The Dynamics of the Georgian National Mobilization and its Radicalization 1987–1992

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Abstract

This study discusses the processes associated with the radicalization of the Georgian national movement in the years 1987-1992. It seeks to uncover the dynamics of the national mobilization through the examination the existing social and structural conditions in conjuncture with the analysis of the transformative events that shaped the Georgian experience. The radicalization of the Georgian movement is evaluated through the challenges it faced: first the republican Communist regime, and later the assertive minorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

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Introduction

The Soviet Union disintegrated under the pressure of the nationalist movements in its constituent republics. Waves of national mobilizations from the Baltic States to Central Asia undermined the efforts of the *Perestroika* campaign to reform the decaying Communist regime, which eventually collapsed together with the Soviet Union. Many observers, who predicted a Yugoslav scenario of a bloody disintegration of the country, were proven wrong: the Soviet Union was thrown into the dustbin of history through an agreement reached by the leaders of the fifteen newly independent countries.

But when one considers Georgia, the images of the war-torn Yugoslavia more closely resemble the anarchy experienced by the country on its way to independence. The period from 1987 to 1992 is marred with Soviet military aggression against peaceful protesters, wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and a protracted civil war fought by president Gamsakhurdia's supporters and the opposition. These developments left behind two unresolved conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, more than ten thousand casualties of the wars for territorial integrity and nearly three hundred thousand refugees, not to mention a delayed transition to a functioning statehood.

Although humanitarian disasters in conflict areas such as Chechnya and Nagorno Karabakh could unquestionably be compared to the Georgian experience, the evolution and simultaneity of different sources of political instability makes the Georgian case exceptional. In particular, nowhere in the Soviet Union did the republican Communist regime oppose the national movement as vigorously as in Georgia. Only in Georgia the political arena was dominated by radical organizations characterized by the uncompromising stance towards minorities. And lastly, the champion of the national movement and Georgia's president, Zviad

Gamsakhurdia was ousted from power by the same political forces which helped him succeed in the first place.

The complexities that accompanied Georgia's path to independence were predictable, but their nature was less so. Initially, the former Georgian dissidents were able to mobilize support for seemingly non-nationalist issues, which in the later stages grew into wider demands for regime overthrow. From the very start of the *Perestroika* campaign, the Georgian Communist leadership was unwilling to participate in the liberalization of the political sphere and saw the formation of movements as a direct challenge to its authority. This in turn sidelined the efforts of the moderate political groups to establish cooperation with the regime on the model of the Baltic Popular Fronts. Under these circumstances, the radical grouping was able to gain public support through a series of bold actions and eventually pressed the regime to submission.

Georgia's multiethnic composition together with the existence of three autonomous units on its territory, determined another powerful characteristic of the national movement. Since the minority-dominated autonomies of South Ossetia and Abkhazia tended to side with the Union center Moscow, the issue of territorial integrity was potently used for mass-mobilization of ethnic Georgians.[1] The emergence of national movements in the autonomies only strengthened the Georgian nationalists' stance -that the autonomies represented obstacles for Georgia's national interests. This anxiety found far more support among the population than the issue of the country's independence from the Soviet Union. For this reason, on many occasions the 'dangers' of minorities were deliberately exaggerated by the nationalist leaders.

[1] On the conflicts in Georgia: Fiona Hill, *Report on ethnic conflicts in the Russian Federation and Transcaucasia*, Harvard University: Cambridge, Mass., 1993; Suzanne Goldenberg, Pride of Small Nations: the Caucasus and Post-Soviet disorder, Zed Books Ltd.: London, 1994; Alexei Zverev, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988 – 94," in Bruno Coppieters ed., Contested Borders in the Caucasus, VUB University Press: Brussels, 1996; Ghia Nodia, "Causes and Visions of Conflict in Abkhazia" Institute of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian studies, Berkeley: University of California, 1997

It was the challenge from the republican Communist regime and the conflict with the minorities that shaped the dynamics of Georgia's path to independence. Eventually, as it will later be discussed, these challenges helped crystallize national self-awareness, and the Georgian people collectively came to support Georgia's departure from the Soviet Union and to sanction the wars for territorial integrity against the minorities. The advocates of nationalism overcame those of reason and tolerance, and so the society embraced the exclusive ideas of nationalism.

Before examining the Georgian national movement, its ideological substance, or the concept of nationalism, needs appropriate attention. A large literature on nationalism seeks to uncover its origins with a hope that the essence of the phenomenon can be understood.[2] This literature mostly argues that the manifestation of nationalism is a logical outcome of an impact of broad social forces, or a gradual transformation of historically encoded identity. In our case, this approach can be helpful to understand the existence of submerged identities, but would be ineffective for explaining how nationalism suddenly crystallized and became the driving force behind the unfolding events.

Other views on nationalism contend that it is a product of ideas generated by the elites, the success of which is largely determined by the way in which national identities were formed prior to the elite-led action.[3] Liah Garfield takes this view even further : "the origins of nationalism…create a predisposition for a certain type of action, and probability that, in certain

[2] For instance, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983; Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1988; Ernest Gellner, *Nationalism*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997; Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992

[3] Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: a Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groupings among the Smaller European Nations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 24

conditions, such action will take place."[4] From this point of view, it is the earlier conditions which determine whether nationalism will flourish or not. However, this view is highly deterministic and avoids the question of under what circumstances are the ideas put to action. For instance, the peculiarities of the Georgian nationalism and its cultural attributes do not necessarily predispose it to radicalism.

This of course does not imply that the social and institutional structures played a secondary role in the nationalist mobilization. On the contrary, the existing structural and social conditions determine the human behavior and thus largely shape the outcomes of interaction among the agents.[5] On the other hand, focusing only on the effect of agency, for instance, the role of individuals in fostering the national movement, would miss a wider relationship between the events and the structural conditions that shaped them. Thus, both approaches are crucial for constructing an inclusive account of the Georgian experience.

Essentially, it is the relationship between the pre-existing structural conditions and event-specific influences on shaping the prelude to violence and radicalization of the Georgian society what constitutes the central research objective of this paper. I argue that a chain of galvanizing events were instrumental in radicalizing the movement, as well as defining the nature of the conflict with the minorities.

[4] Liah Garfield, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1985, p.23

[5] Mark R Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and Collapse of the Soviet Union*, Cambridge University Press, p. 8

Theoretical Approach and Data Description

In developing such a perspective, I focus on the theoretical approach put forward by Rogers Brubaker who argues that nationhood can be understood "as something that suddenly crystallizes rather than gradually develops, as a contingent, conjuncturally fluctuating, and precarious frame of vision."[6] Given that the Georgian national movement reflected a sharp rise of national(ism) sentiment within the society, the chain of events that precipitated this mood needs more attention than centuries-long identity shaping processes. In this manner I intend to view the radicalization of the Georgian movement through the prism of the "eventful analysis"[7] of the challenges that it faced in conjuncture with the existing social and structural conditions. Similarly, the confrontation between the national movement and the minorities can be viewed through the prism of transformative events that shaped the nature of future conflicts.

I use the database on the mass events and riots in the Soviet Union between the years 1987-1992 compiled by Mark Beissinger from 150 different news sources, U.S. government publications, émigré publications, central and local Soviet newspapers, and unofficial *samizdat* sources. These events will be used to determine the dynamics of the confrontations in Georgia, as well as provide the insight on the importance of the selected transformative events.

[6] Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 19
[7] William H. Sewell, "Historical Events as Transformations of Structures," *Theory and Society*, vol. 25, 1996, p. 843

Terms and Definitions

In my analysis, I use William Sewell's formulation of *event* as a contentious and potentially subversive act that challenges normalized practices, modes of causation, or systems of authority.[8] This *event* transforms social relations in ways that could not be fully predicted from the gradual changes that may have made them possible. Sewell argues that the events should be conceived as sequences of occurrences, or chain of events, that were initiated by a surprising break with routine practices. As a consequence, the *event* touches off a chain of occurrences that durably transforms previous structures. It is these types of events that I look at to account for the radicalization of the Georgian national movement and subsequent changes in social and political conditions.

The *event* also has a social quality to it: two contending groups i.e. those who challenge the order and those who uphold it, involve also a large audience of "observers" who lend a spectacle-like quality to confrontation and with it provide much of the transformative power. I focus on the Georgian mobilization at different stages of its evolution and on the specific challenges it faced: first, its opposition to the existing Communist regime which was mostly manifested through mass non-violent acts of protests and second, the confrontation with the minorities in the autonomous regions, which eventually resulted in mass violence. The analysis will focus on the temporal, powerful and transforming chains of events that conditioned the national movement's radicalism.

By *pre-existing structural conditions* I refer to one dimension of the structural influence on action: to the accumulated resources, established patterns of behavior, or norm delineated

[8] *Ibid* p. 843

conditions which facilitate action through their presence.[9] My argument is that the pre-existing structural conditions do not determine specific modes of outcomes, but rather condition the behavior of actors which in turn act within the existing framework of conduct. For instance, the existence of the autonomous units on the Georgian territory did not automatically condition the future conflicts with the minorities, but rather, the actors empowered by the autonomous structures acted in certain ways which where conditioned by the existing institutional structures. And by *institutional constraints* I mean the ways in which the institutions define and marginalize the actions of those who would challenge them.

By *radicalization of the movement* I refer to the dominance of the Georgian national movement by the radical groups, a development which negatively affected the consequent chain of events. To stress once again, the radical groups existed in many places around the Soviet Union, but only in Georgia were they able to marginalize the moderates and set their own agendas. In this way, the confrontation with the minorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia eventually became of a violent character.

Within the movement, I make distinction among the groupings as radical and moderate. *Radical* refers to tactics used by the activists: uncompromising stance and unwillingness to participate in the Soviet structures combined with a nationalist agenda. *Moderate* refers to greater willingness to negotiate and participate in the Soviet institutions, moderation in tactical sense, and also greater emphasis in their program on democracy and civil rights rather than national ones.[10]

[9] Mark R Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and Collapse of the Soviet Union*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.14

[10] Jonathan Aves, *Paths to National Independence in Georgia 1987 - 1990*, University of London 1991, p 6

In the first chapter of the paper I discuss the relevant structural, social and demographic conditions in Georgia prior to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In addition, I present the main groups involved in the processes of national mobilization and subsequent confrontation. In chapter two, I analyze the dynamics of conflict between the national movement and the republican Communist regime, which was galvanized by the April 9 event. In the third chapter, I move to discuss the relation of the national movement with the minority dominated autonomies of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In each case, I present the transformative events which set the prelude for the eventual hostilities.

