

Georgia: Dimensions of Insecurity

GHIA NODIA

Georgia has been an insecure and unstable country since regaining independence in 1991. Over the intervening years, it has suffered two bloody and protracted secessionist wars, both of which the central government lost. These produced two zones of unresolved conflict centered on two unrecognized states (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) that together constitute nearly 15 percent of the country's territory. In these areas, political uncertainty, insecurity, and crime fester, with a substantial portion of the population living as "internally displaced people."¹ Until May 2004, Ajara constituted a third area of uncertain jurisdiction within the country. Although Ajara never proclaimed independence, it did not comply with the Georgian constitutional order either.

In addition, Georgia has not had an orderly and constitutional transfer of power since the Communists lost the 1990 elections. Instead, it has had two rebellions, revolutions, or *coups d'état* (depending on who is describing them)—one of them bloody, the other peaceful and fairly orderly. The first led to several years of near anarchy; the second triggered a tense crisis between Tbilisi and Ajara. Moreover, even in those areas of the country where the government's political control has not been openly challenged, its capacity to ensure basic order and security has often been questionable. For example, the Pankisi Gorge region has acquired the reputation of being a safe haven for terrorists and criminals. Georgia's relations with Russia, its most powerful neighbor and former imperial master, remain extremely unstable and have been on the brink of military confrontation several times. Georgian public revenues are miniscule (even allowing for the country's essentially dysfunctional economy),

¹ According to the 2002 Georgian census, the number of internally displaced persons in Georgia was 264,000, although some observers believe this figure to be exaggerated.

and public sector salaries are as a rule well below subsistence levels. No wonder Georgia is often defined as a “weak state” or, even more radically, as a “failing state.”

This chapter outlines Georgia’s core insecurities and vulnerabilities, including “objective” threats and challenges. Objective threats include those realities that Georgia had to face when building its statehood on the debris of the Soviet Union, realities whose existence did not depend on choices made by the Georgian state, its political elite, or the public: factors such as Georgia’s geography, its size and resources, its ethnic diversity, the specific settlement pattern of its ethnic groups, and the legacy of Soviet ethnic-based quasi-federalism. For example, ethnic secessionist conflicts emerged from a combination of pre-existing factors such as the presence of ethnic minorities not only concentrated in border regions, but also benefiting from ethnically based institutions on which they could rely in pursuit of their own nationalist political programs, coupled with considerable support from neighboring Russia. But this chapter also takes account of the “subjective” factor—that is, how the Georgian state and public responded to these threats and challenges. This includes both the policies chosen and capacities developed to implement those policies—in other words, the sphere in which Georgia earns the sobriquet of a “weak” or “failing” state. In this case, the focus switches from the analyses of pre-existing factors to the way Georgian actors tackled them.

The sources of the security challenges facing Georgia can be divided into internal and external categories. The most obvious external source of Georgia’s insecurity resides in its relations with its former imperial patron, Russia. Over the years since Georgian independence, these relations have been mainly bad and at times particularly tense. Otherwise, Georgia has not faced serious threats from any other state. Because Georgian–Russian relations are treated elsewhere in this volume,² here the Russian dimension will be considered only as it bears on the internal sources of Georgia’s insecurity.

THE GEORGIAN NATIONAL PROJECT

When we speak about security or insecurity, we always mean security of a certain actor: this may be an individual, a group, or a political body—that

² See Jaba Devdariani and Oksana Antenenko’s chapters in this volume.

is, a polity. In political analysis, security issues are primarily discussed with regard to the state. It is usually assumed that all states are more or less uniform in what they regard as in their own interests and that differences on this issue mostly depend on objective factors, such as a state's size, geography, and resources.

While these factors are obviously important dimensions in determining a state's security, they are not sufficient conditions. States belong to specific collections of people—called “nations,” “peoples,” or “populations”—or sometimes simply to “elites.” Different peoples or different elites may define the kind of public order they want and what constitutes the “national interest” quite differently. I refer to this process of determining a national interest as the “national project.” The national project is a normative idea expressing the nature of the public order that state institutions are expected to define and protect, as well as defining whose institutions they are. Understanding this project lies at the heart of what is usually meant by “the national interest.”

The national project reflects the ambitions of different people (or of the elites representing them), as well as the political values, ideologies, and orientations prevalent within a society or key parts of it. People may seek to create states that try to play an active role in shaping the world beyond their national borders, or they may just choose to be “consumers” of public goods produced within the international order. They may seek to create a “nation-state” for a specific people (or “nation”). Or they may think that unifying different “nations” is the task of their state. They may want their state to be based on liberal and democratic values, on patriarchal values, on communitarian values, or on something else.

Depending on the choices they make, states and the societies upon which they are based will have very different kinds of security problems. The same factors that threaten a certain nation's aspirations might not be perceived as threats if the national project had been formulated differently. For instance, a group that pursues a project of ethnic self-preservation (i.e., of preserving its identity) does not necessarily defend the same priorities as another otherwise similar group that is committed to setting up a full nation-state crowned with a UN seat, and therefore may face a different set of threats and challenges. A nation with superpower aspirations might consider a certain development to be a threat, while a nation with more modest ambitions would not even discuss this same development in the language of “threats” (e.g., Russia considers NATO expan-

sion to be a national security threat, while Ukraine does not). A nation trying to build a democratic order will likely see threats differently from one that is aspiring to build either a traditional or modernizing autocracy. Contrary to what Lord Palmerston thought, not only does Britain (as any other country) not have permanent friends and enemies, neither does it (or any country) have permanent interests.³

Of course, it is legitimate to ask where these national projects come from. Nations consist of many individuals who disagree on issues of great importance and who are, especially in democracies, eager to express these disagreements. Obviously, these national projects do not grow on trees or emerge spontaneously from the “national soil.” They are created—or constructed, as a postmodern sociologist would prefer to say. People who take the lead in formulating ideas behind a national project are usually elites, especially intellectuals and politicians.⁴ However, the development of a national project never depends solely on the arbitrary decisions of individuals. Different versions must compete in the marketplace of ideas before one set of normative concepts gains critical acceptance.

It is also true that there is never a full consensus within a nation about what the national project should be, but strong majorities can usually be rallied around its central ideas. Politicians, especially when in government, like to frame many issues as security threats, because it is easier to mobilize people on matters said to endanger core national interests (and to enhance the incumbent government’s standing or influence in the process).

There are many factors that shape the formulation of a national project, but one is particularly important: that of a *role model*. Most nations are so-called “late developers”—that is, they began constructing themselves as modern nations after other nations had already defined what it means to be developed or advanced, and after the major parameters of the world order were already in place. The national projects of late developers tend to imitate the successes of more advanced nations, while at the same time trying to find a niche that respects their own political personality.

³ See very intelligent observations on this subject in Robert Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), pp. 38–39 and pp. 127–138.

⁴ Cooper writes that, “It is the function of political leadership to define what people want, even before they may know it themselves: [Winston] Churchill’s policy was based not on a calculus of interest, but on a deep insight into the British people and their history” (Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations*, p. 133). In many countries, intellectuals have provided this kind of leadership.

These role models are usually found among: (1) those states that are successful on a global scale (in the modern world, this is “the West”); (2) those that were once imperial masters and brought aspects of modernization, even if they were imposed (these may or may not be countries of the West); (3) countries that are culturally “like us” and/or geographically close to us, but at the same time that have been more successful in key respects (for instance, Spain and Portugal for Latin American countries). These role models may complement or contradict each other. The advanced countries of Europe and North America may provide general models of development, but if they are culturally distant, a late developer’s effort to imitate their model will lack legitimacy, because people care about identities, not merely development models. This dilemma has developed dramatic dimensions—for instance, in many Islamic countries. Therefore, a culturally relevant role model, a “country like us,” is easier to emulate.

Georgians do not have a single specific role model—no culturally similar country that serves as a model for imitation (as Azerbaijan arguably has in Turkey). One can say that Europe in general serves as a role model for Georgia, although one has to note here that the model is the European nation-state, rather than the European Union. More proximate models may be the more successful postcommunist countries of Eastern Europe such as the Baltic states, Poland, and even Serbia (the regime change in Georgia in November 2003 was consciously modeled on Slobodan Milošević’s ouster in Serbia). This general orientation implies that Georgia’s great project is to become a “normal” European nation and be recognized as such.

This simple and hardly original normative model for a national project implies several conditions that are far from simple to guarantee. First, that a nation exists—that is, there is a political body united around a more or less uniform vision of the national project. Second, that it exists as an internationally recognized independent state and a respected member of a community of nations. Third, that it has a political order similar to a normal European country—in other words, a liberal democracy. Fourth, it must have an economic order that ensures a reasonable level of well-being for its citizens and, at the same time, allows the country to be a part of the international economic system. However, it must also preserve what is unique to its national identity (language, national culture, even “spirituality”).

One may legitimately ask, “How do we know that these ideas really define the aspirations of the Georgian people? How widely shared are such priorities? Are they simply an elite fantasy?” It would, of course, be wrong to argue that all Georgians are sure about their “Westernness” or “Europeanness.” A certain nostalgia for the Soviet Union persists among parts of the population, and there have been events and movements reflecting an anti-Western backlash. In addition, ethnic minorities⁵ do not necessarily share in all aspects of the predominant Georgian vision. However, even if countervailing ideas, such as a closer integration with Russia or developing some kind of “Georgian way” based on the Eastern Orthodox religion have been advanced and defended, they have failed to gain a significant place in Georgian political life or public discourse.

This background provides a basis for judging the sources of insecurity in Georgia. Security threats are those trends and forces that menace the national project. Whatever endangers goals essential to the project represents a principal security threat. Moreover, in Georgia’s case, a special vulnerability stems from the tension between the country’s normative model and its pre-existing realities.

BECOMING ONE NATION: ETHNICITY, AUTONOMY, AND CONFLICTS

Becoming one nation has proven to be the greatest challenge Georgians have faced since gaining independence. This kind of challenge is typical among countries that embark on nation-building after multinational empires have crumbled. Nations are not built on a *tabula rasa*; they start from a specific population mixture and an institutional design left over from the *ancien régime*. Nations-to-be, however, differ in the multiplicity and complexity of challenges they face, and in their capacities to deal with them. In the Georgian case, the challenges have been greater than in other postcommunist states, and, alas, the response of the Georgian public and political elite has been much less effective, particularly in the early stages of the country’s independence.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgian society faced an intricate web of fissures based on ethnicity, religion, and sub-ethnic regional loyal-

⁵ According to the 1989 Soviet census, ethnic minorities made up approximately 30 percent of the Georgian population. According to the 2002 census (which did not include Abkhazia and parts of South Ossetia), minorities represent 16.3 percent of the Georgian population.

ties, fissures which were often reinforced by territoriality and administrative structures. The ethnic issue has proven to be the most important one. There are a number of ethnic minority populations in Georgia that differ in their size, settlement patterns, and attitudes toward the project of the Georgian state. Most importantly, at the time of Georgian independence, there were two ethnic-based autonomous territories (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and one religious-based autonomous territory (Ajara) that had enjoyed certain administrative privileges in the Soviet era.

