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Conflict in the Post-Soviet Caucasus

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Why was the collapse of communism accompanied by more violence in the Caucasus than elsewhere in the Soviet Union?

This essay searches for what caused or prevented conflicts following the collapse of the USSR. Its analyse is however limited to the example of Georgia during the years of 1989 to 1993. Two reasons determine this choice. First, the practical aspect that makes a detailed synthesis and thorough comparison across the former Soviet territory a daunting task. A detailed study of all post-soviet conflicts would be necessary, but also their antitheses such as the peaceful transition in the Baltics or the settlement of Tatar sovereignty aspirations would have to be looked at. An analysis of the causes for conflicts is only satisfying with such a “differential test”. Appropriately, the second reason to limit the study to Georgia is the fact that it witnessed not only the emergence of wars – over Abkhazia and South Ossetia – but also that with Ajaria and the important Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities on its territory, it had concrete examples of potential conflicts that did actually not occur[1].

This essay argues for an area study based approach to the explanations of war and peace in Georgia. It recognises that each conflict or non-conflict took place in its own particular context. Theoretical frameworks are however used complimentary in order to point at eventual factors for conflicts.

The text is structured in five parts. First, a section discusses the theoretical and methodological challenges faced when analysing the nature of conflicts in the post-soviet space. Further it defines informal categories of analysis that are used in the following four topical sections about two wars and two non-conflicts.

On Theory and Methodology

The real difficulty in studying conflicts is to schematise, abstract and isolate factors that are relevant for a sufficient explanation of the conflict. Whether for example economic grievance or religious fundamentalism is viewed as explanation, it automatically constrains the narrative and ignores other factors. Different approaches to the selection of factors exist. Area study specialists and especially anthropologists undertake a bottom-up, context specific investigation. Such a paradigm is criticised for its lack of generalizable findings, making larger comparisons relatively hard[2].

Another academic approach is based on large n- studies in order to isolate key factors driving conflicts. An example is the Collier-Hoeffler Model of Civil war and Onset (Collier and Sambanis, 2005). It is based on the analysis of more than 30 civil wars through 23 case studies. Zürcher (2007) tested their theoretical findings in his book on post-soviet wars. Six factors that do not necessarily lead to a war but augment the statistical risks of them are tested in the Caucasian context[3]. Zürcher’s study is valuable because it tries to schematise and isolate factors while showing the limits of such an approach since not all wars are defined through these six factors. Sometimes additional ones appear, or despite the presence of a high risk factor wars do not erupt.

It seems that defining an exhaustive set of factors explaining ethnic conflicts while remaining useful for comparisons is always linked with sacrifices because of the necessary abstraction. This essay uses a set of factors that have frequently reappeared in discussions during the seminar. They are: the role and legacies of Soviet ethno-federalism

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relevant in creating a national identity, defining territories and demographics, creating a new elite and providing a set of new institutions; economic factors; tradition of governance[4]; the role of religion; external factors including the collapse of central Soviet-state power and other international influences; the role of politicians and their strategy.

The War over South Ossetia

Ethno-federal structures established by the Bolsheviks were to play a major role in the emergence of conflicts during the unravelling of the socialist empire seven decades later. However the situation in South-Ossetia would be different than in the other separatist region of Abkhazia, and not only because of another status. South-Ossetia was an Autonomous Oblast, hierarchically in a lower position than Abkhazia, which was an Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (ASSR). Not only the smaller autonomy was responsible for the fact that South-Ossetians during the Soviet period were relatively well integrated in Georgia. Although the language barrier towards Georgian was proudly maintained by South-Ossetians, it was pragmatically overcome by the Russian lingua franca. A majority of them lived actually outside their own autonomous region. The 1989 Soviet census indicated that 65'000 Ossetian lived in their region (60% of the total population) and another 164'000 resided in the rest of Georgia. But the shadow of arbitrary ethno-federalism became visible in face of emerging Georgian ethno-nationalism during the 1980s. The Bolsheviks had cut-off the South-Ossetian from their kin on the northern slopes of the Caucasus. lived The majority of Osstians in the North-Ossetian ASSR (around 300'000 in 1989, Zürcher, 2007). While this fact did not have a far-reaching impact during the existence of the USSR, it became clear, as the signs of Georgian sovereignty became stronger, that an international boarder would divide the Ossetians. The external reality of Soviet state collapse closed the option of accessing a higher status inside the USSR in order to react against Georgian ethno-nationalism. And like in Abkhazia, Yeltsin's call to swallow as much sovereignty as possible was followed.