Chapter 1: The Soviet Structural Legacy and Main Actors

In the second half of the 1980s, along with the emergence of the Georgian national movement, whose main goal was to attain independence from the Soviet Union, analogous movements in the autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia based their programs on the support of the Soviet center. The conflict between the movements was thus inevitable from the start, as the Georgians would not tolerate the Communist sympathizers in their regions, just as the movements in the autonomies would not stay within the Georgian territory without the existence of a protective Soviet center. With the liberalization brought about by the *Perestroika* campaign, the nationalists were able to openly pursue their agendas. As a result, the relations among the ethnic groups living in Georgia considerably worsened.

The existing structural and social conditions played a pivotal role in the mobilization of the minorities in Georgia: the principle of the Soviet ethno-territorial division left Georgia with three autonomous regions, two of which were ethnically defined. The nationalist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia enjoyed close relations with the local Communist regimes and were thus able to use the resources for their nationalist goals. This factor was of a crucial importance, as the success of the minorities directly depended on the existence of resources from their autonomous structures and the goodwill of their local governments.

The first part of this chapter aims to elucidate the major structural and social conditions in Georgia prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The second part introduces the major political organizations and paramilitary groups which were instrumental in shaping the Georgian political landscape in the dying years of the Soviet Union.

1.1 Nationalism and Soviet Federalism

The Soviet leaders never attempted to forge a Soviet nation. The major emphasis of nation-building was on the question of how to make the Soviet Union's diverse ethnic groups co-exist peacefully and thereby resolve the problems associated with nationalism. To achieve this goal, the Soviet Union sponsored the institutionalization and codification of nationhood at the sub-state rather than at state-wide level. In this way, the builders of the Soviet state did not seek to instill a 'Soviet proletariat' identity, but rather worked on creating national proletariats following Stalin's vision of the nationhood in Soviet terms – 'national in form and socialist in content'. The policy involved the systematic promotion of minorities' national consciousness, and the establishment to their benefit of many institutional forms of the nation-state.[11]

This policy was best exemplified by the ethno-territorial federalism which divided the territory of the state into a complex four tier system of administrative units, units which exercised different levels of autonomy relative to the center.[12] Following this pattern, the Soviet Union was divided into fifty-three territorial components consisting of Union Republics, Autonomous Republics, Autonomous *Oblasts* and Autonomous *Okrugs.* Most of these units represented a nominal 'homeland' to the historical communities that resided on the territory, providing them with the state symbols, administrative resources, parliament-like structures and decision-making powers in certain areas.

By such a laborious division of the state, the architects of the Soviet Union meant to delegate secondary executive powers to the indigenous ethnic cadres in return for cooperation

[11] Terry Martin, '*The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923 – 1939*', Cornelll University Press: Ithaca London, 2001, p.1

[12] Rogers Brubaker, 'Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia: an Institutional Account', in *Theory and Society*, Vol.23, No. 1, p. 50

with the all-Union center Moscow.[13] The local national cadres were allocated economic resources, but were given directions on how to appropriate them. In this way, Moscow expanded its influence by politicizing the ethnicity: for the scheme of the power devolution to work, the majority of the cadres had to represent the titular nationality of the area, so as to ensure the legitimacy of the Soviet rule within their respective society. For example, although Abkhaz were no more than 17% of the population of the Abkhaz autonomous republic (See Table1.1 below), because they constituted a titular nationality, 50% of the first secretaries of the local raikom divisions were ethnic Abkhaz.[14]

Table 1.1: Ethnic Composition of Georgia and Autonomous Regions in 1989

Ethnic Group	The Georgian SSR		The Abkhazian ASSR		The South Ossetian AO	
	Population	%	Population	%	Population	%
Georgians	3,787,000	70.1	242,000	42.2	29,000	29.0
Armenians	437,000	8.1	77,000	14.6	-	-
Russians	341,000	6.3	74,000	14.2	2,000	2.2
Azeris	307,000	5.7	-	-	-	-
Ossetians	164,000	3.0	-	-	65,000	66.2
Greeks	100,000	1.9	-	-	-	-
Abkhaz	95,000	1.8	91,000	17.3	-	-
Others	212,000	3.1	40,000	7.7	3,000	2.7
Total	5,433,000	100	524,000	100	99,000	100

Source: Stuart J. Kaufmann, '*Modern Hatreds: the Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*', New York, Cornelll University Press: 2001, p. 87

Often, the relations between the union republic and its autonomies closely resembled that of the union republics and the center: the rulers of the autonomies were allowed to pursue their agendas in exchange for proper 'behavior'. However, the elites from the autonomies in theory and in practice were able to ally with the center against the parent union republic. Such a multi-dependent relationship between the autonomous units, the republican center and Moscow was particularly pronounced in Georgia, which held three autonomous units: Abkhazia, Adjara

[13] Philip G. Roeder, 'Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization', in *World Politics*, Vol.43, No. 2, p.199

[14] Svante E. Cornell, '*Autonomy and Conflict: Ethnoterritoriality and Separatism in the South Caucasus – Cases in Georgia*', Uppsala University, Peace and Conflict Monograph Series No. 61, 2002, p. 147

(autonomous republics) and South Ossetia (autonomous *oblast*). During the decline of the Soviet power at the end of 1980s, the elites from the autonomies collaborated with the all-Union center against the independence minded Georgian movement, which gave reason to the majority of Georgians to suspect separatist motives behind the autonomies' actions.

Another dimension of ethnic identity preservation was the Soviet passport system which served as the basis for most Soviet bureaucratic recordings. Every Soviet citizen was classified according to his or her nationality, irrespective of territory of residence. The national background of an individual in some cases, most notably in admission to the higher education, shaped the life chances either negatively (especially the Jews) or positively (for titular nationalities in the non-Russian republics, who benefited from affirmative action or preferential treatment policies).[15] It is only logical that individual ethnic identity was not only preserved this way, but also became an integral part of social identification.

Both policies of ethnic institutionalization and codification bore unintended consequences as the liberalization of the regime took place in the second half of the 1980s. While the federal division of the state intended to quench the national sentiments of the minorities, the elites from those territorial units used the autonomous structures and resources for their own nationalist agendas. The passport system, used as a means of regulating migration and registration in collective farms, ensured that ethnicity remained the norm of social accounting and self-identification. It is a historical irony that both of these policies meant to strengthen the control of the center over its peripheries, but eventually served to undermine the foundations of the system.

These Soviet legacies considerably shaped the Georgian politics in the years of *Perestroika*: the Georgian national movement by campaigning for independence from the Soviet center implicitly encouraged its ethnic minorities to follow the same path of challenging the

[15] Brubaker, 'Nationhood and the National Question' p. 53

Georgian center. The existence of the autonomous structures enabled the minorities to articulate their grievances through legitimate procedures and mobilize for action. Thus, in 1989 the autonomous formations in Georgia presented the nationalist adventurers with economic resources and legitimacy of the official institutions to implement their national projects. And in two of its autonomies, Abkhazia and South Ossetia the confrontation evolved into open warfare.

1.1.2 A Brief History of Abkhaz-Georgian Relations

The Abkhaz are indigenous to the Caucasus region and speak a language from the Caucasian family. Their linguistic and ethnic connection to the Georgian is faint – the Abkhaz are related to the Northern Caucasian group known as Circassians. Prior to Abkhazia's inclusion into the Russian Empire in 1829, Abkhazia was in nominal or effective vassalage union with various (often separate) Georgian kingdoms and princedoms. The historical evidence on the relationship between Abkhazia and Georgia before their inclusion into the Soviet Union is dubious and both independence and autonomy[16] of Abkhazia could be argued.[17]

The period between the defeat of the Russian Empire during World War I and consolidation of the Bolshevik power in Russia (1918-1921) was characterized by struggles for power in Abkhazia between the Menshevik and Bolshevik ideological factions, the latter having more influence among the Abkhaz population. The Bolsheviks were eventually defeated and Abkhazia was included as an autonomous republic within the independent Menshevik-led

[16] For instance, since the Georgian kingdoms were gradually absorbed into the Russian Empire and their rights and statuses were defined at different stages, one could argue that Abkhazia was treated independently of other Georgian kingdoms because its relationship with Russia was defined at different stages and in different manner.

[17] Alexei Zverev, "Ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus 1988 – 1994", ed. Bruno Coppieters, *Contested Borders in the Caucasus,* VUB University Press: Brussels, 1996, pp. 39

Georgia. On the eve of approval of a new constitution, the Soviet army invaded Georgia.[18] Because Georgia backed the Menshevik Abkhaz government (with self-interest of course), the Abkhaz memories from this period are associated with the struggle for independence from the expansionist Georgia, a case that could be easily made if the ideological confrontations between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks were treated as irrelevant.

In 1921, both Georgia and Abkhazia were included in the future Soviet Union as parts of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. Georgian – Abkhaz relations were defined under the treaty conditions of union, which nominally recognized Abkhazia as a union republic and stipulated its association (but not subordination) to Georgia.[19] In 1931, the restructuring of the Soviet Union resulted in Stalin's decision to demote Abkhazia's status to that of an autonomous republic within Georgia. Since then Abkhazia's status has not changed.

The years of Stalin's reign were marked by the 'Georgianization' campaign undertaken through the imposition of the Georgian-based alphabet for the Abkhaz language, the ban on the Abkhaz schools, the planned migration of Georgians into Abkhazia and the discrimination against Abkhaz nationals. For the Abkhaz, these experiences were signs of oppression exercised by numerically superior Georgians, and Stalin and Beria's ethnic background further reinforced this view.[20]

These motives largely shaped the Abkhaz unwillingness to remain in subordinate status with Georgia. Already in 1957, four years after Stalin's death, the Abkhaz officials made a request to be transferred from Georgia to the Russian Federation, a demand that was refused by

[18] Bruno Coppieters, "The Georgian – Abkhazian conflict," Europeanization and Conflict Resolution: Case Studies from the European Periphery, Academia press: Gent, 2004, pp. 193
[19] Jonathan Wheatley, '*Georgia from national awakening to the rose revolution: delayed transition in the former Soviet Union*', Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005, pp. 57
[20] Beria, an ethnic Georgian (Mingrelian), was one of Stalin most trusted henchmen who was the head of the secret police NKVD and was also in charge of the South Caucasus.

the center.[21] On three other occasions in 1967, 1977 and 1989 similar demands were raised by the Abkhaz.

1.1.3 Brief history of Georgian and South Ossetians relations

The Ossetians belong to a Caucasian group of people speaking a north-eastern Iranian language. The Ossetians were the titular nationality in North Ossetia (Russian Federation) and South Ossetia (Georgia). Unlike Abkhazia, South Ossetia was never a separate kingdom or princedom governed by Ossetian nobility and for the most part constituted a regional administrative unit within Georgia called Samachablo. However, during Georgia's independence (1918-1921) the Ossetian leaders allied with the Bolshevik Northern Ossetian kin in an attempt to breakaway from Georgia. Russia largely stayed out of the conflict and the challenge to the Georgian territorial integrity ended with the suppression of Ossetian defiance by the Georgian Peoples' Army. Casualties reported by Ossetian historiography number more than 5,000 dead and many more injured due to Georgian cruelty. In 1922, the South Ossetian Autonomous *Oblast* was formed within the Georgian Union Republic.[22]

During the Soviet rule the relations between Georgia and South Ossetia were mostly calm: no demands concerning the border change were raised by the South Ossetian officials before 1989. With the emergence of the South Ossetian national movement, *Ademon Nykhas*, the demands for greater autonomy from Georgia, with a view of eventual unification with the North Ossetia were raised.