Whether or not Georgia's complex ethnic mix represents a challenge largely depends on the central idea of the national project and specifically how one defines a Georgian. Georgians, as is often true in Eastern Europe, have defined belonging to a nation in an ethnically exclusivist way.⁶ For the vast majority of Georgians, a "Georgian" was a person who shared both a (mythological) common origin (that is, who was a Georgian "by blood") and a Georgian culture (especially Georgian language). For many (but not all) Georgians, this also included the Eastern Orthodox religion. Therefore, Georgian political nationalism was also ethnic: it implied that Georgians as a nation deserved an independent and indivisible state of their own, but only ethnic Georgians were considered full members of the nation.

This naturally left open the question about the status of ethnic minorities within Georgia. Most Georgians consider their nation to be

⁶ There is a rather vast literature on the differences between civic or political (inclusive) versions and ethnic (exclusive) versions of nationalism, but most authors agree that most nationalisms to the east of France tend to be exclusive. Notably, however, Lord Acton drew this line between Great Britain and France, arguing that (to use contemporary terms) the French concept of nation was ethnic while the British concept was a more civic one. This illustrates that while the distinction between the two ideal types is more or less obvious, its application to specific cases may be rather problematic. See John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, *Essays on Freedom and Power* (Boston, MA: The Beacon Press, 1948); Eugene Kamenka, "Political Nationalism—The Evolution of the Idea," in Eugene Kamenka and John Plomenatz, eds., *Nationalism: The Nature and Evolution of the Idea* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), pp. 2–20; and Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). Jack Snyder makes a good point linking predominance of ethnic over civic nationalism to late development. See Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), p. 77.

especially tolerant, and with good reason. While some radicals have urged minority representatives to buy one-way tickets to their “historical homelands,” most Georgians have not questioned minorities’ right to live in the country. Unlike in Latvia or Estonia, granting citizenship to ethnic minorities was never seriously contested, and in due time all those people who resided in Georgia at the time of the Soviet Union’s disintegration had no problem becoming citizens.⁷ Most people in Georgia do not object to granting what in the West are called “minority rights.” For example, teaching minority languages in Georgian educational institutions is not questioned. But in this era of democracy, in contrast to the medieval period, it is not enough just to *tolerate* “the other”; a state must find a way to *integrate* “the other”—to make him a willing participant in the national project. As long as minorities are not integrated in this sense, their very existence may be seen as a challenge to the state.

This set of circumstances explains the rather confused and inconsistent attitudes on ethnic issues prevailing in Georgian politics even today. While an ethnically pure nation may theoretically be ideal for ethnic nationalists, even the most radical Georgian nationalists understood from the beginning that this was not a realistic policy option. The predominant assumption has been that ethnic minorities have the right to stay in Georgia and to maintain their cultural otherness, but only under the condition that they are loyal and support the national project. By this logic, any manifestation of disloyalty on the part of minorities constituted sufficient moral grounds for coercive action, including expulsion. Because most minorities were thought to be at least potentially disloyal, they were under constant pressure to affirm their trustworthiness.

This mindset is quite typical for ethnic nationalisms in the postcommunist world, and the Balkans and the Caucasus represent the areas where, in the early stages of the transition, it had been most predominant. In the Georgian case, this mindset is associated with the rule of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first leader of independent Georgia (1990–1992).⁸ In his political vocabulary, ethnic minorities were often referred to as “guests.”

⁷ This was not true for ethnic Georgians who happened to live in other parts of the Soviet Union at the time of independence and attempted to return to Georgia.

⁸ Gamsakhurdia became chairman of the Georgian Supreme Soviet in November 1990, and therefore the national leader. He was not elected president until May 1991. This, however, did not significantly alter his real power.

They could stay if they behaved, but if they started to question the fundamentals of the Georgian national project or express nationalist aspirations of their own, they could legitimately be pressed to move to their respective “historical homelands,” where they could pursue their own nationalist agendas. If particular ethnic minority elites espouse their own exclusivist nationalist ideologies and can mobilize support for them, these attitudes constitute a recipe for violent conflict with the central government. Georgia has had two such conflicts (in Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and in both cases Georgian forces were defeated.

Military defeat and a general breakdown in Georgia during the mid-1990s discredited the aggressive ethnic nationalism espoused by politicians such as Gamsakhurdia. The ideologists of Eduard Shevardnadze’s regime condemned Gamsakhurdia as a “parochial fascist.” Ethnic minorities were no longer assigned the status of “guests”—a label that carried the tacit threat of expulsion. This brought an end to open ethnic tensions, but did not mean that a more inclusive civic concept of Georgian nationalism had triumphed over ethnic nationalism. Rather, this sensitive problem was tabled for discussion at a later date. During the beginning of Shevardnadze’s reign, no one attacked ethnic minorities in Georgia or questioned their loyalty, but neither was any effort made to integrate them into public life and create conditions that would facilitate their genuine political participation. Abkhazia and South Ossetia were turned into “frozen conflicts”—there was no war, but neither was there a settlement promising a lasting peace.

Moreover, public discussions in Georgia on some pieces of legislation—for instance, on the ethnic nationality registration requirement in Georgian citizens’ identity documents—displayed quite vividly that an ethnic understanding of nationhood still predominated. There was a public outcry when “reformers” in the government initiated legislation eliminating Soviet-style ethnic nationality fields in official identity documents in 2000, and the pro-Western elite that promoted a non-ethnic definition of nationhood found itself on the defensive.⁹ This small elite, however,

⁹ See Oliver Reissner, “‘Test ground for Cosmopolitanism’ or ‘Ethnic Zoo’? The Debate about the Item ‘Ethnicity’ in the IDs for Georgia’s Citizens” (paper presented at the conference “Potentials of (Dis-)Order: Former Yugoslavia and Caucasus in Comparison,” Berlin, June 11–13, 1999). See also David Losaberidze, “Citizenship Regimes in the South Caucasus,” in Carine Bachmann, Christian Staerklé, and William Doise, eds., *Reinventing Citizenship in the*

proved powerful enough to delay the adoption of legislation containing an expressly ethnic concept of a nation. However, as Shevardnadze's popularity plummeted at the end of his rule, his government tried to encourage ethno-nationalist sentiments for its own advantage. For instance, in the 2003 national election campaign, official representatives of the government party frequently alluded to the hidden Armenian roots of the main opposition leaders, implying that an ethnic Armenian heritage by itself disqualifies a person from a political leadership role in Georgia.¹⁰

The problem of national unity based on ethno-cultural factors continues to be one of the chief challenges facing Georgia. An ethnically exclusivist concept of nation remains at the heart of this problem. Moreover, exclusivist attitudes are no less, if not more, characteristic of minorities than of the Georgian majority, so a civic understanding of nationhood among the dominant Georgian population would not in itself guarantee the successful political integration of society. That said, considering that this mindset is typical for most postcommunist nations, it is also important to describe those factors of an ethno-nationalist nature—such as myth of origin, language, religion, or formal status of different groups within the political space—that do distinguish Georgia and help to explain why the problem of unity has been so difficult.

The first relevant factor is the link between ethnic diversity and institutional legacy, and specifically, the presence of autonomous formations in Georgia. The Soviet Union was built as a three-tier ethnic federation (or quasi-federation) that many compared to the Russian *matrioshka* doll. The highest level, that of the union, was notionally supranational, although it was perceived as “Russian” by both the outside world and the non-Russian population. The second level was represented by union republics—that is, quasi-nation-states within this supranational structure. On the third level, there existed ethnically based autonomous entities—

South Caucasus: Exploring Dynamics and Contradictions between Formal Definitions and Popular Conceptions (Zürich: Scientific Cooperation between Eastern Europe and Switzerland (SCOPEs), Swiss National Science Foundation, 2003), p. 50, <http://www.cimera.org/en/research/citizenship.htm>.

¹⁰ For instance, Irina Sarishvili, spokesperson for Shevardnadze's United Georgia bloc, spoke of the Armenian descent of Zurab Zhvania and Mikheil Saakashvili, and even alleged that Richard Miles, the U.S. ambassador to Georgia, was representing the interests of the Armenian lobby in the United States. See “Georgian Government-backed Bloc Spokeswoman Takes Swipe at U.S. Envoy,” *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union*, August 12, 2003.

that is, quasi-nation-states of second rank embedded in the union republics. Autonomous republics ranked ahead of autonomous *oblasts*, which ranked ahead of national *okrugs*,¹¹ thus implying that some ethnically based autonomous entities had greater formal powers and a more elaborate web of state agencies than others.

The terms “quasi-federalism” and “quasi-nation-state” better describe this arrangement, however, because the division between the façade (or the formal institutional structure) and the real mechanisms of power constituted an essential and often underestimated part of the Soviet political system.¹² The façade was represented by the constitution—a quasi-federal, quasi-democratic document that put supreme power in elected parliaments (supreme soviets) and even allowed Soviet republics to secede—something that genuine federations rarely accept. The real mechanism of power, meanwhile, was the Communist Party and its coercive apparatus, which included the KGB, the army, and the police. It was strictly centralized and based on repression rather than democratic practice. The constitution could afford to look relatively democratic because the Communist Party was expected to dominate the actual mechanisms of power indefinitely.

Even in the Soviet case, the façade could not be fully isolated from the “real thing.” With the benefit of hindsight, it is evident that the Soviet constitutional structure had an especially important influence on the way nationalist movements and agendas were formed in the wake of the Soviet Union’s breakup. Soviet federalism might have been a hoax in terms of the real workings of power, but it contributed to the creation of national bureaucratic and intellectual elites, as well as national educational, academic, and cultural systems—all of which were crucial to post-Soviet nation-building. As a result, the Soviet quasi-federalist façade had a greater bearing on nationalism than its creators had intended.¹³

¹¹ “Oblast” is the Russian word for region and “okrug” means district.

¹² Noting this discrepancy is also important for understanding the workings of postcommunist political systems, as well as public attitudes toward them. One of the legacies of communism may be a widely shared assumption that it is normal to have a gap between the political façade that is intended for outside consumption and real mechanisms of political and economic power. No wonder many Western political scientists talk about “façade democracies” or “Potemkin democracies” in post-Soviet countries. See, for instance, Charles King, “Potemkin Democracy: Four Myths about Post-Soviet Georgia,” *The National Interest*, no. 64 (summer 2001), pp. 93–104.

¹³ See Rogers Brubaker, “Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet

Therefore, once the repressive Soviet system started to crack and newly emerging political movements could call on the Soviet Constitution to bolster their case, it turned out that the quasi-nation-states looked, felt, and eventually tried to behave like real ones. Unfortunately for Georgia, however, this was also true of the quasi-nation-states of the second order. As the Soviet Union collapsed, the autonomous units below the level of union republics represented excellent institutional platforms for launching secessionist movements. Georgia had three such units at the time of independence. In two of them, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, fully fledged secessionist movements developed.

