by Russia.

16. In one of his interviews, Gamsakhurdia charged Gorbachev with blackmailing him on the Ossetian issue: "Sign the Union Treaty", Gorbachev allegedly said to him in a telephone conversation, "or everything that is happening in Ossetia will continue", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 7 March 1991.
17. On the alleged co-operation between the South Ossetian movement and the Soyuz group, see 'Tskhinvali Militia Chief on Unrest', FBIS-USR-91-036, 4 October 1991, pp. 32-33.
18. "The declaration of [South Ossetia's] independence with an eye to Moscow and the prospect of unifying Southern and Northern Ossetia... [was] a mistake from a geopolitical point of view"; "Whoever wants peace between the South Ossetians and the Georgians should abandon forever the idea of the unification of Southern with Northern Ossetia. Whoever wants peace between Georgia and Russia should also abandon this idea." Vasilii Abayev [a prominent Ossetian scientist], *Tragediya Yuzhnoy Osetii--put k soglasiyu*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 22 January 1992.
19. For a more detailed outline, see Elizabeth Fuller, 'Georgian President Flees after Opposition Seizes Power', RFE/RL Research Report, Vol.1, No. 3, 17 January 1992.
20. Gamsakhurdia spoke about this in numerous interviews. See, for example, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 21 February 1992.
21. After his deposition, Gamsakhurdia said the following: "I arrived in a wasteland, you see? I was alone and empty-handed - I had no militia, no KGB, no-one; everyone was a traitor, everyone was a bribe-taker. What do you do in that kind of society, in that kind of state?" FBIS-SOV-92-035, 21 February 1992.

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