[21] Cornell, '*Autonomy and Conflict*', p. 151
[22] Zverev, 'Ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus', p.40

1.2 Nomenklatura, Corruption and the Criminal Underworld

Each territorial unit in the Soviet Union had its own *nomenklatura*, or a highly centralized body of bureaucrats and Communist Party officials with formal decision-making powers. These bureaucratic bodies were in charge of domestic affairs, whereas all the key ministries responsible for implementing economic and industrial policies, as well as the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Defense, were located in the Union center, Moscow.[23] The center filled in the supervisory role for the local bureaucracies and distributed resources among the territorial units. For instance, decisions regarding the industrial production were dictated from the centralized agencies in Moscow – orders on how much to produce, how many workers to hire, or even where to acquire raw materials from.

The centralized nature of the *nomenklatura* coordination meant that local officials were left with very little room to maneuver. This was especially true of those responsible for meeting the production targets set by the Central Planning Committee in Moscow. Because of centralization and inefficiency of the command system, the officials were not always able to meet their targets. The members of local *nomenklatura* faced a dilemma: either they had to follow the rules, fail to meet the production targets and thus lose prospects for promotion (and sometimes even their jobs), or they had to bend rules to achieve the targets in some other ways. Usually the latter choice involved creation of networks of officials who 'covered' for each other in exchange for similar favors. In this way, entrenched local elites developed strong networks in their respective republics, with ensuing shadow economies (this was especially true in the case of Georgia) and corruption.

[23] Wheatley, '*Georgia from National Awakening*', p. 20

With time, corruption became a widespread phenomenon usually characterized by secrecy, capturing the entire hierarchy of the Communist Party and members of the bureaucracy. According to Ghia Nodia, these groups eventually became insulated from the rest of the society:

> Markers such as occupation were secondary: the bureaucrats who worked for the communist party, the manager of a big factory, the university rector and the secretary of the composers' union all attended the same meetings, spent their holidays in the same resorts for the privileged.

Such practices especially characterized the Georgian *nomenklatura*, as the cultural norm of favoring ones' relatives and close friends together with deep cynicism towards the official ideology created fertile grounds for the cultivation of vast corrupt hierarchies.[24] Due to this fact, the Georgian *nomenklatura* and the Communist party came to represent a social stratum, representing the interests of certain clans, rather than a political organization. This quality became even more evident with the emergence of the national movement: the Communist party, anxious to secure the interests of its inner circle, was particularly reluctant to reform and to share their monopoly on power.[25]

To summarize, the organizational culture of the Soviet *nomenklatura* was characterized by rule breaking, dissimulation, corruption, clientelism, indifference towards ordinary citizens and extreme degree of dependency on superiors. And this was especially true in Georgia.[26] This culture remained prevalent even after the weakening of the Communist regime, as the new political forces followed similar organizational customs, thereby making it hard to establish the principle of democratic accountability.

[24] Wheatley, '*Georgia from National Awakening*', pp. 23
[25] Jonathan Aves, '*Paths to National Independence in Georgia, 1987-1990*', London: The School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, pp. 47
[26] Wheatley, '*Georgia from National Awakening*', p. 24

The absence of self-constituted mechanisms of social organization made it difficult for the society to organize itself into self-aware groups with concrete interests. Moreover, the Soviet resistance to formation of independent groups resulted in absence of the civil society tradition, which effectively impeded the development of a tolerant, democratic political culture. Instead, as the *Perestroika* revealed, the political scene in Georgia was highly fragmented, representing mainly the interests of family based clans and criminal networks.

Under these circumstances, only two independent organizations could exist in the Soviet society: the criminal underworld and the underground dissident organizations. The criminal underworld constituted a separate culture with its own code of ethics and financial resources. In Georgia, the criminal underworld invoked in much of the younger generation a particular admiration; in contrast to those serving in the ranks of the *nomenklatura*, the criminal was seen as more noble and honest. The Georgian term, *kurduli gageba*, or literally 'thieves understanding', or the code of honor within the criminal underworld, was highly esteemed by young Georgians.[27] It was this culture of 'thieves' understanding' that united the future Georgian paramilitary organizations such as *Mkhdrioni* and the National Guard.

In theory, the ideological antagonism between the *nomenklatura* and the criminal underworld would be irreconcilable; however, this was not the case. Through social networks represented by what Nodia calls the 'shadow economic elite' or those "who stole raw materials and finished products and sold them on the black market", the members of the criminal world were linked to the *nomenklatura*.[28] The *nomenklatura* provided with the legal cover, whereas the criminal underworld sustained the black market, and in this way their mutual benefaction brought these groups closer. The political opportunities brought about by *Perestroika* helped the criminal

[27] Wheatley, '*Georgia from National Awakening*', p. 38
[28] Jonathan Wheatley, 'Group Dynamics and Institutional Change in Georgia: A Four Region Comparison' available at: http://www.oei.fu-berlin.de/en/projekte/cscca/downloads/jw_prop.pdf

elements to participate in the political processes, usually through organizing paramilitary organizations.

The dissident organizations were relatively weak: usually they consisted of small groups of intellectuals who did not have access to institutional resources and were crucially obstructed from their activities by the official establishment.[29] The *Perestroika* campaign allowed these groups to surface and in certain cases as in Georgia, these groups actually formed the main locus of the national movement. However, as the Georgian experience demonstrated, the dissident inspired movement soon turned into a repressive regime acting along the lines of its Soviet counterparts.

In short, the weakness or absence of legitimate political institutions under the Soviet rule discouraged the building of formal organizations to promote the shared interests of the citizens. In this context a myriad of discrete informal networks, in which economic, social and cultural benefits maximized and flourished, thus creating obstacles to political and social integration.[30] Due to the absence of other independent organizations the development of the political culture in Georgia was shaped by elements from the Soviet past: by the members of the regime, the dissidents and the criminal underworld.

1.3 The Main Actors

1.3.1 The 'Radicals'

The evolution of the Georgian national movement was inspired by the dissident activities of a small group of intellectuals led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Merab Kostava. Gamsakhurdia, son of a renowned Georgian literary figure Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, had already made a name

[29] Philip G. Roeder, 'Soviet Federalism', p. 209
[30] Aves, '*Paths to Independence*', p. 15

for himself in 1972, in a campaign against the apparent manipulation that surrounded the appointment of a new Katolikos, the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church.[31] In January 1977, he founded the Georgian Helsinki Watch Group which monitored the human rights issues in Georgia. Gamsakhurdia and his followers were soon jailed by the Soviet authorities for anti-regime campaigning. Gamsakhurdia was released after repenting the 'errors of his judgment' on national television, while Kostava chose to stand his ground and was imprisoned until 1987.

In 1987, seven prominent dissidents established the Ilia Chavchavadze Society, an organization which aimed to prepare the Georgian nation for an eventual independence. The splinters from this organization created several radical political parties which became known for their radical stance towards the authorities. The radical parties defended the idea that any participation within the structures of the "occupation regime" was morally and politically unacceptable.[32] Because of this stance, the formation of an all inclusive Popular Front (as in the Baltic States) became hard to achieve. In fact, during the *Perestroika* similar 'radical' organizations could be found in many places, but in Georgia these parties were able to command more popularity than the moderate political organizations.

1.3.2 The 'Moderates'

Moderate activists began to play an influential role in Georgian politics from the beginning of 1988 by campaigning over relatively 'safe issues', such as ecology and cultural rights. For instance, in 1987-1988 the moderates were active in campaigning against the building of a massive hydro-electric scheme, against the construction of the Transcaucasian railway and

[31] Aves, '*Paths to Independence*', p. 8
[32] Ghia Nodia, 'Political Turmoil in Georgia and the Ethnic Policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia', ed. Bruno Coppieters, *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, VUB University Press: Brussels, 1996, available at: http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/ContBorders/eng/ch0201.htm

confronted the Soviet army over the usage of a medieval Davit Gareja monastery grounds for firing practice.[33] These 'moderate' activists united under the organization known as the Caucasian Club in 1988 and participated in efforts to organize a Popular Front according to the Baltic model.

The moderates, represented by a historian, Giorgi Zhorzholiani, a physicist, Giorgi Tarkhan-Mouravi, a film director, Eldar Shengelaia and philosophers Nodar Natadze and Merab Mamardashvili were unable to awaken much popular response from the Georgian public opinion. Although they called themselves "movement", they were in fact small clubs of intellectuals who argued about political theory rather than initiated a concrete political action.[34] The only comparatively strong organization of the moderate opposition, the Popular Front of Georgia, could not hold its founding meeting until late July 1989 (after the April 9 massacre), at a time when negotiations with the Soviet authorities were widely perceived as unpopular.

1.3.3 The Popular Forum *Aidgylara* – Abkhazia

In November 1988, an initiative group based on the Abkhaz Writers' Union was formed to prepare for the formation of the Abkhaz Popular Forum or *Aidyglara*. The following year, *Aidyglara* became a moving force behind the establishment of the Assembly of the Mountainous Peoples, which later became a vehicle for support of the Abkhaz separation from Georgia. The movement initially campaigned for the protection of rights of the Abkhaz involved in the ethnic riots in July 1989 and frequently appealed to Moscow for help.[35] The organization also participated on several occasions in conferences organized by the Georgian Popular Forum, but

[33] Aves, '*Paths to Independence*', p. 11
[34] Nodia, 'Political Turmoil in Georgia', ch.2, p. 3
[35] Jonathan Aves, 'The rise and fall of the Georgian Nationalist Movement' in Hosking, Aves and Duncan (eds.), *The Road to Post-Communism: Independent Movements in the Soviet Union 1985-1991,* London and New York: Pinter Publishers, 1992, pp. 160

because of radical factions' dominance on both sides, the movement was unable to establish partnership with the Georgian moderate organizations.

Moreover, by the end of 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union imminent, Abkhaz authorities established a National Guard, consisting of approximately 250 ex-Soviet servicemen. Parallel to this, a battalion of internal troops several hundred strong was also established under the authority of the Abkhaz ministry of internal affairs.[36]

1.3.4 *Ademon Nykhas* – South Ossetia

Ossetians responded to Abkhaz and Georgian mobilizations by forming a popular front called *Ademon Nykhas* in January 1989. Led by a historian Alan Chochiev, among its first public actions *Ademon Nykhas* expressed solidarity with the Abkhaz attempts to gain more autonomy from Georgia, hoping the precedent would help Ossetians rejoin their Northern brethren.[37] Initially the organization was not supported by the local Communist leadership in South Ossetia, but with the radicalization of the Georgian rhetoric, it was able to take the Ossetian parliament under control.