Preexisting institutional forms like these ethnically based autonomous units were important, because they made it easier to put forward ethno-nationalist programs on behalf of existing territorial entities rather than according to more amorphous ethnic groupings. Moreover, within the Soviet system, autonomy had nothing to do with freedom (contrary to what the term suggests), but with privilege. It created a sense of special status among both local bureaucratic and intellectual elites, as well as among the general public. At the same time, it bred a sense of being *underprivileged* when compared to groups who were represented by union republics. Once the overarching structure of the Soviet Union gave way, conflicts were hard to avoid, because autonomous republics sought to enhance their status. From the perspective of the union republics, this assertion of status by autonomous units meant secession.

ALTERNATIVE NATIONAL PROJECTS: THE CASE OF ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA

Soviet ethnic federalism created the preconditions, but not sufficient grounds, for open conflicts. These were provided by alternative ethno-nationalist programs, such as those put forward by the Abkhazians and

Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia: An Institutionalist Account," *Theory and Society*, vol. 23, no. 1 (1994), pp. 47–78; Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationalism and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, Or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review*, vol. 53, no. 2 (summer 1994), pp. 414–452. These authors show quite well how Soviet institutions effectively encouraged nationalism, but fail to explain why Communist framers created a system that obviously contradicted their interests and ideology.

Ossetians (but not the Ajarans). The Abkhazians and Ossetians constitute ethnic groups that are linguistically unrelated to Georgians, while Ajarans speak Georgian and consider themselves to be (ethnically) Georgian. It is also important to note in this context that the Abkhazians and Ossetians are ethnically kin to North Caucasian peoples that already enjoyed autonomy. For example, a majority of Ossetians live in the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic in Russia.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the Abkhazians are linguistically close to other North Caucasian peoples, such as the Adyghean, Circassian, and Kabardin. The national projects of Ossetians and Abkhazians can be summarized as follows: “We are not Georgians. We are the only autochthonous population on the territory that we occupy. Other groups, including Georgians, who live on this territory are guests (migrants) or, worse, ‘occupiers.’ The territory where we live is not Georgian and should be separate from Georgia. Uniting with our brethren in the North Caucasus is highly desirable.”¹⁵

All of these assumptions, save for the first, ran exactly contrary to what Georgians thought. Georgians viewed the territories at issue an inseparable part of the historical Georgian homeland and considered themselves to be the autochthonous population of these lands.¹⁶ Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia had already been the scenes of violent conflict during the first Georgian attempt to create an independent state from 1918 to 1921. This is not to say that the clash of Georgian, Abkhazian, and Ossetian national projects inevitably had to lead to violent conflicts. In the case of Abkhazia, the violent stage of the conflict could have been avoided.¹⁷ But wars happened in both cases—both of which

¹⁴ South Ossetia, on the other hand, had the lower rank of autonomous *oblast*, or autonomous region. This distinction, to Georgians at least, underscored that North Ossetia was the primary or “real” homeland of the Ossetians.

¹⁵ In the Ossetian case, this meant simply unification with North Ossetia, while the Abkhazians thought of creating a confederation of North Caucasian peoples.

¹⁶ It was the Ossetians whom Georgians considered “guests” on this territory—which is why the term “South Ossetia” itself was unacceptable to Georgians. With regard to the Abkhazians, the situation was more complex. Most Georgians would concede that the Abkhazians were also an autochthonous population of Abkhazia, although during the Georgian independence movement, another theory gained currency: that the Abkhazians were actually relatively recent migrants from the North Caucasus.

¹⁷ Ghia Nodia, “The Conflict in Abkhazia: National Projects and Political Circumstances,” in Bruno Coppieters, Ghia Nodia, and Yuri Anchabadze, eds.,

ended in military defeats for the Georgian side, creating two zones of “frozen conflict.”

Currently, these conflicts represent the greatest strategic challenge to Georgia’s security. Since these regions achieved quasi-independence in the early 1990s, people living in secessionist territories have evolved into societies that are separate from Georgia. With each passing year, the prospect of reintegration becomes more and more problematic. At the same time, Georgians still have strong feelings about these territories and just writing them off as lost for good is not considered an option. Displaced populations constitute an economic burden and a potentially destabilizing factor in the internal politics of Georgia. Until a solution for these conflicts is found, the resumption of hostilities could occur at any time, however successful the international community may be in momentarily discouraging politicians on all sides from resorting to the language of war in their speeches.

Apart from the internal problems they raise, these frozen conflicts also do major damage to Georgia’s international image. Their persistence serves as the first (albeit not the only, or even the main) argument against Georgia’s ambition of joining NATO and the European Union (EU). In addition, unresolved conflicts complicate Georgia’s relations with Russia. They also have the practical effect of blocking transport routes between Georgia and Russia, the country that is destined to be Georgia’s major economic partner. Parts of Georgia adjacent to Abkhazia have no way to get their products to the international market. Last but not least, these disputed areas are a breeding ground for crime and smuggling, which in turn make it harder for Georgia to clean up and strengthen its own state institutions. Georgian partisan groups operating on the border between Abkhazia and Megrelia were essentially private armies that served as a cover for smuggling and extortion. They created problems not only on the Abkhazian, but also on the Georgian side of the border. No wonder moving against these groups was one of the first steps President Mikheil Saakashvili took in western Georgia. Similarly, South Ossetia has turned into a haven for smuggling. In both cases, at least until Saakashvili’s government launched its anti-crime campaign, corrupt Georgian law enforcement services were believed to be largely implicated in these illicit activities.

Georgians and Abkhazians: The Search for a Peace Settlement (Köln: Sonderveröffentlichung des Bundesinstituts für Ostwissenschaftliche und Internationale Studien, 1998), pp. 14–48, <http://poli.vub.ac.be>.

The Saakashvili government indicated that it considered such conditions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be intolerable and would take active measures to resolve the conflicts. As soon as the crisis in Ajara was surmounted in May 2004 (see the next section of this chapter), the government focused on the South Ossetian issue (since it looked easier to address than the Abkhazian conflict). The Georgian strategy in South Ossetia included several components: (1) showing good faith toward Ossetians residing in the region by starting to pay their retirement pensions, broadcasting in the Ossetian language, undertaking charity actions, and criticizing some past actions of the Georgian government like the abolition of South Ossetian autonomy in December 1990;¹⁸ (2) undermining the economic basis of the separatist regime through a crackdown on smuggling; (3) military intimidation by moving some federal troops into South Ossetia, while formally claiming to keep within the quota of Georgian peacekeepers allowed in the region; and (4) intense diplomatic and public relations work with the Russians and other international players.¹⁹ However, these measures led to increasing tensions within the region, including shootouts that resulted in casualties and a new tide of mutual accusations between Tbilisi and Moscow. Although the Georgian government proved prudent enough not to allow the situation in South Ossetia to deteriorate into a new all-out war, this episode became the first major failure of the new Georgian government.

AUTONOMOUS BUT NOT FREE:
THE CASE OF AJARA

The case of Ajara is rather peculiar. Among outside observers, it is often compared to Abkhazia and South Ossetia—a comparison that angers many Georgians. On the surface, the comparison may look plausible: Ajara was once an autonomous republic within Georgia, and, until May 2004, the Georgian central government exercised little control over it.

¹⁸ “Georgian Leader Says It Was ‘Mistake’ to Abolish Breakaway Region’s Autonomy,” *ITAR-TASS*, June 12, 2004.

¹⁹ The Georgian strategy for solving the South Ossetia issue was articulated in an interview with Giga Bokeria, an influential Georgian MP. See “Tbilisi Wants to Regain South Ossetia through Pro-Georgian Campaigning,” *Civil Georgia*, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/detail.php?id=7489>. See also “Georgia to Adopt ‘New Strategy’ on South Ossetia—Minister,” *Kavkasia-Press*, June 30, 2004.

However, Ajarans, unlike Abkhazians and Ossetians, consider themselves to be ethnic Georgians. Nor was there ever a separate Ajaran national project, which makes Ajara very different from South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Thus, even when Ajaran authorities defied Tbilisi, they never did so as ideological separatists. On the contrary, Ajara's former leader, Aslan Abashidze, loved to portray himself as a champion of Georgian unity.

Ajaran autonomy was first established in the 1921 Georgian Constitution and then confirmed in the October 1921 Treaty of Kars between Turkey and a Bolshevik-controlled Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The arrangement was meant to protect the right of Georgian Muslims to practice their religion. During the period of Georgian independence (1918–21), Ajara was often referred to as “Muslim Georgia.” Of course, allowing this kind of religious-based autonomy in a communist state that was committed to atheism was a contradiction in terms.

After Georgia achieved independence in 1991, the religious factor never seriously affected relations between Tbilisi and Ajara. Even when tension reached its climax after the November 2003 revolution, Abashidze never tried to invoke the religious factor. If anything positive can be said about Abashidze's rule, it was that Ajara had a higher level of religious tolerance than many other Georgian regions. It is also important to note that, according to the 2002 Georgian census, Muslims constitute a minority within Ajara.²⁰

Thus, in Ajara the conflict was institutional and political, not ethnic. As in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the root of the problem did start from the institutional setup inherent in the Soviet system of autonomous units. In the Ajaran case, Abashidze used the ambiguity of the autonomous units system to fashion a small personal fiefdom. His disobedience included, among other things, preventing Tbilisi from controlling customs points and the port of Batumi (two especially lucrative sources of income for Abashidze's regime), not paying tax revenues to the central government, and gradually building up a private army. The state under Shevardnadze was weak and intimidated by the disastrous results from the use of force in the South Ossetian and Abkhazian cases, circumstances that Abashidze skillfully exploited to mount his “separatist bluff”—that is, if Tbilisi tried to meddle in Ajaran affairs, he would opt for real separatism.

²⁰ The 2002 Georgian census reported that 30.6 percent of Ajara's population was Muslim and 54.0 percent was Eastern Orthodox.

With Ajara's defiance of the central government, the coexistence of two distinct political regimes within the same country further impeded Georgian state-building and added another source of conflict. While Georgia could not claim to have stable democratic institutions, it did have a fairly high level of political pluralism and civic freedom. Ajara, on the other hand, represented a one-man autocracy without any space for political pluralism. While the local and parliamentary elections in Georgia were always competitive (although not necessarily fair), in Ajara electoral contests were a pure fiction: the number of eligible voters was inflated and the turnout was always close to 99 percent, with 95 to 98 percent voting in favor of Abashidze's party.

This situation created a problem, and not just from a civil rights perspective. In the Georgian system of proportional parliamentary representation, when a local leader can distort the number of eligible voters, voter turnout, and results, he becomes a disproportionately powerful figure on the national level. In the 1999 parliamentary elections, Abashidze led the major opposition coalition (including some Tbilisi-based parties) and was even believed to have a reasonable chance of winning. Shevardnadze's Citizens' Union, therefore, was driven to run a (successful) scare campaign warning that Abashidze, if elected, would extend Ajaran-style autocracy to the whole of Georgia. In the November 2003 elections, the Ajaran factor (in addition to general fraud) was one of the major reasons for the crisis, without which the Rose Revolution might never have occurred. Abashidze's Revival Party was declared to have received 20 percent of the vote,²¹ seemingly forcing Shevardnadze's Citizens' Union to form a coalition with it in order to control parliament. This prospect stirred fears that Abashidze's growing influence in Tbilisi would lead the "Ajarization" of the entire country, which was a major factor in galvanizing the protest movement leading to Shevardnadze's resignation.