A crucial factor in explaining the South-Ossetian conflict is certainly the role of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the leading opposition figure during the 1980s and first President of Georgia from April 1991 to January 1992, before being deposed in a coup and finally succeeded by Eduard Shevardnadze. In his attempts to discredit the old communist power and to demonstrate a strong opposition against Moscow, a set of nationalist and centralist policies were initiated that triggered defensive reactions from South-Ossetians who felt threatened in their cultural and political autonomy. The language policy of 1989 that increased the status of the Georgian language was according to Zürcher et al. (2005) first directed against Moscow but lead to a South-Ossetian petition addressed to the central Soviet power for transfer of their region into the Russian Socialist Federation of Soviet Republics (RSFSR). This move was followed by a Georgian nationalist reaction, which excluded regionally anchored political parties to enlist for the first democratic elections in 1990. From a South-Ossetian perspective therefore, democratic elections did not help to legitimise the new system but increased the political fragmentation. The fact that Moscow did not accord a different status to South-Ossetia while it was still in its theoretical possibility, combined with the radicalisation of Gamsakhurdia's policy, lead to a further escalation of the conflict.

But in order to understand the emergence of an ethnic and not simply political conflict, other factors have to be considered as well. As mentioned above the relation between Georgians and Ossetians during Soviet times could be qualified as good. Political dissent did not automatically translate into opposition among the common people[5]. Furthermore, religion was not playing a divisional role between people since most Ossetians where in practice pagan (King, 2008). As Kaufman (2001) has demonstrated, the transmission from political opposition into open hatred among people needs a further instrumentalisation of symbols and practical actions. Zürcher (2007) mentions in this context the role of Georgian militias like the National Guard that brought the actual violence into the region. In a rational-choice argumentation, the landlocked South-Ossetians had no economical benefits from a separation from Georgia whereas for the militias that largely escaped state control, gains through looting could be achieved and disguised by nationalistic rhetoric.

The War over Abkhazia

Abkhazia's ethno-federal structure expressed itself not only through a different status as South-Ossetia but also in its composition. Despite being the titular nation, Abkhazians represented only 17% of the region's population (Cornell 2002). The approximately 90'000 Abkhaz (1989 census) were largely all settled within their own region. At the

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beginning of the Bolshevik area, the personal influence of high-ranked party leader Nestor Lakoba, a native Abkhaz, resulted in beneficial treatments and a generous autonomy. With the rise of Stalin and later its countryman Beria, and the elimination of Lakoba, a Mingrelian Abkhaz, policies changed. Forced Georgianisation of the population occurred together with resettling important numbers of Mingrelian Georgians into Abkhazia. This Georgian oppression combined together with the numerous but unsuccessful attempts of Abkhazian dignitaries following de-Stalinisation to persuade Moscow of including Abkhazia in the RSFSR[6], formed the basis of a grievance script used to justify the independence from Georgia[7].

Cornell (2002), Derluguian (2005) and Zürcher (2007) offer an explanation going beyond this grievance script. They argument that the unsuccessful attempts of Abkhazians to be integrated into the RSFSR, were partially compensated by an over-proportional number of posts in the bureaucracy. While not being in charge of key offices such as the KGB, which remained in Georgian hands, they had an important control of the local economy[8]. In addition to sorrows of cultural and political independence, a rational-choice argument appears. Integration into the Georgian state defined by democratic majority power, would be unfavourable for the Abkhaz population, which had institutional advantages under the old-regime. If market reforms such as privatisation were to happen after a democratic majority vote, the Abkhaz stood no chance against the Mingrelians and other Georgians (Derluguian, 2005).

Similar to South-Ossetia, religion did not play a serious role in mobilising national aspirations. Likewise the widespread Georgian rhetoric arguing that Russian influence played a decisive role in the conflict needs to be balanced. It certainly influenced the outcome of the conflict but hardly triggered it (Zürcher et al., 2005)[9]. Another important external player, but who also did not trigger the conflict, was the Mountain Confederation. It was a rally of North-Caucasian volunteers that fought alongside Abkhaz units and whose motives where divers, from Circassian kinship relations to war-hungry adventurers such as the later Chechen leader Shamil Basayev.