In South Ossetia, a similar pattern of armed mobilization developed in response to what many in the region perceived as violent threats by Georgians against their communities. Beginning in 1989, several militias and paramilitary groups were established, including the armed wings of local political organizations, South Ossetian special purpose military detachments, and the Republican Guard.[38]

[36] Demetriou, Spyros, 'Politics from the Barrel of the Gun: Small Arm Proliferation and Conflict in the Republic of Georgia,' in *Small Arms Survey*, Occasional Paper No. 6, November 2002, available at: http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/files/sas/publications/o_papers_pdf/2002-op06-georgia.pdf
[37] Kaufmann, 'Modern Hatreds', pp. 107
[38] Spyros, 'Politics from the Barrel', p.5

1.3.5 The Paramilitary Organizations *Mkhedrioni* and the National Guard

The major Georgian paramilitary groupings, *Mkhedrioni* (Horsemen) and the National Guard were heavily based on the traditions of the criminal underworld. These organizations were instrumental in initiating armed clashes with the ethnic minorities, as well as fueling intra-movement tensions which led to the civil war and ousting of Georgia's first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Mkhedrioni was led by a former bank robber and murderer, tuned playwright critic Jaba Ioseliani, who was also a "lawful criminal" – elite member of the criminal authority. At the height of its activities it boasted around 5,000 members, many with criminal records who survived on drug smuggling, robberies, offering protection to the businesses and roadblocks to collect tributes from drivers.[39] The lack of professional cadres in *Mkhedrioni* contributed to the mistreatment of civilians in conflict zones in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and even in Georgian cities.

The second main paramilitary group in Georgia was the National Guard, a loose amalgam of 'National Self-Defense' groups (numbering several hundred men) created in late 1989 in response to the incipient South Ossetian conflict.[40] The group headed by the former architect Tengiz Kitovani, eventually acquired a semi-legal status within the Georgian constitution, but during the civil war split into two, a pro-Gamsakhurdia and an anti-Gamsakhurdia camp. Both Georgian political paramilitaries in the 1989–91 period were inherently fragmented, mutually antagonistic, and organized on the basis of neighborhood or family clans or 'brotherhoods'.

[39] Wheatley, '*From Awakening,*' p. 55
[40], Spyros, 'Politics from the Barrel,' p. 7

Chapter 2: Radicalization of the movement against the Communist Regime

From 1986 onwards, the *Perestroika* campaign resulted in the polarization of the political organizations in Georgia. The dissident groups and the oppositional movements previously active only underground, eventually came to spearhead a mass-led Georgian national mobilization which in the following years manifested its strength primarily through street protests. In October 1987, the founding chapter of the umbrella organization for radical nationalist activists, Ilia Chavchavadze Society, aimed 'to encourage the political development and education of the Georgian people, in order to prepare them for *future* independence'.[41] Therefore, the separation from the Soviet Union was not the national movement's immediate political goal, as it aimed to gain wider autonomy from the center in line with the liberalization process of the *Perestroika* campaign.

The agenda of the national movement was impeded by the entrenched Georgian Communist leadership, who was reluctant to assist the democratization of the political sphere in Georgia. Initially, the Georgia movement did not explicitly rally on nationalist issues, but with the gradual politization of similar movements across the Soviet Union, it soon challenged the local regime with overtly nationalist demands. A series of mass demonstrations visibly weakened the republican Communists, who fearing a growing disapproval had to succumb to the nationalists' demands on several occasions. In April 1989, the communists tried an alternative strategy of dealing with the growing popularity of the national movement. Amidst the mass demonstrations for the secession from the Soviet Union, the Communist leaders authorized a military action against the demonstrators. As a consequence, 20 people were killed and hundreds

[41] Aves, '*Paths to Independence in Georgia,*' p.9

were injured, not to mention the massive political and social outcomes that resulted from this event.

In this chapter, I present the temporal division of occurrences, or politically generated ruptures, which had a causal effect on the galvanizing event of April 9, event that fundamentally transformed the existing structures and practices. I make two categorizations regarding the phases of contention between the national movement and the regime: the quiet phase and the loud phase. In the former, crucial events materialized, but did not involve popular upheavals or demonstrations. In the latter phase, the confrontation was mainly manifested through mass protests, which eventually provoked a violent reaction from the state and thus resulted in radicalization of the society along with the national movement.

The actions of the communist leaders in Georgia negatively influenced the dynamics of the national movement. Instead of co-opting the unofficial political groupings and the popular sympathy which they evoked, the reaction towards the emergence of political organizations was drastic. The Georgian authorities' initial response to the creation of Ilia Chavchavadze Society in October 1987, was virtually indistinguishable from the tactics of threats, detention and arrests employed against the Georgian human rights movement during the repressive years of Gorbachev's predecessors.[42]

Furthermore, the Georgian communist leadership attempted to take control of the social liberalization by establishing other official 'public' organizations such as the Rustaveli Society, which along with the faithful *nomenklatura* members also included moderate Georgian intellectuals. In this way, the Communist Party sidelined a significant section of the Georgian intelligentsia who would otherwise have looked to a Popular Front for leadership. The communist leadership did not favor the remaining moderate forces either; they were constantly denied

[42] Beissinger, '*Nationalist Mobilization*', p.180

permission to register, to hold rallies or to establish headquarters for their organizations. The radicals in this respect were much more effective: they defied the government restrictions on organizing demonstrations and forcefully occupied government property.[43] Moreover, the tactics of the communist leaders in fact served the radicals' aims; for instance, they did not obstruct the formation of the paramilitary bands attached to the radical organizations and even provided them with media space.

The actions of communist leaders, Nodia explains, were reasoned by the assertion that the moderates – striving for power through official institutional mechanisms – were potentially more dangerous than the radicals who just "walked in the streets" and "shouted a lot".[44] However, this strategy eventually created a much more popular and formidable adversary than the communist leadership expected. In two years after the foundation of the Ilia Chavchavadze Society, the political landscape in Georgia drastically changed in favor of the radicals. The Georgian Communist leadership was replaced by Moscow, the moderate organizations were effectively sidelined and the most radical nationalist groups became the national movement champions.

The unwillingness of the authorities to cooperate with the emerging political organizations does not provide a full picture of why the radical organizations were eventually able to garner the most popular support. Similarly, the authorities did not support the moderate organizations which were unable to capitalize on this confrontation and thus were unable to improve their political position. In short, the existing condition – the authorities' opposition to the emerging movements – may help explain why Georgia was vulnerable to mass upheavals, but it does not explain what actually occurred. For this reason, I analyze the chain of events that led to

[43] Nodia, 'Political Turmoil in Georgia', p.3
[44] *Ibid*. p.4

the April 9 massacre, which I argue had the transformative power that precipitated the radicalization of the society.

2.1 The Quiet Phase of the Confrontation

In the quiet phase of the confrontation, I discuss two events: the opposition to the construction of the Transcaucasian railway and the Enguri hydro-electric scheme in mid 1987, and the dispute over the use of Davit Garedji Monastery grounds for military exercises.

An initial focus of attention of the emerging national movement was the Transcaucasian Railway project – the most expensive "would be" project in Georgia's history, which envisaged the building of a railway through the Caucasus, directly linking Georgia to Russia. The project attracted heavy criticism from the opposition because of environmental consequences due to construction and the planned destruction of historical monuments on its path.[45] Simultaneously, the protest also centered on the issue of construction of the hydro-electric scheme on the Enguri River. The opposition to these project actually resulted in the first media debate in a true sense in Georgia, and hence the first expression of *Perestroika*.

Of course the economic benefit of these projects was unquestionable and ecological concerns were of secondary nature. More importantly, the opposition to these projects carried a national character, as the railway would create a direct link with Russia and lead to immigration of non-Georgians to the republic. As for the construction of the electric scheme, the avalanches in the mountainous Svaneti region during the same year were blamed on the construction of too many hydro-electric stations.[46] Whether this was right or wrong mattered little: there was a

[45] Cornell, '*Autonomy and Conflict*', p.154
[46] Ironically, even today Georgia suffers from power shortages.

widespread conviction that the local government did not care about the welfare of the nation.[47] A declaration, signed by 800 writers, artists and scientists in June 1987 (among them Merab Kostava and Zviad Gamsakhurdia), addressed Secretary-General Gorbachev arguing that these projects were a breach of Georgia's sovereignty.[48]

The response from the local authorities was unserious and flippant: they reacted by introducing a new slogan, typical of the Soviet view on environment: 'Enguri we will tame you!' Even worse, the officials promoted this slogan in both Russian and Georgian languages, hence failing to grasp the popular mood.[49] The dissidents and the other moderate groupings tried to win over these issues though hunger strikes, petitions, articles in the media but it was not until a year later when first serious demonstrations forced the Georgian communist leadership to concede to the national movement's demands. Later, Zurab Zhvania, a member of the Green party at a time, remarked, "Really, it was the question of the Transcaucasian Railway, which got things moving; which turned out to be the concrete question with already ripened desire for broad changes."[50] The authorities' inflexible responses to these very concrete issues undermined their shrinking popularity even more.

Another issue that caused public outrage was the Soviet troops' use of the area near the David Gareji monastic complex as a shooting range. This concern was mishandled as well: after a year of stalling the Soviet defense ministry finally agreed to move military firing away from the monastery complex, only to restart training a month later. By fall 1988 the public frustration over

[47] Parsons, 'Georgia and the Georgians', *Transcaucasia: Nationalism and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia,* ed. Ronald Grigor Suny, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996, p. 298

[48] Bruno Coppieters, 'In defense of the Homeland: Intellectuals and the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict', *Secession, History and Social Sciences,* ed. Bruno Coppieters and Michel Huysseune, Brussels University press, 2002 p. 96

[49] Aves, *Paths to independence in Georgia,* p.12

[50] *Ibid*. p.13

these non-nationalist issues boiled over when the introduction of Soviet Constitutional reform gave impetus to mass demonstrations. Again, the authorities were unwilling to cooperate and take action for legitimate concerns raised by the dissident groups unless they were pressured through demonstrations.

The radicals, such as Gamsakhurdia, Kostava and another dissident Giorgi Chanturia, constantly grabbed the political limelight by organizing a series of demonstrations in 1988, mainly centering on the issues discussed above. The rallies were held continuously, sometimes attracting 5,000 people – an insignificant number of demonstrators to achieve the far-fetching goals of the movement. The radicals understood well that these issues would not shape the popular support for Georgia's independence. For this reason, the non-nationalist issues were used as a pretext for mass gatherings, where the radicals experimented with the nationalist rhetoric. For instance, during the October 1988 demonstrations, the radicals tried to stir the crowd over the alleged rape of a Georgian girl by an Azerbaijani, but the response was modest. [51] The real breakthrough came with the talks over adoption of a new Soviet Union constitution in November 1988.