As in all of Georgia's crisis regions, the Russian factor played an important role. Russia retained its military base in Ajara and considered Abashidze to be its key ally within Georgia. In the eyes of Russian geostrategists fearful (or even paranoid) about trends in the South Caucasus, Ajara served as an important instrument discouraging Georgia from forging a closer relationship with Turkey. Moreover, Abashidze

²¹ This was achieved predominantly through votes in Ajara, although, according to the 2002 census, Ajara's share of Georgia's total population is only 8.6 percent.

certainly considered the Russian base to be a guarantee of his political security.

President Saakashvili made it clear from the beginning of his term that he would not put up with Abashidze's defiance. He took a dual-pronged approach to Ajara. On the one hand, he helped strengthen local resistance to Abashidze's rule (the local opposition was genuine, but previously too intimidated to act). At the same time, he used the power of the central government to apply outside economic and political pressure on Ajara. This strategy was intended to force the Ajaran leader to accept greater control from the center. Saakashvili's government did fear that Abashidze would be more prepared than Shevardnadze had been to use force to defend his position, but it proceeded decisively nonetheless. On May 2, 2004, Abashidze ordered the bridges between Ajara and the rest of Georgia to be blown up. He presumably hoped this action would provoke a military showdown with Tbilisi, in which case he counted on Russia's intervention to protect Ajara. If this was Abashidze's calculation, however, it proved wrong. In the end, it was the Ajaran people, and not Georgian troops, who took to the streets of Batumi and forced him to flee. Ironically, it was the Russian envoy, Igor Ivanov, who ultimately convinced Abashidze to leave Ajara.

After this crisis ended, the Georgian government promised that Ajara's autonomous status would be preserved, despite calls from some opposition parties to abolish it.²² In effect, however, amendments to the Georgian Constitution and the new Law on the Status of the Autonomous Republic of Ajara enacted on July 1, 2004, significantly abridged the powers of the autonomous republic and reinstated central control in all the strategic areas of governance.²³ Elections for the Supreme Council of Ajara in June 2004 led to a strong victory for the pro-presidential party (which received 72.1 percent of the vote). The new supreme council elected a Saakashvili loyalist, Levan Varshalomidze, to the post of Ajaran prime minister and amended Ajara's constitution to put it into compliance with Georgia's legislation.

²² Notably, they proposed to abolish this status through plebiscite of the residents of Ajara rather than unilateral action from Tbilisi. See "Party of New Rights Started Gathering of Signatures among Achara Residents for Plebiscite on Status of Achara," *Black Sea Press*, June 14, 2004.

²³ "Georgian Parliament Defines Autonomous Status of Ajara," *Prime-News*, July 1, 2004.

While the new definition of Ajaran autonomy may be criticized as too centralist, what matters most is that so far there have been no signs of it being resented by Ajara's population. They may not like their government being appointed from Tbilisi—but this is increasingly true in other Georgian regions as well. It seems that the problem of Ajara's challenge to Georgia's statehood is now solved. This does not mean that there are no questions about how the new autonomous regime will work. In a more democratic Ajara, some Georgians fear that the religious factor may lead to tensions in the future. There are Georgians who resent the very existence of Georgian Muslims and think that belonging to the Orthodox Church is part and parcel of "Georgianness." Ajaran Muslims are aware of this sentiment, and it could generate new frictions.

POTENTIAL IRREDENTISM? ARMENIANS IN JAVAKHETI AND AZERBAIJANIS IN KVEMO KARTLI

The Abkhazians and the Ossetians had never been the largest ethnic minorities in Georgia. When the Soviet Union broke up, Armenians, Russians, and Azerbaijanis (8.1 percent, 6.3 percent, and 5.7 percent of the population, respectively) were the largest ethnic minorities in Georgia. The 2002 Georgian census revealed a shift in this breakdown. Following the large-scale emigration of Russians, as well as the de facto secession of Abkhazia (where many Russians and Armenians lived), Azerbaijanis became the largest ethnic minority (6.5 percent of the Georgian population), followed by Armenians (5.7 percent). Large groups of Azerbaijanis and Armenians are concentrated in border areas with Azerbaijan (Kvemo Kartli) and Armenia (Samtskhe-Javakheti), respectively. Only a minority of Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Georgia speak Georgian. For the most part, members of these two communities have a weak sense of Georgian identity and a strong emotional attachment to their ethnic homelands.

This means that these two areas could theoretically become areas of irredentist conflict similar to Nagorno-Karabakh. This concern exists in some Georgian quarters, although it has diminished over time since there have been no signs of such conflicts thus far. Why did these "dogs fail to bark?" There are several reasons. First, unlike the ethnic groups in autonomous entities, the Armenians and Azerbaijanis had no administrative platform from which to launch alternative ethno-nationalist projects.

Second, the earlier experiences in Abkhazia and South Ossetia made Georgians more cautious when dealing with minority issues in general. And, third, because of their heavy involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Armenia and Azerbaijan needed to have good relations with Georgia and could not afford to support separatist movements there.

Still, while general conditions in the minority regions of Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli are similar, there are greater concerns about the Armenian-populated Javakheti region than the Azerbaijani community in Kvemo Kartli. Javakheti is a small region that includes the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts, where over 95 percent of the population is ethnic Armenian.²⁴ No other part of Georgia is as dominated by a minority population. The Georgian language is hardly used there and—in defiance of the Georgian legislation—the Russian ruble rather than Georgian lari served as the main currency in both regions until June 2004. Against the backdrop of Georgian nationalism and the turmoil following President Gamsakhurdia's ouster in 1992, a local Armenian militia was created under the umbrella of Javahk, an Armenian nationalist organization. In the early 1990s, the Georgian authorities had considerable difficulty controlling the region, but by the mid-1990s, they had managed to re-establish their control through deals with local clans or patronage networks that dominated the most lucrative parts of local business. Javahk split into several organizations (including Virk, an unrecognized party) and lost most of its influence. Their agenda is territorial autonomy for Javakheti Armenians—something that, following Georgia's experience with its three autonomous units, is unacceptable to Georgians. Although voiced from time to time, the idea of autonomy for Javakheti has not become a basis for political mobilization.

In Azerbaijani-populated regions of Georgia, there has been no activism of this nature, and no slogan of territorial autonomy has appeared. The difference between regions may be explained by the character of the local communities and the remoteness of Javakheti as compared to Kvemo Kartli. However, external geopolitical factors have also played a role. The political behavior of local Armenians and Azerbaijanis

²⁴ Javakheti is part of Samtskhe-Javakheti, an administrative region in southern Georgia that includes six administrative districts; its population is 54.6 percent Armenian and 43.4 percent Georgian. The name Javakheti usually applies to two districts, Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda, which are fully dominated by ethnic Armenians. However, Javakheti is not a formal administrative unit.

is largely influenced by the actions of the governments in their ethnic homelands. The governments of Georgia and Azerbaijan have common interests. They both have uneasy relations with Russia and seek closer relations with Turkey and the United States. Armenia, on the other hand, has a very close partnership with Russia and considers Turkey to be its “historical enemy.” These divergent policies create a certain level of mistrust between Georgia and Armenia, which has the potential to influence Georgia’s Armenian community.

The presence of the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki is the most important factor in this context. For Javakheti Armenians, the military base is a source of livelihood (many locals were employed there until spring 2004, and the base contributes to the local economy in other ways as well), but most importantly they also see it as a security shield against Turkey, as well as against a possible resurgence of Georgian nationalism. In contrast, most Georgians and their government consider the Russian base to be a threat to Georgia’s security and want the Russian military to withdraw from it. Thus, the base constitutes a latent source of tension between Georgia’s Armenian community and the Georgian state.

IMPORTED CONFLICT: THE CASE OF PANKISI

Pankisi Gorge is a tiny area in the northern mountains of Georgia where a small community of approximately 7,000 Kists reside. Kists are Muslims and are related to the Chechens. However, they are also relatively well-integrated into Georgian society, speak fluent Georgian, and have Georgian-sounding names.

Until the two wars in Chechnya, many Georgians did not even know where Pankisi was. The place became especially famous in 1999, when thousands of Chechen refugees fleeing the war arrived in Pankisi.²⁵ In addition to refugees, Chechen fighters easily infiltrated the region’s porous mountainous borders, and this led to a serious problem between Georgia and Russia. Moscow accused Georgia of harboring terrorists.²⁶ These events also created grave internal problems for Georgia. Pankisi soon degenerated into an area outside effective state control and into a haven for illegal trade in arms and drugs, and, what was especially scan-

²⁵ There had been no similar inflow of refugees following the first Chechen war that started in 1994.

²⁶ See the contribution of Jaba Devdariani in this volume.

dalous, kidnapping for ransom. Pankisi became another symbol of state failure and disintegration.²⁷ As a matter of fact, Georgian law enforcement officials gave up on policing the area. In private, Georgian politicians said that trying to establish order in Pankisi would draw Georgia into the Chechen war, so the best possible course of action was to isolate it from the rest of Georgia.

However, if only because of the kidnappings, isolation of Pankisi proved to be impossible. Residents in the neighboring region of Akhmeta created a militia and threatened to establish order on their own, and this militia became a problem in its own right. In October 2001, a group of Chechen fighters that had entered Pankisi by mysterious means (some said with the help of Georgian law enforcement) found itself near Abkhazia and tried unsuccessfully to fight its way into the renegade province. While the Georgian central government's lack of capacity partially explains the authorities' inability to control the situation in Pankisi, it also appears true that corrupt law enforcement agents allowed an environment that permitted them to profit from the criminal business thriving in the area.

After September 11, 2001, the global war on terrorism changed both Georgian and international attitudes toward areas like Pankisi. Uncontrolled enclaves within failing states—especially if they happened to be populated by Muslims—were seen as possible sources of terrorism. After the top U.S. diplomat in Georgia, Philip Remler, said al-Qaeda was active in Pankisi in mid-February 2002, Georgia came under pressure from both Russia and the United States to do something about it, and this pressure produced results.²⁸ Georgian law enforcement agencies undertook several operations in Pankisi and gradually succeeded in improving the situation, but only after corrupt officials in the ministries of internal affairs and security were dismissed. The Pankisi problem led the United States to launch its Georgia Train and Equip Program in 2002, which sent 200 U.S. Special Forces soldiers to Georgia in order to help train the Georgian military.

²⁷ This provoked headlines in the Western media like Patrick Cockburn, "Collapse of Georgia Is Ignored by the World," *The Independent*, January 14, 2002.