The Situation in Ajaria

Like Abkhazia, Ajaria was an ASSR, with its comparative higher degree of autonomy than South Ossetia. However unlike the two previous regions, Ajaria did not descend into an inner-ethnic conflict fought over territorial and cultural sovereignty. While for Abkhazia and South-Ossetia the Soviet ethno-federal structure seemed to have played an important, if not decisive role in enabling the conflict, its function in Ajaria was important as well, but in an opposite way. Ajars are ethnically and linguistically related to Georgians, however they are Muslims. Their ASSR was the only example in the USSR, where a minority group has been delimited and accorded an autonomous regional status because of a religious difference. Under Soviet rule, despite their autonomous status, their assimilation into Georgian culture became much higher than the Abkhaz or Ossets, mainly because of the language and the disappearing role of religion. Religion being not (at least officially) recognised in communist ideology, the Ajars were considered as ethnic Georgians in official statistics. By crosschecking different assessments, Zürcher (2007) estimates that they represented around 70% of the regions inhabitants in 1989. That despite this important majority Ajaria did not seek official secession from Georgia is in Toft's (2002) opinion due to the above-mentioned cultural assimilation. Derluguian (2005) supports this argument but refines it by arguing that the definition of identity in Ajaria was solely cultural, in opposition to an ethnic nationalism present in the two other autonomous regions. Consequently the role of the ethno-federal structure was neither enhancing nationalism nor favouring cultural assimilation, which happened despite of it rather than as its consequence.

The role of ethno-federalism was important in favouring and consolidating the local elite and power structure. As Zürcher (2007) and Cornell (2002) argue, the external influence of central state acollapse did not have major implications in changing the local power structure. Even in 1991 when Aslan Abashidze became the new regional leader, the local communist nomenklatura remained in power. The informal ties elaborated during Soviet times preserved the same governance, strongly based on a personalised client-relationship system. The continuation of a solid power structure made transition less bloody.

That despite provocations by Gamsakhurdia to abolish the region's special status no serious escalation took place can be explained by the pragmatic policy of the regional elite who was aware that an open conflict might result in a loss of power and control on economic benefits. This rational-choice argument by Zürcher (2007) is the most

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plausible in explaining the elites' actions. Ajaria was transformed in a free-trade zone through which an important amount of illicit but very lucrative regional trade was done. This economical independence, which was also made possible by the access to the sea, lead de-facto to a political independence of Ajaria until 2004, when Abashidze lost his power-play against Michail Saakaschwili. But even for Gamsakhurdia as well as Shevardnadze, it became rapidly clear that a peaceful status quo was better than a third open conflict risking a completely dismemberment of the state.

Non-conflicts of Armenians and Azerbaijanis

The issue of the Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities in Georgia is by far the least researched issue of *non-conflicts* during the collapse of the USSR. The only Western scholar known to the author who has published on this issue is Svante Cornell[10]. This gap can be seen a testimonial of the lack of primary field research undertaken in the region in opposition to the nearly exponentially growing secondary (especially theoretical) literature.

In the last Soviet census of 1989, Armenians accounted for 8.1% of the Georgian SSR's inhabitants. The large majority of the Armenian population lived on the border region with Armenia in the administrative region of Samtskhe-Javakheti. In certain villages they made up to 90% of the people. At a first look this could have lead to separatist movements advocating for integration into Armenia. Furthermore, conflicts over borders had a historical precedence during the time of the short-lived independent republics following the fall of the Czarist Empire. A first reason for the peaceful outcome during the transition can be seen in the lack of an independent ethno-federal structure. The Armenian minority had not the institutions like the parliament in South-Ossetia or an ethnical nomenklatura as in Abkhazia enabling it to voice and push through their claims. Nevertheless, the consciousness of being Armenian and not Georgian seemed quite strong and can still be witnessed nowadays in these communities living relatively isolated from the Georgian state apparatus[11]. External influences further explain for Cornell (2002) the reasons why a strong Armenian identity did not lead to a conflict. The Armenian state played a moderating effect in the region. Being already caught in a separatist war over Karabach, another war had to be avoided; especially a war with Georgia through which landlocked Armenia got its supplies (the boarder with Turkey is closed until today).

The Azerbaijanis amounted to 5.7% of the Georgian population in 1987 and are like the Armenians grouped in the south-western region of Kvemo-Kartleti. The Azerbaijanis are culturally even further away from the Georgians than the Armenians because of their religion. Even though the cultural difference lead to tensions during the 1980s the population always remained loyal to the Georgian state and the only minor clashes that materialised were between Azerbaijanis and another minority, the Swans. Cornell explains the peaceful situation through similar factors as for the Armenian minority. The lack of ethno-federal autonomy was even strengthened in his view by the rural aspect of the population and therefore its lower organisation and mobilisation. External influence played also a pacifying role. Later during the 1990s, the Azerbaijani President Aliyev apparently even officially encouraged Georgian Azerbaijanis to vote for Shevardnadze and support the Georgian state structures. Again this is understandable by looking at Azerbaijani domestic policy. Azerbaijan under Aliyev came through two tumultuous presidencies and was still caught in a war that it was losing.

Despite Cornell's analysis, which has much in common with rational-choice conflict theories or is simply descriptive, a further study of the national self-understanding of these two minorities would be useful. Two decades having already passed since the event, it is however questionable if new explanations can surface through primary field research.