2.2 The Loud Phase

It was within the context of these non-nationalist issues that the explosion of the nationalist mobilization encompassed Georgia in November 1988 and April 1989. In both cases, the radical nationalist movements sought to utilize the public mood of frustration and outrage with Moscow over other issues to refocus nationalist consciousness around demands for independence.[52] The mobilization under the secessionist banners in November 1988 eventually

[51] *Ibid*. p.11
[52] Beissinger, '*Nationalist Mobilization*', p. 181

subsided. But what ultimately radicalized the public mood and the national movement with it, was the massacre of April 9.

The focus of mobilizations in November was the proposed Soviet constitutional changes which would give the Soviet center the right to strike down any republican law which contradicted the all-Union law and the right to reject the petition on secession.[53] The unresolved grievances over the protection of historical monuments and ecological issues surfaced as well. On November 29, more than 200,000 thousand people attended the rally, which made the Georgian communist leadership panic and beg Moscow for introduction of the martial law. The request was dismissed and instead Moscow dispatched former Georgian party boss and Soviet Union's foreign minister at a time, Eduard Shevardnadze with a message assuring the Georgian population that their demands would be met. Shortly after, the crowd dispersed and demonstrations ceased, much to the chagrin of the secessionist nationalists, who had hoped to be catapulted into power as a result of regime collapse.[54]

The protests were muted, but not for long. In April 1989, demonstrations started as a reaction to the mass demonstration in Abkhazia for secession from Georgia. A crowd of over 200,000 people gathered in front of the Georgian House of Government beginning April 4th and under the lead of the nationalist leaders, radicalized in a secessionist direction. On April 7th the Communist party leader Jumber Patiashvili sent a telegram to Moscow asking for permission to arrest the leaders and impose martial law. This time, in the absence of Shevardnadze and Gorbachev on a working trip to Great Britain, the request was granted by conservative elements in Moscow.

[53] Wheatley, '*Georgia from National Awakening,*' p.42
[54] Beissinger, '*Nationalist Mobilization,*' p.182

In the early hours of April 9, the Soviet military dispersed a crowd of demonstrators, killing twenty civilians and injuring hundreds using sharpened shovels and tear-gas. The reaction was equivocal: the radicals' calls for secession finally found its audience.

2.2.1 The April 9 Event

April 9 had a powerful lingering effect. The effects of the political conjuncture became gradually clear – the Georgian Communist leadership was sacked by Moscow, the new leadership adopted the national sovereignty and approved the supremacy of Georgian law over the Union law, the radicals championed their dominance over other political groupings and the confrontation with the minorities acquired a violent nature.

The reflection on the event that followed combined the terms of "tragedy", "massacre", "heroism", "sacrifice", "national awakening" and so on, took authoritative meanings, which transformed the Georgian political culture in favor of the radicals. In the past, the radicals tried hard to mobilize the population against the "oppressive forces of occupation" and rejected compromise on moral grounds as if it were equivalent to "improving the conditions in the Gulag camp". The imagery of national strive crystallized into reality, evidenced by deaths of 20 peaceful demonstrators, 16 of whom were teenage girls. In this way, the nationalist conceptions of the bright future following Georgia's independence, contrasted by the oppressiveness of the Communist regime, became of critical importance for all Georgians.

The symbolic interpretation of this event is crucial to understanding its effects. It would be artificial to conceptualize the April 9 event just as a statistical milestone of human deaths. Those who challenged the Soviet authority did it because for them the Soviet rule represented a barrier to the fulfillment of national potential; their actions were already symbolically motivated. Furthermore, the data, the journalist accounts and the investigative commission suggest that

many people joined the demonstration after rumors of suppression had surfaced.[55] In addition, the crowd was continuously asked by the Katolikos Ilia II to disperse from the demonstration in face of looming danger, a plea that was ignored. Therefore, this event encompasses the characteristics of deliberate sacrifice and what followed, was the actual illustration of the despotism of Soviet rule over the society.

A constitutive ingredient of this event was the emotional reaction that followed it. The emotional tone was that of repulsion over the excessive coercion against civilians and associations were made between the oppression and the foreign power. Initially it was widely perceived that most people had died from the injuries sustained by the sharpened shovels. The effect was obnoxious: teenage girls chopped with shovels by armed Soviet military.[56] Only later it was concluded that many died from a strange reaction to the chemical composition of the tear gas. But it did not matter, the emotion of repulsion was sustained, which became evident through the opinion pole conducted five months later, revealing that 92% of Georgians wanted to see Georgia out of the Soviet Union, the highest percentage among all other peoples at the time.[57]

The cultural transformation effected by this event was stimulated by shifts both in resources and in modes of power. The newly appointed communist leaders tried to adapt to the new political atmosphere by cooperating with the movements and supplying them with organizational resources, by allowing the formation of paramilitaries and by upholding their aggressive strategy towards the minorities.[58] Furthermore, the radicals came to be perceived as the only grouping that represented national interests. As Ghia Nodia points out:

[55] Beissinger, '*Nationalist Mobilization*', p. 351.
[56] The Georgian police forces did not participate in the operation, it was the special Soviet Airborne regiment that carried out the task.
[57] Aves, '*Paths to Independence*', p. 2
[58] For instance, the new secretary, Givi Gumbaridze, participated in Gamsakhurdia's March on South Ossetia. The March was intended to intimidate the local Ossetian population with show of

> After the massacre of April 9… it became impossible for anybody to say anything in favor of communism or the Soviet Union in public. One can say that although the Communist Party was nominally in power until the fall of 1990, the legitimacy of Soviet rule in Georgia really ended in April 1989, and the agenda was being completely and definitely set by the nationalist movement.

The event was transformative in the rise of nationalism as well. Anatolii Sobchak, who led the investigation of the April 9 events, had noted that before the massacre "the majority of the People were still not prepared to give them [nationalists] their active support… The nation still slept and it was necessary to awaken it."[59] The awakening came from the unintended consequences of the awkward response by the Georgian communist party leaders to the April demonstrations.

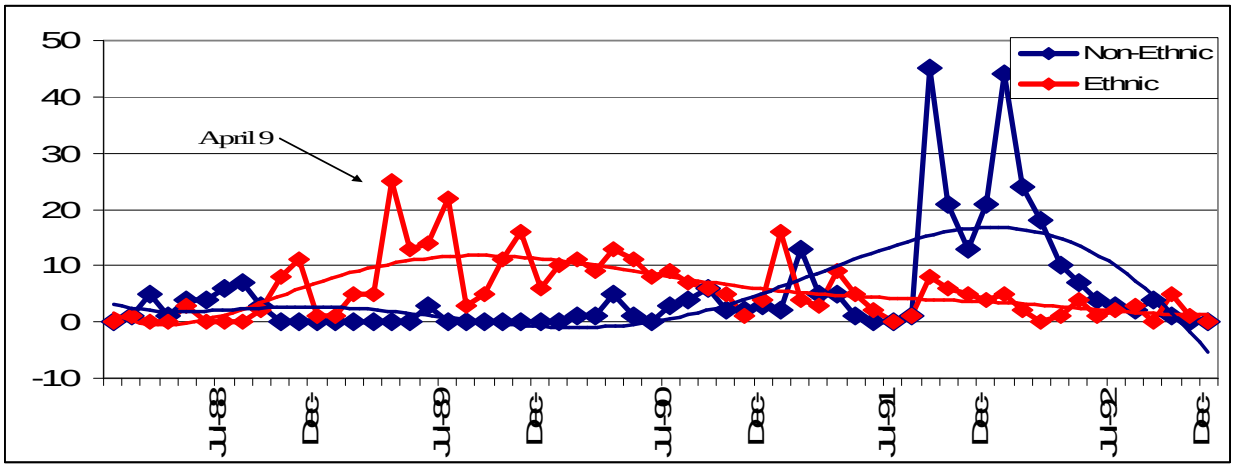
These developments can be easily traced if one looks at the evolution and proliferation of demonstrations with nationalist character after April 9[60]. Figure 1 below plots the intensity of demonstrations (as captured by number of demonstrations per month) over the 88-92 period.

'number power'. The tactics were so controversial that few members of the radical movement split to form their own organization.

[59] *Ibid*.

[60] Over issues such as secession from the Soviet Union, commemoration of the events from the past, withdrawal of the Soviet army from the country, etc.

Figure 1.Number of demonstration over Nationalist and Non-nationalist issue among ethnic Georgians[61]



Source: Author's own calculations

The frequency of demonstrations over ethno-nationalist demands considerably increased after the November 1988 and more so after April 1989, dynamics that suggests the radicalization of popular mood. It is also evident that non-nationalist issues continued to play a pivotal role in the mobilization of crowds, but with considerably less frequency and density. Towards the end of the period, the rise in non-ethnic demonstrations refers to the confrontations between Gamsachurdia and his opposition. The events that followed the aftermath of the April 9 massacres, put less emphasis on popular demonstrations, but instead centered on more assertive policies of the national movement, the ones which attempted to resolve the growing 'problem' of Georgia's minorities.

To sum up, the shock triggered by the April 9 event fundamentally changed the political environment in Georgia. First, the radical organizations of the national movement came to dominate the Georgian political spectrum and anything short of an anti-Soviet position became

[61] It should also be mentioned that the nationalist demonstrations were effective until the Soviet center still exercised legitimacy in Georgia. For instance, the April 9 demonstrations were directed towards Moscow to take action against the Abkhaz and to devolve more powers to the national movement. Once the Soviet power waned, and the nationalists took control of the republic, the demonstrations of this nature subsided – the nationalist grievances were resolved more effectively through armed confrontations.

widely frowned upon. And second, the communist rule lost its last vestige of legitimacy. In the period April 1989 - October 1990, Georgia lived under a divided rule: the communist government in power continued to carry out the routine management while all important political decisions were taken under pressure by or with the consent of the national movement.[62] In the following chapter, I will discuss the aftermath of April 9 and the transformation of national movements' assertiveness against the minorities.