²⁸ Ariel Cohen, "Moscow, Washington, and Tbilisi Wrestle with Instability in the Pankisi," *Eurasia Insight*, February 19, 2002, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav021902.shtml>.

THE PROBLEM OF POLITICAL INTEGRATION

In Pankisi, as well as other conflict zones in Georgia, the basic concern is that Georgia faces threats of fragmentation. In each of these problem areas, ethnic or religious factors are involved, but ethnic diversity on its own does not explain the outcome. Rather, the institutional structures of the Soviet period and the uncertainties created by the transition from the multilayered quasi-federation of the Soviet Union to independent nation-states have proven to be the strongest predictor of conflict in the early stages of state-building. The threat of fragmentation also strongly correlates with Russian military involvement, either directly (as in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Ajara, and Javakheti), or as a collateral effect of Russia's military activity (in Pankisi). Where the institutional underpinning for fragmentation and negative outside influence is absent (as in Kvemo Kartli), the challenge is much less acute.

This, of course, does not lead to the simplistic conclusion that all of Georgia's internal problems are masterminded by Russia or some other external actor. Several fissures that are less obvious also contribute to Georgia's insecurity and its perception of vulnerability. Ethnic issues are the most important among them. Even if we do not count effectively separated Abkhazia and South Ossetia, ethnic minority groups constitute 16.3 percent of the Georgian population, with Azerbaijanis and Armenians being the two largest of these groups.²⁹ While there are no genuine grounds for fear of potential irredentism among these two groups, the main problem is their marginalization within Georgian society. Most of them do not speak Georgian, which is the country's only official language.³⁰ In addition, most of them only take part in the affairs of their local area and not national public life. While some minority representatives serve in the Georgian Parliament, their presence tends to be purely ceremonial, and there are almost no minority representatives in national political parties.

Lack of knowledge of the official language is only one reason for Armenians' and Azerbaijanis' passivity and marginalization. The real problem appears to be uncertainty over their status within Georgian

²⁹ These figures are from the 2002 census, which does not include Abkhazia or South Ossetia.

³⁰ The Abkhazian language has official status in the territory of Abkhazia, but this has purely symbolic relevance until the conflict is settled.

society. On what basis are they to be integrated? For instance, should integration be based on “ethnicity-blind” approaches, on formal or informal ethnic quotas, or on something else? After the experience of the Abkhazian and Ossetian conflicts, state officials and much of Georgian society simply want to duck the problem, hoping that it will take care of itself. It is not likely to do so.

In practice, these circumstances have ultimately led to the (greater) “Georgianization” of the state and, at the same time, a continuation of Soviet ethnic policies. Ethnic minorities have genuine mechanisms by which to preserve their cultural identities, such as education in their native languages, but these mechanisms only reinforce their isolation in ethnic ghettos. Finding a proper formula for integration is hampered both by the reluctance of the majority to conceive of minority populations as part of the nation and the tendency of minorities to see any integration as the first step on the road to assimilation. The other solution would be to institutionalize existing ethnic enclaves through a system of ethnic federalism. This is politically untenable for the moment, however, because Georgians see the creation of ethno-federal units as a stepping stone to separatism. It also probably means giving up on the prospect of integration. Yet, until some formula is found, the existence of disenfranchised ethnic minorities in Georgia will continue to loom as a potential threat.

Some of the Saakashvili government’s new policies suggest that the government recognizes the problems of ethnic minorities in Georgia and is willing to do something about them. Soon after he came to power, broadcasting was resumed in minority languages. In February 2005, in his annual address to the Georgian Parliament, he mentioned integration of ethnic minorities as one of the most important issues for the country and announced a program to train three hundred young minority representatives in Georgian universities with the aim of preparing them for future government positions.³¹ It is not enough, however, to say that minority integration issues are going to be treated as a priority or that the government has a coherent plan of action in this regard. Yet the new government cannot neglect the problem. Previous research on the situation in ethnic minority areas allows this author to conclude that the main

³¹ “Georgian President Delivers Annual Address to Parliament,” *BBC Monitoring Newslife*, February 10, 2005.

method of preserving ethnic stability by the Shevardnadze government was through co-opting minority elites into corrupt patronage networks. Preserving these methods will run counter to the general reformist agenda of the new government, but undermining them without having some proactive policy of integration and addressing grievances of ethnic minorities may be destabilizing.

A second form of fissure within Georgia is regional identities and linguistic minorities among ethnic Georgians. Regional identities have a long history in Georgia. From its “Golden Age” in the eleventh and twelfth centuries to its gradual incorporation into the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century, Georgians lived in various princedoms that had some loose sense of unity, but were often in conflict with one another. When the liberal intelligentsia in nineteenth-century Georgia started to work on fostering a sense of common national belonging, they considered these *kutkhwroba* (territorial loyalties) to be a major impediment to nation-building. Paradoxically, it was the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic that considerably strengthened Georgians’ sense of belonging to a nation. Even today, however, these regional identities raise anxieties. While these identities rarely figure in the public discourse, many Georgians fear that under certain circumstances, regional loyalties could still pose a threat to national unity.³² Traces of them show up, for example, in discussions of whether Georgia should acquire a federal model of government. In 1993 and 1994, President Shevardnadze created a new subnational unit of governance, the *mkhare*, which coincided with historical provinces such as Kakheti, Imereti, Guria, and Samegrelo. This plan, however, proved too controversial, and no agreement on a territorial arrangement for the country was achieved during the constitutional debates in 1995. This most important area of state-building remains a blank in the Georgian constitution, and the *mkhare*—which in fact has become a powerful level of governance—only exists by presidential decree.³³ Georgians still fear that turning historical provinces into admin-

³² For instance, Georgian scholars have written about the influence of regional loyalties (which they define as “tribalism”) on the composition of bureaucratic patronage networks. See Koba Kikabidze and David Losaberidze, *Institutionalism and Clientelism in Georgia*, Discussion Paper (Tbilisi: UNDP Discussion Paper Series, 2000), pp. 19–21.

³³ The official Georgian government explanation for the failure to put the territorial arrangement of the country into the constitution was that secessionist con-

istrative units will reinvigorate regional loyalties, which would further undermine Georgia's unity.

Out of all of these regional identities, two—Megrelian and Svan—stand out because these two groups speak languages that are related to Georgian but incomprehensible to other Georgians. Of the two, Megrelian is considered to be the more important group because it is much larger.³⁴ Some Western observers even wonder why Megrelians have not sought independence.³⁵ In 1918, 1921, and in the current period of post-Soviet independence, however, Megrelia has been a region where Georgian nationalism was and is especially strong. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a Georgian nationalist and the country's first president, was of Megrelian heritage. This eventually caused a problem, because after Gamsakhurdia was deposed, Megrelia became a stronghold of resistance to Shevardnadze's government. Attempts to establish control over the region turned into punitive campaigns against the local Megrelian population. Moreover, most of the Georgians in Abkhazia were Megrelians, who were then expelled as a result of the Abkhazian conflict. Thus, Megrelians believe they have suffered disproportionately from the Georgian civil wars of the 1990s and, to make matters worse, believe that their suffering goes unrecognized by the remainder of the country. Megrelians have not developed anything like a separatist agenda, but the trauma of recent conflict does distance them from other Georgians.

The Rose Revolution may have healed the wound between Megrelians and other Georgians. Saakashvili gave preference to Megrelia in his campaign against Shevardnadze's regime, and it was this region that provided him with the strongest support during the November protests. After the revolution, Saakashvili took steps to rehabilitate Gamsakhurdia's image, something welcomed by most Megrelians. People close to Saakashvili say that "mainstreaming" Megrelia had long been part of his strategy for bringing Georgia together.

flicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia had to be resolved first. In reality, however, it was finding an internal Georgian consensus on the issue that created a problem.

³⁴ There are no official statistics on carriers of different regional identities, but according to the 2002 Georgian census, the population of the regions traditionally considered Megrelian exceeded 450,000, while for the Svan regions the population was in the vicinity of 40,000.

³⁵ Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

Having strong regional identities that in some ways compete with a national identity is normal for a modern nation and does not necessarily imply a challenge to national unity. In Georgia, surviving the turmoil of the early 1990s proved that these regional loyalties by themselves (including in Megrelia) are not necessarily a challenge to Georgia's unity. If ever a restless people might have wanted to separate themselves from the central government, the government's breakdown immediately after independence would have been the time to do it. This was the period when the weakness of Georgia's political institutions presented the greatest threat to national unity.

While Shevardnadze's policy after the ethno-political wars of the early 1990s was to contain the damage and prevent further disintegration, Georgia's new president Saakashvili has put Georgian reunification at the top of his agenda. So far he appears to have been successful in overcoming the psychological trauma of Megrelia's estrangement and in surmounting the administrative and personal sources of the Ajaran problem. Solving problems of separatist entities and genuinely integrating major ethnic minorities, however, appear to be tougher challenges.

THE NEW STATE ORDER: ANARCHIC FREEDOM, NEO-PATRIMONIALISM, AND THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

A state's weakness often has two major dimensions: a deficit in its institutional capacity and its lack of legitimacy for the exercise of power. Trying to figure out which of these two aspects lies at the core of a state's weakness may simply lead to a chicken-and-egg question.³⁶ It is difficult to build efficacious state institutions when there is no agreement on what kind of state they are to serve and whose state it should be. Yet, who can take the lead in nation-building other than political elites acting through state institutions? In addition, the effective performance of a state can be a powerful source of its legitimacy. Conversely, the breakdown of a state is often a reason that secessionist conflicts turn into bloody wars (not vice versa).

³⁶ Dov Lynch speaks about these two aspects of state weakness with regard to South Caucasus countries in Dov Lynch, "A Regional Insecurity Dynamic," *The South Caucasus: A Challenge for the EU*, Chaillot Papers no. 65 (Paris: Institute for Security Studies, European Union, December 2003), pp. 12–15.

The strength of the Georgian state can be measured in two ways: (1) the stability and sustainability of its institutions, and (2) by these institutions' effectiveness—that is, their capacity to fulfill the functions normally expected of government.³⁷ By both of these measures, the Georgian state is weak, as demonstrated by its failure to enforce effective control over the whole territory of the country. It has also been evident in the central government's failure to enforce a monopoly over the legitimate use of force within the country—thereby falling short of the minimal Weberian criterion of effective statehood. This inadequacy was greatest from the time of the coup in the winter of 1991–1992 until the Georgian government cracked down on the Mkhedrioni, the most powerful of the private armies, in the fall of 1995. Even after 1995, however, the state tolerated the existence of paramilitary groups, such as those operating in Megrelia and Abkhazia, as well as a militia that was created in the context of the Pankisi crisis.