Conclusions

Comparing reasons explaining post-soviet conflicts and *non-conflicts* is a tough methodological and theoretical challenge. Summarising the four case studies, the relative importance or absence of one or several of the analytical factors we used became clear. The role of Soviet ethno-federalism is certainly the strongest single factor to explain why conflicts appeared or why they did not. But the explanations are not straightforward. The example of Ajaria demonstrated that legacies of ethno-federalism were not expressed in a separate identity or its instrumentalisation, but acted as a mechanism to create, institutionalise and organise an elite like it was not possible for Armenian or

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Azerbaijani minorities. The role of politicians and their strategy has been proven decisive especially in regards of the South-Ossetian conflict. Gamsakhurdia's ethno-nationalist policy affected and triggered the conflict with Ossetian probably more decisively than with the Abkhaz. South-Ossetians were also largely integrated outside of their own region and had no economical benefits to preserve by secession. External influences too, turned out to be a multidimensional factor. They played a minor to non-existent role in triggering the conflicts though were sometimes crucial in relation to the outcome of conflicts such as the role played by North-Ossetian volunteers or the fighters of the Mountain Confederation. Soviet central state collapse as an external factor has especially in the South-Ossetian and Abkhazian case played a major role. By the disappearance of a supra-national state structure, a higher autonomy status was not possible anymore and full-fledged independence became the only credible option in the view of many elites for whom a centralised Georgian state was no option. Tradition of governance played a role when looking at informal networks that structured power such as it was the case in Ajaria. There it went along the Soviet-established client-patron relationship structure. In Abkhazia and South-Ossetia ethnic and family networks helped to mobilise fighters as well as they did in Georgia with the different Militias.

The use of Georgia as miniature model for the study of post-soviet conflicts is particularly valuable in regard to the analysis of non-conflicts. This approach pointed also to the fact that non-conflicts remain under-analysed. Two factors in relation to which the Georgian model is not representative of other conflicts in Caucasus, is probably the role of religion and other aspects of traditional governance. The role of religion as a mobilising factor and customary law (Adat) would need a higher attention in the study of North Caucasian conflicts. The multidimensionality of certain factors in a specific context have nevertheless proven the limits of theories, that were certainly helpful to structure analytical thoughts. A deeper understanding, and the lack of it in the case of the Armenian and Azerbaijani minority has proven it, requires the inductive methodology and empirical knowledge of area studies.

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[1] Situations that presented a potential for conflicts did not result in one, will further be referred to as *non-conflicts*.

[2] Another critic seems to be about certain primordialist approaches used to explain the belligerent behaviour present among mountain people like in Dagestan for instance. Primordialist accounts of conflicts are out of fashion in Western academia and should be handled with great care if an explanation is meant to be more than simple stigmatisation. Sometimes however they illustrate well the limits of theories and are the last tool to explain seemingly unique reasons behind endless conflicts. This problematic has been illustrated and discussed during this seminar with anthropologist Dr Robert Chenciner who specialised on Dagestan, a region notorious for its very complex inner conflicts, a Waterloo of conflict theories.

[3] These six risk factors are: 1) Low level of economic development. 2) State weakness and state collapse. 3) The parties at war have to be able to organise and finance themselves. 4) A war experience during the last five years increases the chances for another one. 5) A complex ethnic geography: very heterogeneous or very homogenous societies however seem to be less prone to ethnic conflicts than a society with few but large distinct ethnic groups. 6) Mountainous terrain.

[4] This describes the informal rules defining the organisation and conduct of societies in the Caucasus that run parallel to official state structures and organisations. Tradition of governance includes the role of clans and extended families but also the very important customary law known as Adat.

[5] Aspect highlighted by Nino Kemoklidze in the context of the seminar. N.K. is a native Georgian, PhD candidate at CREES, University of Birmingham.

[6] Attempts were undertaken on a regular base: 1957, 1967, 1977 and finally in 1988. (Zürcher, 2007).

[7] Compare Hewitt (1998).

[8] Abkhazia was an all-Soviet holiday destination and produced highly demanded citrus fruits. Zürcher (2007) estimates that Abkhazia's wealth and living standards were among the highest in the Soviet Union.

[9] Aspect highlighted by Nino Kemoklidze in the context of the seminar.

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[10] An additional source on the subject is an extensive discussion with Nino Kemoklidze.

[11] This was especially the case until 2007 when the Soviet-era Russian military base of Akhalkalaki was handed over to Georgia. Russian was not only the dominant language, but the military base was the biggest employer and provider for health care. Cornell (2002).

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