[62] Ghia Nodia, '*Two Attempts to Establish Democracy in Georgia: Summarizing a 15 Year-Long Journey*', in Building Democracy in Georgia: Attempts to Establish Democracy in Georgia, *Discussion Paper 1*, May 2003. available at: http://www.idea.int/publications/georgia/upload/Book-01_scr.pdf

Chapter 3: Radicalization of the Georgian National Movement against the Minorities

Along with the struggle to achieve independence from the Soviet rule, the main aim of the Georgian national movement was to ensure territorial integrity of the country. As mentioned previously, the emergence of Abkhaz and Ossetian nationalist organizations caused suspicion among the leaders of the Georgian movement, as well as among the society at large. The clash between the national movements was inevitable, as their programs openly contradicted each other: the Abkhaz and Ossetian movements oriented themselves towards the Soviet sovereignty, whereas the Georgian national movement refused to cooperate with the Soviet authorities. Moreover, the Abkhaz and South Ossetian nationalists clearly preferred to opt out from being parts of Georgia – logically, a completely unacceptable program for their Georgian counterparts. The actions from all sides encouraged radicalization within the movements and the societies, and as a result, the radical factions became dominant forces within their respective movements.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the April 9 event decisively undermined the position of the communist government in Georgia. Since then, the Georgian radical movement swayed the political spectrum in its favor and thus was able to impose its own agenda regarding the minorities. A series of events eventually pitted the groups against each-other and unlike the earlier confrontation with the Soviet center, the disputes came to be resolved through the use of force. In this chapter I examine the issues surrounding the mobilization of the minorities, as well as analyze the sequence of occurrences which galvanized the confrontation between the minorities and the Georgian national movement. I argue that the processes associated with the

Georgian strive for independence were directly connected with the eventual violent outcome of the confrontation with the minorities.

There are many accounts explaining why the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia erupted.[63] Some catalogue these conflicts as being 'ethnic', resulting from centuries long 'hatreds' between the groups, others think it is the security concerns of the groups that caused the outbreak of violence, while many point to the mistreatment of the minorities as the main rationale for the minority claims to independence from Georgia. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to argue for one theory or another, all theories generally accept that the re-definition of the existing borders significantly contributed to the wave of violence. I concur with the idea that the main issue of contention was the conflicting national programs of the Georgians, South Ossetians and the Abkhaz. However, the conflict over political status does not automatically result in warfare, as many cases around the Soviet Union have shown.

For the most part, the conflicts over the redefinition of the borders in 1988 and 1989 were targeted against the Soviet authorities and the republican governments, and sought to force them to adopt policies to bring about the revision or maintenance of the borders.[64] The rationale is clear: if the borders were to be changed, Moscow had to agree to it and implement the changes. Once every decade since Stalin's death, the Abkhaz nationalists applied to Moscow for advance of the status of their autonomy to that of the union republic, but to no avail. The last letter sent by the future *Aidgylara* movement in November 1988 was rejected as well. The Soviet Union's

[63] Fiona Hill, *Report on ethnic conflicts in the Russian Federation and Transcaucasia*, Harvard University: Cambridge, Mass., 1993; Suzanne Goldenberg, Pride of Small Nations: the Caucasus and Post-Soviet disorder, Zed Books Ltd.: London, 1994; Alexei Zverev, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988 – 94," in Bruno Coppieters ed., Contested Borders in the Caucasus, VUB University Press: Brussels, 1996; Ghia Nodia, "Causes and Visions of Conflict in Abkhazia", Institute of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian studies, Berkely: University of California, 1997

[64] Beissinger, 'Nationalist Violence and the State: Political Authority and Contentious Repertoires in the former USSR', *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 4. p. 402

General Secretary at the time, Mikhail Gorbachev expressed his position in the 1988 Politburo meeting saying that "reviewing boundaries is unrealistic; that would mean going down a disastrous path, and not only in those regions [Caucasus]."[65] However, the unwillingness of the Soviet center to sympathize with the nationalist grievances was not always shared by the local communist leaders. In Abkhazia for instance, the nationalists were permitted to hold rallies and the communist leaders even attended them.

The sympathy of the local communist leadership proved to be a crucial factor for promoting separatism. The proximity to the communist leadership more than anything meant access to resources, media and institutional influence.[66] In South Ossetia, for instance, the nationalists were able to gain control of the parliament and to declare South Ossetia an autonomous republic on November 10, 1989 (from autonomous *oblast*) with a view to eventual unification with North Ossetia. For the numerically inferior South Ossetians[67] who did not argue about the change of borders previously, the mobilization would have been impossible had it not been for the sympathy of the local communist regime. Likewise, it would have been very hard or even impossible for the South Ossetian nationalist movement – *Ademon Nykhas* to mobilize crowds to topple the local authorities.

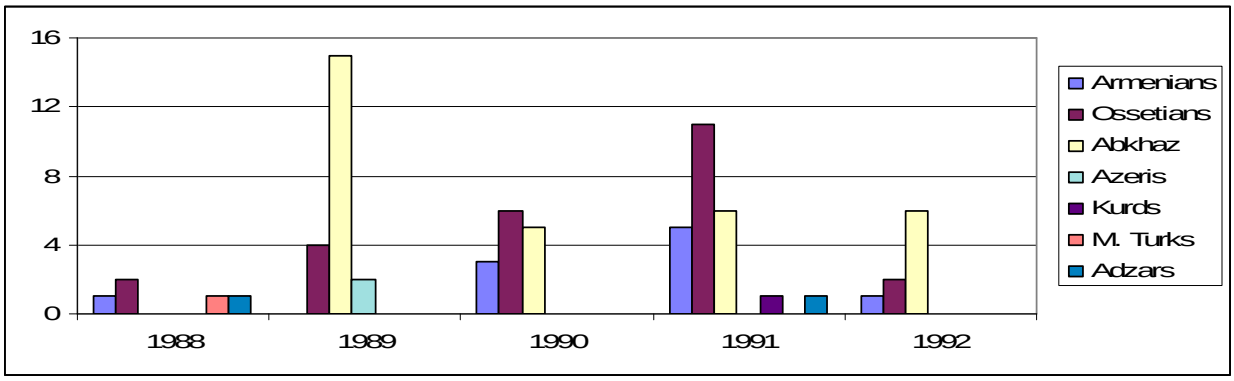
The same situation can be observed in Abkhazia, where signs of separatism were clearly visible within the communist leadership. In Georgia however, the national movement had to struggle against the republican communists before they could successfully challenge the Soviet center. It took months of protests and mobilizations, galvanized by the April 9 event before the will of the communist leadership was bent. Now, if we consider the minority movements facing

[65] Ibid, 409
[66] Philip G. Roeder, 'Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization', *World Politics*, Vol.43, No. 2, p.211
[67] 66,000 in 1989, see table 1.1

similar challenges before being able to exert any influence, it is highly unlikely that their anti-Georgian mobilizations would materialize as they did. In short, the sympathy of the local leadership was a key to successful mobilization.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that the existence of institutions in those autonomous regions was a crucial factor for the successful mobilization of the minorities. Once the nationalists were able to exert their influence, the institutions served as a vehicle of legitimate activities for those groups in power. In this way, the South Ossetian nationalists declared secession from Georgia through legitimate institutions. If one looks to other similarly assertive minorities (See Figure 2 below), for instance the numerically superior Armenians in the Javakheti region who also had their nationalist groupings but no official institutions, the importance of autonomous structures becomes even more obvious.

Figure 2. Number of mobilizations per year of different nationalities



Source: Author's calculations

The Armenians were also territorially concentrated close to their ethnic kin in the Armenian republic and numbered 150,000 members. The issues at stake for the Javakheti Armenians were very similar to those of the South Ossetians: language issues, concern with the rising nationalist rhetoric in Georgia, wish to reunite with Armenia, etc. Only that in Javakheti nothing significant happened because the nationalist organizations were unable to exert their influence over the population through legitimate channels. Moreover, the evidence of the mass

events in Georgia in the years 1988-1989 (See Figure 2 above), points to much higher levels of mobilization among the ethnic groups with autonomous status i.e. Abkhaz and Ossetians, than others. This fact is crucially connected to the existence of institutional structures which could be utilized for mobilization purposes.

Similarly, a successful mobilization is also significantly shaped by the activity of the external power. Both Abkhaz and South Ossetian movements were strengthened in various ways by certain elements in the Soviet center. For instance, at the height of the armed confrontation between the Georgian side and the South Ossetian militias in 1991, Moscow dispatched troops to keep the sides from fighting each-other and eventually transformed them into peacekeeping forces, troops which are stationed there till this day. For the numerically inferior South Ossetians, assistance from the Soviet center (later Russia) was the only real chance towards secession. In Abkhazia, high-ranking retired Soviet army generals helped the Abkhaz sketch the combat tactics, not to mention economic supplies, military technology and volunteers flooding from Russia.[68] The existence of potential 'rescue' emboldened the separatist movements to carry out their programs.

And lastly, it was the availability of the Soviet weapons in the region which made it possible for the movements to arm themselves. The ethnic confrontations in 1989 were rightly called "stone wars", in three years time the proliferation of arms transformed the mobs into armies. More importantly, the weapons came into hands of the groups that were backed by the official government. This enabled the institutionalization of violence which consequently helped sustain the violent conflicts, especially that Soviet institutions were hardly able to influence events any longer. In fact, the institutionalization of violence is a characteristic shared by all present day frozen conflicts from the Soviet era (South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno Karabakh

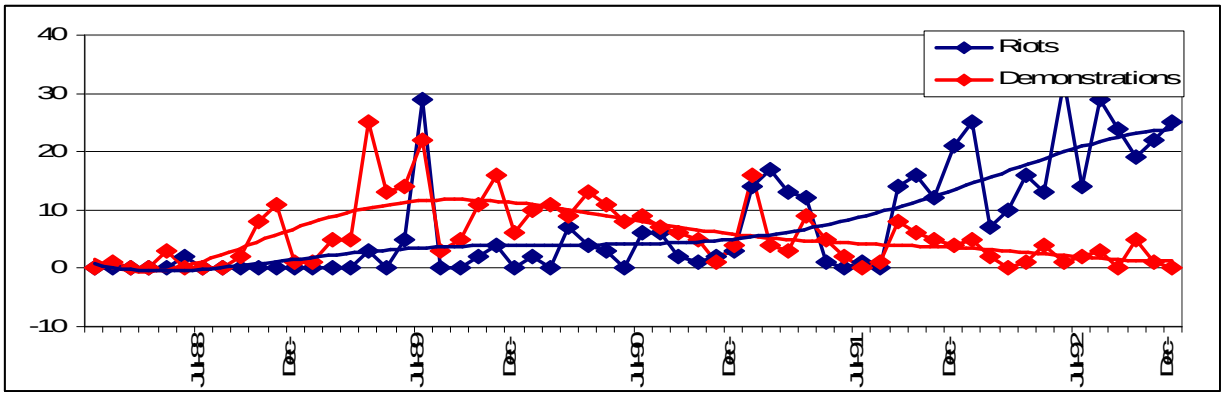
[68] Cornell, '*Autonomy and Conflict*', p.183

and Transnistria). Once the state structures got involved in organizing and sustaining the inter-ethnic violence, it was then that conflict proportions became massive.