The weaknesses of the Georgian state, however, go beyond the inability to establish control over the legitimate use of violence and include its failure to master the constitutional transfer of power. Both Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze were forced to leave office rather than giving way to legitimate successors chosen through elections. Similar weakness is evident in the Georgian government's insufficient control over the armed forces. In 1991, it was the leaders of the armed forces that initiated the ouster of Gamsakhurdia, the first president of Georgia. In addition, Tengiz Kitovani, who was head of the Georgian National Guard, is often charged with primary responsibility for instigating the military conflict with Abkhazia in August 1992. Since April 1994, when a former Soviet general became the Georgian minister of defense, the army has lowered its political profile—but between 1998 and 2001, several mutinies in the army erupted, seriously challenging public order. Although neither the police nor security forces ever displayed open disloyalty to the state, they

³⁷ There are different ways to define state weakness. The Weberian criterion of exercising monopoly over the legitimate use of force may be considered as the minimal criterion. Joel S. Migdal, in his frequently quoted book, provides a more extensive list of state capacities as “capacities to *penetrate* society, *regulate* social relationships, *extract* resources, and *appropriate* or use resources in determined ways.” See Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 4.

are widely believed to be entangled in various criminal activities, such as smuggling, narcotics trafficking, and kidnapping. In addition, during the late Shevardnadze period they were largely perceived as machines for extorting businesses and citizens.

There is also the Georgian state's failure to raise public revenue and adequately fund state institutions. Georgia is usually considered to have the largest shadow economy among the post-Soviet states (estimated to be 40 to 70 percent of the country's overall economy).³⁸ As a result, public revenues are very limited. In 2003, they constituted only 11.2 percent of Georgia's GDP, compared to nearly 50 percent among European Union countries.³⁹ This has led to very meager state salaries and retirement pensions in Georgia, most of which are well below a living wage.⁴⁰ As a result, the state has had difficulty attracting honest and competent personnel (in the last years of Shevardnadze's rule, a minister's salary was not even close to that of a simple secretary in an international organization), leading many to use their office for private gain. Finally, corruption—the most obvious and widely discussed indicator of state weakness—is recognized as the principal reason for many of Georgia's other failings. According to the well-known Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, Georgia was tied for 124th place among the 133 rated nations in 2003.⁴¹

³⁸ According to official data from the Georgian State Department of Statistics, the share of Georgian shadow ("non-recorded") economy from 2000 to 2003 was between 32 and 34 percent of the country's total economy (*Georgian Economic Trends*, Quarterly Review, no. 2–3, 2003, p. 10). On the other hand, in the opinion of Nikolay Hadjiyski, a European Bank for Reconstruction and Development expert, this figure is "certainly more than 50 percent." See Daan van der Schriek, "Illicit Traders Work the Georgia–Turkey Shuttle," *Eurasia Insight*, August 6, 2003, www.eurasia.net.

³⁹ Galt and Taggart Securities, *Georgia: Weekly Stock Market Commentary*, January 26, 2004. This is based on official (relatively low) estimates of the size of the shadow economy. If it is presumed to be higher, then the share of public revenues as a percentage of GDP should be even lower.

⁴⁰ According to the data of the Georgian State Department of Statistics, the average nominal monthly salary of hired employees in Georgia in 2002 was 104.9 lari (equivalent to about \$50), while a working person's subsistent minimum was estimated to be 127.9 lari. See *Georgian Economic Trends*, Quarterly Review, no. 2–3 (2003), pp. 50–51.

⁴¹ Only Myanmar, Paraguay, Haiti, Nigeria, and Bangladesh were ranked below Georgia. See <http://www.transparency.org/cpi/2003/cpi2003.en.html>.

The relationship between a high rate of corruption and state weakness, however, is not always so obvious. There are many countries around the world where corruption is high, but the level of the state control is also high. While uncorrupted governments are, of course, generally preferable to corrupt ones, in some countries corruption serves as a lubricant enabling state mechanisms to function properly. It is the particular character of corruption that matters. Under Shevardnadze, the state depended on income from corruption, but no single center controlled it. As a Georgian expert put it, “Economic capital in Georgia is not structured into a single neo-patrimonial pyramid.”⁴² The state tacitly licensed public servants to use their offices for private gain: The leadership sold offices to be used for extortion, and then shared the funds it collected. These corrupt pyramids existed as multiple networks that did not necessarily coordinate with each other. President Shevardnadze mediated between different corrupt interests in order to maintain the general stability of the system, but did not try to enforce common rules. This setup, according to some informal sources, made the system of corruption in Georgia especially unpredictable (and hence destructive). Moreover, when efforts were made to attack corruption, they not only failed, but made the situation even messier and more unpredictable.

Why is the Georgian state so weak? Georgian intellectuals tend to speak about a “non-state mindset” or the alienation of individuals from state institutions.⁴³ Many Georgian intellectuals say that the modern state is something imposed by the Russian Empire, and therefore marked as “foreign.” The Georgian experience with communism simply deepened that sense of alienation. This transforms the state into something defined by restrictions, repression, and deception, rather than by protection. Due to these experiences, many Georgians view the state as something to be avoided. The other side of a strategy of avoiding the state is a reliance on personalistic networks, which in turn are the root of clientelism, neo-patrimonialism, and corruption.

⁴² Marina Muskhelishvili and Anna Akhvlediani, *Democratization in Georgia: Economic Transformation and Social Security*, Discussion Paper no. 8 (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), May 2003), p. 15.

⁴³ See, for instance, Mamuka Bichashvili, “Krizisi da misi tsnobierebis modipikaciebi,” in Gia Chumburidze (ed.), *Chkua vaisagan* (Tbilisi: Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, 1994), pp. 83–108.

While this may be a valid argument, it can in no way be restricted to Georgia alone. Modernity feels foreign to much of the non-Western world, since it, as with anything imposed by outsiders, also destroys traditional values and living patterns. In this case, the alienating effect of modernity also correlates with state weakness. Thus, the weakness of the state constitutes a generic problem in much of the developing world.⁴⁴ Beyond this, however, the communist system's addiction to corruption, repression, and deception has stimulated an anti-political mindset in a country like Georgia.⁴⁵

But Georgia's political institutions are arguably more volatile than those of other post-Soviet countries. Why is this? One explanation may be that Georgia simply has had to face more diverse challenges than other post-Soviet states. Even if there are grounds for making this claim, however, measuring and comparing potential challenges is a murky business. For instance, arguably, there was no less potential for ethnic conflicts in the three Baltic states, but they did not erupt, because political leaders acted more skillfully. It is more plausible to argue that Georgia's susceptibility to disorder is linked to the tension between the (self-imposed) normative model of liberal democracy and Georgians' use of pre-existing survival strategies based on their actual social experiences. The choice in favor of a Western liberal democratic model in Georgia, it seems, is largely identity-driven: Georgians feel they have to be democratic because they have to be Western. However, the country's social and historical experience with "Westernness" is minimal. Never in its history has Georgia been in close contact with the West. In medieval times, it was socialized mainly through ties with Byzantium (not an area that the modern West claims as part of its heritage), followed by ties with the Ottoman Empire and Persia. Western modernity came to Georgia only in the early nineteenth century, and then by way of the Russian Empire. The Russian version of modernity, however, was second-rate. No wonder Georgians now want direct access to the "real thing," as represented by Europe and the United States. The Georgian national project derives out of this desire for access to Western modernization.

⁴⁴ See Mark R. Beissinger and Crawford Young, eds., *Beyond State Crisis? Post-colonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002).

⁴⁵ See George Konrád, *Antipolitics* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).

The collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 and of the Soviet Union in 1991 afforded Georgia opportunities for direct access to Western modernization. The social capital that Georgians could actually invest in the Westernizing project, however, was and remains limited by Georgians' anarchic understanding of freedom as a lack of restraint, their intuitive mistrust toward state institutions, and their reliance on personalistic networks. This mindset has had the advantage of helping Georgians to defeat attempts to establish autocratic rule, both in the personalistic and populist version of Gamsakhurdia and the oligarchic version of Shevardnadze. However, it has not helped Georgians to construct sustainable and effective state institutions.

The most important feature of the Rose Revolution is not that Georgians once again rejected a nondemocratic leadership. Its greatest achievement may be the fact that it was fairly orderly, nonviolent, and involved a minimal derogation of the Georgian Constitution. It was the government, not the opposition, that had tampered with democratic institutions, and the people who enforced constitutional order by forcing the president to resign. With Shevardnadze's resignation, events again unfolded within the constitutional framework. It was the orderly and nonviolent character of the revolution that made Georgians, as well as many outside observers, believe that Georgians' European ambitions may be more justified than previously thought. In particular, it is widely believed that the Rose Revolution prompted the European Union to include countries of the South Caucasus into its neighborhood policy in 2004, contrary to its previous decision in 2003 to leave this question open. Georgian society used the period between the two extra-constitutional changes of power in 1992 and 2003 to develop some of the social capital necessary for building critical civil society institutions.

Whether Georgians' social capital is also sufficient for creating functional institutions that will make new revolutions (velvet or otherwise) unnecessary is an open question. The answer largely depends on the ability of Georgian political elites to formulate a new social contract that will be acceptable to the majority of the Georgian people. "The fight against corruption," the trademark issue of the post-revolutionary government, only makes sense against this backdrop. What Western advisors and Georgian democratic activists or politicians call corruption is for many Georgians a normal way to do business when the state is presumed to be an adversary. Shevardnadze, like many other post-Soviet leaders, was simply trying to

redefine in somewhat new terms what some American Sovietologists had called “the Brezhnev social contract.”⁴⁶ This essentially entailed the state turning a blind eye to massive corruption among its civil servants and citizens in exchange for their political loyalty. Shevardnadze’s rule was stable as long as this tacit contract survived. Rejecting the Brezhnev/Shevardnadze social contract formed the ideological basis for the Rose Revolution.

The Saakashvili government has demonstrated that strengthening the state and cracking down on corruption are its first priorities. Paramilitary groupings like the partisans in Megrelia and armed groups under Aslan Abashidze were crushed. One could say that save for separatist regions, Georgia now meets the Weberian criterion of statehood—the monopoly over the legitimate use of force. Since Saakashvili came to power, a number of high-level officials have been imprisoned on corruption charges, and improvement in tax collection has increased the level of public revenues by more than a half within a few months.⁴⁷ In order to reduce corruption in government offices, the government created a foundation that pays competitive salaries to some 11,000 public servants. It received funding from international and Georgian sponsors, including the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the American philanthropist George Soros, although it is supposed to be entirely funded by the Georgian state within three years.⁴⁸ The new authorities started to aggressively cut down personnel in government agencies so that in a few years time all employees who remain can be paid adequately from the state budget. Dramatic reductions in police forces (which were considered almost untouchable under Shevardnadze) were especially impressive. A radical program of privatization that calls for “selling everything but our conscience” is part of the same strategy.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ See George Breslauer, *Five Images of the Soviet Future: A Critical Review and Synthesis* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Institute of International Studies, 1978); and Linda Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why it Failed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁴⁷ Based on the data of the first nine months of 2004, the rate of tax collection increased by approximately 78 percent as compared to the similar period the previous year. See Galt and Taggart Securities, *Georgia: Weekly Stock Market Commentary*, October 11, 2004.

⁴⁸ Author’s interview with Kote Kublashvili, the director of the foundation, July 2004.

⁴⁹ This program was announced by Georgia’s new minister of economy, Kakha Bendukidze. See “A Different Sort of Oligarch,” *The Economist*, July 27, 2004.

However, it is too early to say how successful these measures will be in creating a new relationship between Georgian citizens and the state. They could even be destabilizing in the short run, because these measures threaten a social order under which Georgians have lived for decades. Trying to replace this order with a new set of social practices that satisfy Western criteria of transparency and accountability is something other states have tried to do and failed, destabilizing their countries in the process. In these periods of transition, governments face the extremely difficult dilemma of tolerating a certain level of corrupt practices without being sucked into them. On the other hand, there is the danger of being carried away by a revolutionary Jacobin zeal for national purification and recasting all institutions from scratch.⁵⁰ This creates a temptation to resort to authoritarian modernization in the name of establishing liberal democracy. In this case, democratic political institutions are not based on a balance between different societal interests, but rather are imposed on society by “progressive” and enlightened elites. Widespread criticism of Saakashvili’s government for skewing the power balance in favor of activist executive power at the expense of other institutions and actors, and for cutting corners of established democratic procedures, reflects this structural problem.⁵¹ The problem cannot be solved unless a workable middle way is found between accepted social practices and the ideal type of the modern liberal state.

⁵⁰ Based on an analysis of 1998 survey results, German sociologist Theodor Hanf described part of the Georgian society dedicated to democratic values as “pious Jacobins” (pious because they displayed an unusually high level of religiosity). See Theodor Hanf and Ghia Nodia, *Lurching to Democracy: From Agnostic Tolerance to Pious Jacobinism: Societal Change and People’s Reactions* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000).

⁵¹ See on this, for instance, *Honouring of Obligations and Commitments of Georgia*, Resolution 1415 (2005) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, <http://assembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?link=http://assembly.coe.int/documents/adoptedtext/ta05/eres1415.htm>, accessed May 10, 2005; Tinatin Khidasheli, “The Rose Revolution Has Wilted Georgia,” *International Herald Tribune*, December 8, 2004; Ghia Nodia, “Avtoritaruli modernizatsia lait tu demokratiuli institutebi?” *24 Saati*, January 28, 2005; Irakly Areshidze, “Bush and Georgia’s Faded ‘Rose,’” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 9, 2005.

‘CULTURAL SECURITY’: WESTERN VALUES AND NATIONAL TRADITIONS

The success of a new social contract upon which modern liberal democratic institutions can be based in Georgia depends on, among other things, whether this social contract is ideologically reconciled with the concept of the Georgian identity. This implies some linkage to traditional values, because national identities cannot be defined without acknowledging these values. The fact that democracy is unevenly spread between civilizations (the widely discussed issue of the lack of democracy in Muslim-majority countries is the most dramatic example of this phenomenon) suggests that it is not enough to explain why liberal democratic institutions are better from a rational point-of-view (or less bad than other systems, to borrow from Winston Churchill’s phrase). People must also believe that liberal democratic institutions can become “their institutions” and be compatible with their culture.

In this regard, there is a certain tension between two aspects of Georgia’s national project. On the one hand, Georgia’s insistence on being a liberal democracy is largely identity-driven, in the sense that the country wants to be a liberal democracy in order to prove that it is Western and that it can be a modern nation-state without depending on Russia. On the other hand, in the course of implementing the project of liberal democracy in Georgia, it will be very difficult to avoid a clash with accepted social practices that are deeply entrenched from years of experience with a foreign and repressive regime. This will require new norms and institutions to be crafted by educated elites. In the process, however, these elites will create an ideological opening for their political opponents, who can present existing social practices as the embodiment of national values and traditions threatened by a new “foreign” modernizing project.

This is why modernizing projects often cause a nativist backlash. In order to prevail, modernizers must demonstrate their ability to protect and strengthen national identity, rather than weakening it. In other words, the modernizing project should be ideologically embedded within the national political tradition. Modernizing elites must be able to present modernization as a continuation and enhancement of a domestic political tradition or, at a minimum, as something that poses no threat to it.

This problem can also be described from sociological and political perspectives. The gap between the normative model and available social capital also translates into a social and cultural gap between “enlight-

ened” young modernizing elites on the one hand and the “backward” populace and old elites on the other. In the Georgian case, these new elites are represented mainly by political groups (such as Mikheil Saakashvili and Zurab Zhvania’s circle that started as “young reformers” within the Shevardnadze-led Citizens’ Union of Georgia), nongovernmental organizations, the media, academics, cultural figures, and parts of the new business community. These are the people who inspired and organized the force behind the Rose Revolution, although a minority of them rejected the revolution on the basis of strict interpretation of liberal constitutionalism. They acted in opposition to elite networks in the state bureaucracy and to business people of the old type (those who had vested interests in preserving practices that the reformers characterized as corrupt).

Ideological fights between these modernizing and conservative elites largely revolved around the social and cultural gap described in the previous paragraphs. Do efforts to change the ways in which things have been done in Georgia constitute a fight against corruption and the eradication of vestiges of an old political and economic order imposed by a foreign communist regime? Or is it a fight against Georgian national identity and values, a fight in which the West has a hidden agenda of undermining Orthodox culture? Are the reformers new national leaders who want to make their country stronger, or are they stooges of foreign influence who are, either intentionally or unwittingly, diluting Georgian national identity by introducing Western (or global) values and institutions into the country?

In Georgia, these two main opposing discourses have not led to the creation of opposing political parties based on reformist and conservative agendas. Nor have ethno-nationalist parties of the extreme right emerged to represent a nativist backlash against modernization. This may in part be explained by the fact that political parties in Georgia are not based on values and ideologies, but rather serve the political interests of specific personalities and groups.⁵² A further explanation may be that the general legitimacy of the orientation toward democratic change in Georgia is rather strong. This may be measured both by sociological data that not

⁵² Ghia Nodia, *Political Parties in Georgia*, Discussion Paper no. 8 (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), May 2003), pp. 8–14.

only demonstrate widespread support for basic democratic principles, but also—and even more importantly—the absence of significant antidemocratic discourses in Georgia. This distinguishes Georgia from a number of postcommunist countries at roughly the same level of development.⁵³ Players on the extreme right have never been able to establish viable political movements nor have they successfully challenged Georgia's orientation toward European values.⁵⁴ Were Georgia's pro-Western orientation to be questioned, this would most likely come from pro-Russian or neo-communist groups rather than from ethno-nationalist groups, but so far the former have failed to create any kind of credible political force.

This does not mean that the two discourses regarding modernization do not exist in Georgia. Instead, what is happening is that major political groups are trying to combine them. The idea that propagating liberal democracy and a market economy poses a threat to Georgia's traditional values and national identity has been present in the public discourse, although expressed in different ways. Discussions surrounding various versions of the “national security concept,” a document that was supposed to define Georgia's major priorities for security policy, serves as an illustration.⁵⁵ One of the most divisive issues in these discussions was whether such a concept should discuss threats to national identity and

⁵³ For comparative sociological data, see John S. Dryzek and Leslie T. Holmes, *Post-Communist Democratization: Political Discourses across Thirteen Countries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 147–157. On the general attitudes of the Georgian public towards democratic values and institutions, see Hanf and Nodia, *Lurching to Democracy*, and Marina Muskhelishvili and Luiza Arutiunova, “Political Views of Georgia's Population,” unpublished paper.

⁵⁴ In my criticism of Guram Sharadze, the informal leader of the “extreme right” discourse and action in Georgia, I stated that his activities undermined the chances of Georgia's integration with the West. Remarkably, this was the only part of my criticism that he strongly denied. See Ghia Nodia, “Rogor Gavigot, Aris Tu Ara Guram Sharadze Rusetis Spetssamsaxurebis Agenti Da Aqvs Tu Ara Amas Mnishvneloba,” *24 Hours*, July 10, 2002. Mr. Sharadze replied on television.

⁵⁵ After all these discussions, no such text was produced, apart from a document entitled *Georgia and The World: A Vision and Strategy for the Future* that was, according to credible sources known to this author, really written by Western consultants and was never widely publicized by the Georgian government, although it was posted on the NATO website, <http://www.nato.int/pfp/ge/d001010.htm>.

traditions as well as ways of dealing with them. Those more attuned to the modern Western discourse on security believed such references would complicate the document unnecessarily, but others argued that no concept of national security can or should avoid discussing threats to national identity.

There is a similar (and broader) discussion in Georgia about the concept of “national ideology.” The proponents of such an idea insist that the lack of an ideology is one of Georgia’s major problems. By “ideology,” they mean some concept that would define values and strategies for the nation and the state. Such a concept, they argue, should be an official document sanctified by the state and thus made obligatory for all institutions and citizens. Opponents contend that there already is such a document—the Georgian Constitution—and that there is no need for another. While the supporters of a national ideology have never clearly defined what the structure or content of such a document should be, most discussions make it plain that the notion of national ideology refers to national identity and to strategies for preserving and empowering it.⁵⁶

While it may seem easy to dismiss those who call for an official document spelling out a national ideology as people who cannot escape Soviet habits of thought, something more profound is involved. The quest for a national ideology also expresses, albeit rather clumsily, the feeling that Georgia lacks a clear sense of direction. Values of liberal democracy are viewed as being too abstract to provide this direction. These values have not been firmly planted in Georgian soil by the political elites, and the impression lingers that these elites use liberal democratic values more as a convenient political façade rather than as a program for action.

The nativist backlash’s most dramatic expression has been the aggressive ideology of intolerance and violence against religious minorities. This backlash can be called “religious nationalism,” and it arguably represents Georgia’s version of the extreme right. Religious extremists in Georgia maintain that the Eastern Orthodox religion historically constitutes the core of Georgian identity. Therefore, they believe, the proselytizing activities of other churches—particularly Jehovah’s Witnesses, other Protestant churches, and Catholics—are aimed at diluting Georgian identity. According to these religious nationalists, Georgian society and the state

⁵⁶ I reviewed this discussion in Georgian in “Ideologia: Erovnuli Da Svva,” *Apra*, no. 5 (1998), pp. 157–169.

should consider other religions besides Eastern Orthodoxy to be a major security threat. These attitudes were most evident during the wave of religious violence in Georgia from 1999 to 2003. In addition to violating human rights principles, this religious-inspired violence vividly demonstrated the weakness of the state. Officials did not institute the formal restrictions on minority churches demanded by the religious nationalists, but neither did they punish religious fanatics who engaged in open violence either. Moreover, in many instances, the police were largely sympathetic to the perpetrators.