The specific events which set waves of nationalist violence in motion often appear trivial; however, these events obviously have great meaning for those who were swept by them. They are constructed within a larger set of symbolic references which determine the intensity of the mobilization. For instance, at the height of contention, the introduction of the law strengthening the Georgian language in South Ossetia in 1989 might appear unimportant to an outsider, but in fact this event caused mass demonstrations and emboldened the Ossetian leadership to defy the Georgian republican government.

The analysis of data on mass events and demonstrations in Georgia, reveals another crucial factor: whereas waves of demonstrations characterized the years 1988-1989, at later stages mass violent events rose sharply (See Figure 3 below). This tendency needs further clarification. By means of non-violent methods such as demonstrations, sit-ins, or hunger strikes, the groups aimed to influence the Soviet center over their grievances. But after the *de-facto* fall of the Georgian communist regime and waning of the Soviet influence, the mobilization no longer aimed to topple the regime, but was turned against the ethnic groups who exhibited separatist intentions.

Figure 3. Number of demonstrations and riots per month from 1988-1992



Source: Author's own calculations

The non-violent methods of contention used against the communist regime were ineffective against the minorities: for instance, mass demonstrations in the Georgian capital would not necessarily influence the behavior of the minority leadership in Sokhumi (Abkhazia). For this reason, after the second half of 1989, a clear increase in the mass violent events can be observed (See Figure 3.3 below). The surge in violent events is explained by the change of authority in the country, as after the April 9 event, the Georgian nationalists came to dominate the nominally in power, but increasingly irrelevant communist leadership. In the following sections I will analyze the chain of events that influenced the assertiveness of the minority national movements, which in turn caused the radicalization of the Georgian national movement.

3.1 The Abkhaz Mobilization

The Georgian – Abkhaz war started eight months after the collapse of the Soviet Union in August 1992. By that time, Gamsakhurdia was ousted from power and many influential national movement leaders were sidelined from the political arena. Although the eventual war in Abkhazia was not between the Georgian national movement and its Abkhazian counterpart, it was the product of processes which were shaped during the years of the Soviet collapse. The conflict in Abkhazia is inseparable with the earlier confrontational dynamics between the Abkhaz nationalists and the Georgian national movement. In this section, I focus on the chain of events which determined the character of the Georgian – Abkhaz confrontation long before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Abkhaz national movement, *Aidgylara* emerged in late 1988 and early 1989 under the influence of major waves of Georgian mass demonstrations in November 1988, though it had

clear roots in the long record of attempts to separate from Georgia.[69] The history of Georgian – Abkhaz relations throughout the 20th century (see chapter 1) left painful memories which shaped the Abkhaz strive for independence. Before the *Perestroika* campaign, the last showdown between the Georgians and the Abkhaz took place in 1978, when the Georgians massively demonstrated against the proposed Soviet constitutional changes on the status of the Georgian language. As a response, the Abkhaz mobilized protests against the 'Georgianization' of Abkhazia. The Abkhaz separatism was thus already a well-established reaction before the onset of the *Perestroika* campaign.

Once the Georgian national movement emerged as a formidable force, the Abkhaz did not face significant institutional constraints to mobilize, since they enjoyed the support of the local communist leadership, and even the Soviet center. From the very start the Abkhaz movement supported the Soviet sovereignty over the region, and thus explicitly clashed with the Georgian movement's anti-Soviet stance.[70] Georgian – Abkhaz relations were tense throughout most part of the Soviet disintegration, but it was not until the summer of 1992 that the confrontation erupted into open hostility. The first large scale riots, however, took place three years earlier in July 1989.

In March 1989, 30,000 Abkhaz, including the Abkhaz communist leadership, gathered at the historical Lykhny field and approved a declaration condemning Abkhazia's 'illegal' incorporation into Georgia and called Moscow to upgrade Abkhazia's status to that of the union republic (thus separating it from Georgia).[71] The declaration provoked a series of demonstrations among the Georgian population in Abkhazia. Worse, the Abkhaz attack on the bus carrying leaders of the Ilia Chavchavadze Society caused a widespread outrage among the Georgians who

[69] Beissinger, '*Nationalist Mobilization*', p.223
[70] Beissinger, '*Nationalist Mobilization*', p.225
[71] Aves, 'The Rise and Fall of the Georgian Nationalist Movement', p.160

in turn massively mobilized for a series of protests starting from April 4. These events led to the suppression of the Georgian demonstrations by the Soviet military on April 9.

The April 9 event effectively diminished the role of the Communist Party in Tbilisi. In June, arguing that the Georgian communist party had distanced itself from Leninist principles and that Menshevik ideology had returned, the Abkhaz Communist Party petitioned the Central Committee of the Soviet Union to be removed from the ranks of the Georgian Communist Party and become directly subordinated to Moscow. For all practical purposes, the Communist Party in Abkhazia ceased to function as a division along ethnic lines took place, and the party was incapable of handling any concrete issues.[72]

A month later, the Georgians living in Abkhazia, emboldened with the appointment of a more conciliatory government in Tbilisi, demanded the central authorities to permit the establishment of their own university. The Communist government, considerably eager to please the nationalists, quickly approved the demand. As a result, twelve hundred Georgian students and three hundred Georgian instructors left the Abkhazian State University to set up a rival Georgian language affiliate of Tbilisi University in Sokhumi.[73] When the Abkhaz complaints reached Moscow and the investigation was conducted, the central authorities fearing a confrontation between Abkhaz and Georgians, advised the Georgian government to turn back its decision. The recommendation was rejected.

In the meantime the question of the bus attack was raised again. The Georgian side claimed that the attack was assisted by the local Abkhaz police. For self-protection, many Georgians started to arm themselves with hunting rifles. On July 12, the armed Abkhaz militia from the *Aidgylara* movement surrounded the local publishing house which was planning to

[72] Cornell, '*Autonomy and Conflict*', p. 172
[73] Beissinger, '*Nationalist Mobilization*', p. 301

publish the official rebuttal of the Soviet recommendation to turn back on the decision to allow the formation of Tbilisi University branch. There was no intervention from the police forces. Moreover, two days later, policemen of Georgian nationality were removed from the area surrounding the university and Abkhaz policemen were stationed instead.

A police unit sent from Tbilisi to help maintain the order was disarmed and dismissed by the Abkhaz interior ministry. Meanwhile, the groups of Abkhaz and Georgian demonstrators clashed in the Sokhumi center. The accounts of who sparked the clashes first are dubious. The same evening, a group of five thousand Abkhaz stormed the future Tbilisi branch university building "in spite of the close and one would have thought, threatening proximity of the police forces of the autonomous republic."[74]

This incident set off open warfare between the ethnic groups that soon encompassed the entire region: local Abkhaz policemen shot at unarmed Georgians, militia helicopters were used to transport Abkhaz combatants, and Abkhaz officials openly distributed weapons to the Abkhaz volunteers. Georgians "stormed" local police headquarters to obtain weapons. Later the investigation noted that police on both sides offered very little resistance to such raids, and even facilitated them to some extent.[75]

This set off a chain of events that produced casualties as both sides engaged in armed fighting for several days to come. The same evening, the Abkhaz and the Georgians mobilized all over Abkhazia and Western Georgia. The shooting spree lasted all night and intermittently for several days afterward. Meanwhile, 30,000 Georgians from the Western Georgia, led by the dissident Merab Kostava marched toward Sukhumi. The Abkhaz armed groups were able to organize a picket and block the Georgian marchers (some of whom were armed as well) at a

[74] *Ibid*. p. 303
[75] *Ibid.* p. 304

bridge outside the ethnically mixed town of Ochamchire. Kostava stopped the march, averting more bloodshed, and soon the Soviet Interior troops were invoked to reestablish order.

The July events in Abkhazia left at least eighteen dead (mostly Georgians) and 448 injured, of whom, according to official accounts, 302 were Georgians again. The Georgians suspected the attack on their university was intentionally staged by the Abkhaz secessionists in order to provoke a large-scale violence which would prompt Moscow to declare a martial law in the region, and thus deprive the government in Tbilisi of control over the autonomous structures in Abkhazia. At the same time, they accused the Soviet government of manipulating ethnic issues to curb Georgia's otherwise irrepressible independence movement. On the other hand, the Abkhaz claimed that the new university was an instrument in the hands of Georgians to reinforce their cultural dominance in the region, and continued to demand that the investigation of the July events be turned over to Moscow and that no branch of the Tbilisi State University be opened in Sukhumi.

3.1.1 The Event of 1989 July Riots

The July 1989 riots had a powerful effect on the relations between the Georgians and the Abkhaz. Several outcomes were arguably visible shortly after the riots. Since it became obvious that the Abkhaz could not face the Georgians alone, already in August 1989, *Aidgylara* held a founding conference of the Confederation of Mountainous People of Caucasus, which became the vehicle for organizing volunteer regiments to fight the Georgians during the war. Second, the complicity in the riot of local authorities became evident, as such an organizational efficiency was impossible to achieve without the direct involvement of law enforcement channels. It also became evident, that both groups needed to control the local institutions in order to be prepared for future confrontations. Thirdly, after the riots, the proliferation of the paramilitary

organizations (logically, due to changing nature of contention) can be observed on both sides. And lastly, the tragic outcomes of the riots heightened the interethnic suspicion and raised the security dilemma between the groups.

The riots once more sharpened the perceptions of victimization on both sides. For Georgians, it was the second time that Georgian blood was spilled on their own territory. The riots gave symbolic ammunition to radicals such as Gamsakhurdia, who were able to shape a psychological state of siege, where the minorities and the imperial power of the Soviet Union were undermining the mystical unity of Georgia.[76] Inevitably, behind the clashes, the national movement saw the Russian hand. Even the 'moderate' Popular Front of Georgia issued a statement in July 1989 saying "…the real instigators of these events are reactionary external forces which for decades artificially created the Abkhazian question and set the Abkhazian people against the Georgian."[77] Furthermore, the assault on the Georgian nation created a perception that the rights of Georgians living in the autonomies were infringed, and thus these people needed protection.

As for the Abkhaz side, the riots once again proved that their identity was endangered. The leaders of *Aidgylara* already perceiving the period of Abkhazia's inclusion into Georgia as a period "in which the Abkhaz people were undergoing annihilation", further pointed that the Georgian nationalist movement had "worked out a special program for combating the Abkhaz people and their cultural institutions".[78] In short, the event did not crystallize a new perception of

[76] Stephen Jones, "Georgia: Nationalism from under the Rubble," in *After Independence* , available at: http://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/0472098985-ch10.pdf

[77] Svetlana Chervonnaya, '*Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow*', (trans.) Ariane Chanturia, Glastonbury, Somerset, UK : Gothic Image, 1994

[78] John M. Cotter , 'Cultural Security Dilemmas and Ethnic Conflict in Georgia', *in The Journal of Conflict Studies*, available at: http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/JCS/bin/get4.cgi?directory=spring99/&filename=cotter.htm#58

Georgians among the Abkhaz, but rather provided with yet another example of Georgian aggression, for which the Abkhaz needed preparation and external support.

It is arguable whether the event had a significant transformative effect on the cultural modes of power in Abkhazia, as the national movement's position within the society was already firm. The same could be said about Georgia, as the April 9 event, largely sidelined the communist leadership in Tbilisi and placed the national movement at the leading positions of the country. These events confirmed that the Georgian and the Abkhazian national projects were bound to clash and the riots demonstrated the possible intensity of the clash. But instead of dissuading the two sides from engaging into a conflict of this nature, the riots confirmed that the armed conflict was inevitable.

In short, the Abkhaz fear of Georgian aggression was proven right, and the Georgian suspicions over the separatist motives of the Abkhaz were provided with evidence. The conflicting perceptions about the meaning of the clash were left unanswered, until the dynamics of future violence finally shaped the animosity between the groups. It dispelled the naivety of the Soviet style 'friendship of nations' and set off the armament of paramilitary organizations which would clash a few years later.

3.2 The South Ossetian Mobilization

The South Ossetians followed the Abkhaz example by founding their Popular Front, *Ademon Nykhas* in early 1989. A series of standoffs between the Ossetians and the Georgian national movement eventually resulted in armed clashes already at the end of 1989. By this time, the proliferation of paramilitary organizations defined a new phase in the national mobilization – the escalation of nationalist violence. The confrontations were characterized with low intensity

violence before the elections in Georgia in 1990 catapulted Gamsakhurdia into power. In the second half of the 1990, the fighting between the Georgian irregulars and the South Ossetian militia considerably escalated and did not stop until a year later.

Interestingly, the South Ossetian conflict was not shaped by a mass event, but by a series of decisions at the elite level. The Ossetians were not distinguished by a high level of popular mobilization either, between the years 1987-1992 only 24 demonstrations (many of which were low in numbers) took place. The conflict escalated not because of the low-scale ethnic violence in South Ossetia, but much more importantly due to the war of declarations and laws which was waged by the parliaments of Georgia and South Ossetia.

The major event that defined the nature of the conflict was the South Ossetians' desire to hold separate, unsanctioned elections and the subsequent annulment of the Ossetian Autonomy by the Georgian parliament. This was the immediate reason for a year-long war which resulted in hundreds dead. In this section I look at the chain of events that precipitated the South Ossetian conflict.

The *Ademon Nykhas*, among its first acts issued a statement supporting the *Aidgylara* to achieve greater autonomy from Georgia.[79] Its leader, Alan Chochiev expressed his hopes that a 'just solution to the Abkhaz Question will set a precedent for *de facto* parity between so-called Union and autonomous formations'. Clearly, Chochiev envisaged that the Abkhaz case would set a precedent for South Ossetia. However, Chochiev's views apparently were not shared by all Ossetians at the time. Many Ossetians rushed to stress their loyalty to Georgia and to emphasize the historical friendship of Georgians and Ossetians.[80]

[79] Kaufman, '*Modern Hatreds*', p.106
[80] Cornell, '*Autonomy and Conflict*', p.203

The issue was magnified in the Georgian media, and some Georgian observers blame Gamsakhurdia and the Georgian nationalist media for 'launching' Chochiev's career in Ossetia. Indeed, as Chochiev did not enjoy the support of the local Ossetian authorities at that time, his access to the media was certainly limited; hence the claim that most Ossetians learnt about Chochiev and his group from reading the Georgian press is not unfounded.[81]

In the meantime, confrontations at grassroots level were emerging. For instance, during the celebration of the Georgian independence day on May 26, 1989, the Ossetians snatched the Georgian flags of the independence years of 1918-1921 (under which their ancestors were killed) and publicly wiped their shoes with them.[82] But incidents of this kind were of isolated character, as a Georgian moderate Nodar Natadze observed. The tensions began rising when the riots of July 1989 took place in Abkhazia. Rumors started to circulate that armed Georgians were preparing to intervene into South Ossetia as well.

It seems that at this point the Ossetian *Ademon Nykhas* still did not possess the leverage over the local communist leadership, but its calls for demonstrations, campaigns for unification and constant emphasis on the nationalist rhetoric in Georgia were gradually getting resonance among the Ossetian population. In July, the First Secretary of the South Ossetian *Oblast* declared during the demonstration that *Ademon Nykhas's* demands for unification were groundless.[83] The balance of power within the Ossetian society became clearly tilted towards the radicals as Georgians attempted to promote Georgian as the sole language in entire Georgia, including its autonomies.

Georgia held parliamentary elections in October 1990. Previously, the Georgian parliament banned the regional parties from participating in the elections (particularly targeting

[81] *Ibid.* p. 205
[82] Kaufman, '*Modern Hatreds*', p.107
[83] Cornell, '*Autonomy and Conflict*', p.204

Ademon Nykhas and *Aidgylara*). It is unclear however, whether the parties were willing to participate in the elections at all. Gamsakhurdia, whose party gained the majority votes, initially promised to retain the South Ossetian autonomy, but once the South Ossetia declared its intention to hold separate elections, the Georgian parliament annulled its autonomy.

3.2.1 The Abolition of the South Ossetian Autonomy

The nature of this event is essentially a political decision which is conventionally based on a series of calculations. The Georgian side, however, did not have a clear idea of what to do once the South Ossetian autonomous *oblast* was abolished and open hostilities became inevitable. Subsequently, the Georgian parliament imposed martial law on the territory and sent into Tskhinvali (capital of South Ossetia) Ministry of Internal Affairs troops. In a few weeks time, the paramilitary organizations such as the National Guard, the Society of the white George and Merab Kostava's Society, were given free hand to enter Tskhinvali to 'protect' the Georgian territorial integrity. By the early February 1991, they were able to achieve a complete blockade of Tskhinvali, periodically harassing the local population.

The galvanizing events of April 9 massacre and July riots in Abkhazia, in a way demonstrated Georgia's inability to counter the challenges coming from the 'anti-independence' camp. South Ossetia's defiance to the Georgian authority came at the height of flourishing radicalism in Georgia, and thus was responded to by exaggerated measures. The decision of the Georgian leadership to raid South Ossetia is puzzling: even if the Ossetians were able to 'declare' independence and appoint elections, their actions were viewed as illegal even by the Soviet center, therefore, Georgia did not necessarily need to show its force. But the outcomes of the

decision were directly linked to the violence and the year long war, which was stopped only after the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia.

Another surprising dimension of the event is the conformity of the society as well as the newly elected parliament. Even the 'moderate' opposition leaders voted in favor of the abolition of the South Ossetian autonomy and the subsequent measures. The moderate Nodar Natadze explains: "we had no right not to abolish the South Ossetian autonomy, because it was illegitimately imposed by the Bolsheviks."[84] It seems that at this stage the society and political forces were at the height of radicalization

This event was transformative in terms of final decision by the Georgian government to force its jurisdiction on the assertive South Ossetia. If it were about fighting the 'extremists', as the officials claimed, then they had to come up with sustainable strategy of reassessing the jurisdiction over the territory. Instead, the chances of successful operation were hindered due to unprofessional and abusive behavior of the paramilitary originations

[84] Kaufman, '*Modern Hatreds*', p.111

Conclusion

The situation in Georgia in the late 1980s contained a number of elements that contributed to the radical character of the Georgian national movement. Foremost, it was the gradual dissolution of the Soviet Union and breakdown of the institutional cohesion that created grounds for massive political instability. The liberalization of the political sphere brought by the *Perestroika* campaign, for the first time enabled the emergence of multiple political organizations. These groupings succeeded in re-channeling the popular frustration with the corrupt Communist regime into their political agendas, which very soon involved nationalist demands. However, the Soviet legacy of a practically absent tradition of civil society obstructed the evolution of democratic and tolerant movements. Instead, and especially in the case of Georgia, the movements that came to dominate the political spectrum, were not much different from their communist predecessors in terms of their democratic credentials.

The breakup of the Soviet Union activated the legacy which it had been implementing on its territorial units for almost 80 years. As Georgia's experience has shown, the pre-existing social and political structures negatively affected the country's road to independence. This fact alone constitutes only half the story: the structures themselves do not define the outcomes, but rather shape the behavior of the actors. As initially observed, within a relatively short period of time, Georgia experienced a drastic surge in political instability and social transformation, unparalleled anywhere else in the Soviet Union. It was the main goal of this research to establish the relationship between the event-specific influences on the radicalization of the Georgian society.

As the analysis has shown, the radicalization of the Georgian society can be understood within the frame of the challenges the national movement faced on its path to independence. The unwillingness of the Georgian Communist leadership to participate in the regime democratization inevitably set the emerging national movement on collision course with the regime in place. The confrontation which was galvanized by the April 9 massacre, produced social and political transformations which marginalized the Communist regime and propelled the radical organizations into the center of the political arena.

The emergence of national movements in Georgia's autonomous republics shaped another dimension of the movement's radicalism. Because the Georgian national movement was not prepared to forfeit control over its autonomies, and conversely, the autonomies did not intend to remain within the Georgian territory, the clash became inevitable. Violence was however, just one of the many potential courses of action that could have been taken. The particular outcomes, as I have shown, were embedded in the interaction between the pre-existing structures and transformative events, which shaped the dynamics of the relationship between the national movements.

The analysis of the data on mass demonstrations and riots revealed interesting insights into the evolution of the national movements and the changes in modes of confrontation it faced. I have shown that the national movement started off by rallying on non-nationalist issues, but later concentrated on challenging the state authority by raising issues of a nationalist character. In this way, the first phase of the evolution of the Georgian national movement was shaped by peaceful protests, hunger strikes, public actions etc. These methods were instrumental in destabilizing the institutional cohesion of the state. In the second stage of the confrontation, violent methods were utilized to confront the increasingly assertive minorities.

The data also revealed a positive correlation between the existence of autonomous structures and the mobilization outcomes of the minorities. For instance, the minorities that had autonomous structures, have on record significantly higher public activity. Furthermore, the research also revealed that the cooperation with the local authorities determined the success of the national movements in terms of consolidation of the society. As I have shown, the Georgian society was very fragmented not only due to the absence of civic consciousness, but also due to the destructive role assumed by the communist society.

Almost twenty years have passed since the first attempts at national mobilization in Georgia. The processes generated in those days affected the territorial fragmentation of the country, which still remains divided. The Georgians perceived their relations with the Abkhaz and the South Ossetians as an obstacle on their road to independence, moreover, they still regard the contemporaneous developments as being the result of manipulation by "external forces'. The Abkhaz and the South Ossetian however had their genuine grievances and concerns which were not paid appropriate attention. It is unfortunate that the relations between the Georgians, the Abkhaz and the South Ossetians still remain "frozen".

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