Not that Georgia risked anything like a large-scale religious conflict, since the wave of intolerance was mainly directed against very small churches and not against larger minority confessions, such as Muslims or the Armenian Apostolic Church. Yet repeated acts of unpunished violence contributed to the erosion of the state's legitimacy. In addition, the very fact that religious aggression was primarily targeted against churches associated with the West was an indirect indication that there are members of the Georgian population who viewed the West as a threat to Georgian identity. The mainstream Georgian Orthodox Church formally distanced itself from the violent acts (most of them led by a defrocked Orthodox priest). But in official documents, the church also described "liberal ideology" as the major threat to the Orthodox tradition in Georgia. This is particularly important, because the Orthodox Church is the most respected institution in Georgia. A considerable portion of the Georgian public approved of the violent acts, while another portion disapproved of violence *per se* but showed hostility toward religious minorities and considered restrictions against them justified.⁵⁷ After the

⁵⁷ According to a 2004 survey, 32.7 percent of those polled supported violent disruption of meetings of religious "sects" such as Baptists or Jehovah's Witnesses, and 46.9 percent supported destroying their literature. In addition, 43.6 percent of respondents wanted the law to prohibit activities of sects like Baptists or Jehovah's Witnesses, and 34.4 percent wanted to restrict them. With regard to "traditional" religions like Catholicism or Islam, the idea to prohibit or restrict them was supported by 20.6 and 38 percent of those polled, respectively. See George Nizharadze, Iago Kachkachishvili, Rusudan Mshvidobadze, George Khutsishvili, and Emzar Jgerenaia, "Kartuli martladidebeli eklesia da religiuri umciresobebi sazogadoebrivi azris chrilshi: Sociologiuri kvlevis shedegebi," *Saertashoriso Konperentsia Religia Da Sazogadoeba—Rtsmena Chvens Tskhovrebashi. Moxsenebata Mokle Shinaarsebi* (Tbilisi: International Conference Religion and Society: Faith in Our Life,

Saakashvili government came to power in November 2003, however, the tide of religious violence went down, and several of its perpetrators have been jailed.

The early post-Shevardnadze period has shown that while elements of a nativist backlash still exist, its magnitude no longer poses a serious challenge to Georgia's pro-Western national project. Accusations of "inadequate Georgianness" failed to discredit Georgia's new reformist leaders. After the revolution of November 2003, pro-Western modernizers came to power, and the subsequent presidential and parliamentary elections demonstrated their overwhelming popularity.⁵⁸ Many of the people now in office are the same individuals who earlier pushed for liberal reforms, including the less popular principle of religious freedom. Despite their current popularity, Saakashvili and his allies know that the gap between their liberal democratic modernizing agenda and prevailing social practices in Georgia still makes them vulnerable to a nativist backlash. For this reason, they need to develop their own alternative version of nationalism.

The nationalism of democratic modernizers in Georgia is that of a strong and effective state. As in the other post-Communist countries of Eastern Europe, joining the West through membership in organizations such as NATO and the European Union stands at the top of their agenda, but they do not want to give up national pride or the idea of the nation-state as a model of statehood. Membership in Western institutions is seen as the best mechanism for safeguarding the Georgian state and identity. Since the Georgian Orthodox Church remains the most powerful symbol of Georgian identity, however, pro-Western modernizers are careful to ensure that no one can question their loyalty to the church. While still cooperating with Shevardnadze, they sponsored a controversial "concordat" (constitutional agreement) between the state and the Georgian Orthodox Church in October 2002. The agreement highlighted the status of the church as the predominant religious institution in Georgia,

2004), pp. 11–14. See also David Zurabishvili, *Freedom of Confession and Religious Minorities in Georgia*, Discussion Paper no. 7 (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), May 2003), pp. 24–27; and Nodar Ladaria, *Religiozni ekstremizm v gruzii*, <http://www.pankisi.info/analitic/?page=ge&id=43>.

⁵⁸ Mikheil Saakashvili won the January 2004 Georgian presidential elections with 96.27 percent of the vote; the National Movement-Democrats won the parliamentary elections with 66.24 percent of the vote.

although it fell short of formally establishing it as the state church. This led to criticism from many pro-democracy activists in Georgia, including some who later became part of Saakashvili's government.

While the concordat arrangement violates the liberal democratic model, it was a relatively safe way for the reformers to demonstrate their commitment to safeguarding national identity without directly undermining religious freedoms. During his presidential inauguration ceremonies on January 24, 2004, Saakashvili took a holy oath at the Gelati Cathedral in the western Georgian city of Kutaisi.⁵⁹ There was a double symbolism in this gesture. On the one hand, he received the blessing of the church (rather like a medieval monarch). On the other hand, Gelati is where the greatest Georgian king of the eleventh century, David the Builder, is buried. By receiving the blessing at Gelati, Saakashvili, who wants a strong Georgian state, was symbolically alluding to a period of history when Georgia had such a state.

In general, Saakashvili attaches a large importance (some say too large) to symbols. One of his first steps after the Rose Revolution was to push the Georgian Parliament, even before his inauguration, to change the country's flag. The previous flag had been created by the Georgian Social Democratic government in 1918. It had colors similar to those of the German flag, although with dark red occupying the greatest part of the flag in honor of social democratic ideological preferences.⁶⁰ The new flag, introduced by Saakashvili's National Movement when it was still in the opposition, has one large cross and four small red crosses set against a white background. His opponents claimed that it was a Catholic flag, but it has also been used by the Georgian Orthodox Church in recent years. Some historians argue that this flag can be traced back to the golden age of Georgia in the eleventh and twelfth centuries—which is yet another way to evoke the idea of a strong Georgia.

Apart from being a strong state by medieval standards, the Georgian kingdom of that period also cooperated with Christian Crusaders. While Georgia's European vocation is sometimes challenged by Westerners on historical grounds—Georgia has never been part of the European histori-

⁵⁹ "Catholicos-Patriarch to Bless Saakashvili as President of Georgia," *InterPress*, January 24, 2004.

⁶⁰ The independent Georgian Republic was created in 1918 under the patronage of Germany.

cal experience, they insist⁶¹—the connection to the Crusaders provides a rare occasion when Georgia can claim to be affiliated with Europe.⁶² Although the Crusades' relevance to the modern European idea is another matter, Saakashvili does appear to be reaching out not only to Georgia's glorious past, but also to the time when Georgia was strong enough to contribute to European projects. In his inaugural speech, Saakashvili said, "Not only are we old Europeans, but we are ancient Europeans."⁶³ The statement contained an allusion to Donald Rumsfeld's distinction between "old Europe" and "new Europe"—a sensitive issue, because Saakashvili must balance between the Americans and Europeans. But more importantly, he meant to stress that Georgia's European vocation is rooted in ancient times. At his inaugural ceremony, there were two flags: the new Georgian flag with its ancient symbolism and the European flag—the flag used by the Council of Europe and the European Union—with its symbolism of modernity.

CONCLUSIONS

The security challenges facing Georgia are multilayered. The two most dramatic and closely interlinked—the unresolved territorial conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the failure to find a *modus vivendi* in relations with Russia—constitute the outside layer. In trying to solve these issues, Georgia's options are rather limited. The debacle in South Ossetia in summer 2004 demonstrated these fundamental limitations: an attempt to change the situation on the ground and accelerate a solution

⁶¹ See, for instance, William Pfaff, "'Europe' Has Historical Limits: The Baltics vs. the Caucasus," *The International Herald Tribune*, February 28, 2004. Pfaff writes that, "The new president [Saakashvili] says he is committed to leading Georgia back into the Euro-Atlantic fold. Back? Georgia was under divided Persian and Turkish rule from the 16th to 18th centuries, then was a Russian colony for two centuries, and from 1921 to 1991 was a constituent republic of the Soviet Union." But the point is that Saakashvili justifies the policy of going *back* to Europe by citing much more ancient experiences.

⁶² In 2005, the image of the Crusaders resurfaced when Saakashvili—together with his Ukrainian friend and counterpart Viktor Yushchenko—started a joint Georgian program of summer camps for Georgian and Ukrainian youths called "Young Crusaders."

⁶³ "Georgian President Optimistic about Future in Inauguration Speech," *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union*, January 25, 2004.

may only have made things worse, yet the alternative appeared to be passively accepting the status quo. Georgia simply lacks the resources to solve these issues. International experience shows that when it comes to territorial conflicts, especially when they reach the status of “frozen conflicts” where both parties are entrenched in their positions, either powerful outsiders impose a solution by force or blatant pressure or the parties remain in limbo for many decades. Georgians have good reason to fear that they may have to live with the tensions surrounding the country’s “frozen conflicts,” including troubled relations with Russia, for quite a long time.

Other instances of fragmentation—such as the problem of Ajara, sensitive regional identities, and non-integrated and potentially irredentist ethnic minorities—represent the next layer of security challenges. Georgia can deal with these problems based on its own resources, and its record since independence suggests that, on balance, the dynamics are positive. The peaceful removal of Abashidze’s repressive regime and effective incorporation of Ajara into the Georgian political space may have been the greatest strategic success in Georgia’s nation-building since independence. Megrelia appears to have overcome the trauma lingering from the civil conflict of the early 1990s. Important problems remain: Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities are only superficially part of the Georgian political nation, and attempts to integrate them may prove controversial in the future. However, Georgians appear to have overcome the worst phase of aggressive ethnic nationalism, while the Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities—despite many grudges—have not shown readiness to mobilize around separatist programs even in the worst of times.

Issues related to the creation of effective, stable, and legitimate state institutions lie at the core of Georgia’s security problems. They are central because they define the ability of the Georgian state to face the issues that lie on the surface. Here, the record is mixed, and the jury is still out. While the Georgian people have expressed their commitment to the normative idea of democracy, they have yet to pass the most basic test of sustainable democracy: namely, an orderly constitutional transfer of power. “Corruption” has become the buzzword in Georgia—as it has in many other countries in the world—but what it really denotes is a disconnect between the normative Weberian idea of the modern state and the entrenched practices or survival strategies typical for societies that were late in embracing this idea. The new government of Mikheil Saakashvili

has demonstrated a genuine resolve to fight specific manifestations of corruption. But the repressive-revolutionary methods predominant in this fight and the total mistrust of the existing civil service may prove counterproductive if this campaign is not backed up by a more mundane effort aimed at building a new and sustainable civil service.

The tenacity of Georgia's "national project" to be a modern liberal state may be the most promising element of Georgia's experience since independence. Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze's failed policies have not led to an anti-Western backlash, although these policies were notionally pro-Western. Openly illiberal ideological currents—neocommunism, nativist ethnic nationalism, anti-modern religious fundamentalism—did emerge, but after Gamsakhurdia's ouster they remained marginal. Georgians may not have yet mastered routine democratic procedures. However, as the Rose Revolution showed, the basic values of democracy and human rights are internalized by a critical mass of the people. Strict liberals may not like privileging the dominant Orthodox Church or the rhetoric of strong-state nationalism characteristic of the pro-Western modernizers now in power. But the latter know that success of their reforms depends on finding the proper formula for marrying traditional Georgian values and identity with modern liberal ideals. Still, a strong illiberal-nativist force may emerge and work to unravel Georgia's current national project. Thus far, however, Georgia's experience shows that the way to a secure and stable country can only be paved by a new social contract rooted in a combination of modern Western values and safeguards for the national identity.