This thesis asks how Ajarian autonomy has evolved since the collapse of the Soviet Union and inquires as to why autonomy remains necessary for the Georgian state. I construct a framework from scholarly literature on separatism, integration, and autonomy and how it shapes regional identity in Ajaria. This framework creates a basis to understand Ajaria’s history and how it has shaped its autonomy today. To answer my research question, I conducted a qualitative analysis by interviewing Georgian political and academic elites. Additionally I used secondary data and government documents. I argue that autonomy in Ajaria benefits from unusual circumstances and remains as a tool within the broader Georgian geopolitical discourse to help mend Georgia’s territorial issues. Second I argue that autonomy in Ajaria is protected by international treaties involving Georgia’s neighbors who have historically invested its interests in the region. Finally I argue that autonomy not only benefits Ajaria, but the rest of Georgia.
AUTONOMY IN GEORGIA’S AJARIA REGION: ITS BENEFIT FOR THE STATE AND HOW IT HAS EVOLVED SINCE THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION

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This thesis titled

AUTONOMY IN GEORGIA’S AJARIA REGION: ITS BENEFIT FOR THE STATE
AND HOW IT HAS EVOLVED SINCE THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION

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Dedication

Throughout my life my parents have always been there through the good and difficult times. They have encouraged me to pursue my passion in geography and have been supportive along every step of the journey. I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother Carol Ann Browne and my father James Danforth Browne. I would not be who I am today if it weren’t for their love and guidance.
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Chapter 1: Political Uncertainties

On November 2, 2003, parliamentary elections took place in the country of Georgia. The local television station Rustavi 2 released the results of the exit polls and declared the opposition party, the United National Movement, the victors (DeWaal, 2010). Shortly after, the Central Electoral Commission began releasing the official results declaring the pro-government party led by Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, the winners (DeWaal, 2010). In response to the Central Electoral Commission, anti-government groups came into the streets of Tbilisi and started protesting the results. Suspiciously 12 days later, election results from Georgia’s Autonomous Republic of Ajaria were announced. The Revival Party, led by Aslan Abashidze; the ruler of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria, won nearly 100 percent of the votes (DeWaal, 2010). Met with skepticism by the anti-government groups, Abashidze threatened to separate Ajaria from the rest of Georgia if the official election results from his region were not recognized (Gahrton, 2010). If accepted, these results would give the leader of Ajaria more power not only in Ajaria’s capital Batumi, but also in Tbilisi (Gahrton, 2010).

By mid-November, the protests on Rustaveli Avenue in central Tbilisi grew in size. Western organizations who monitored the elections declared The United National Movement party led by Mikheil Saakashvili, the winner with 26 percent of the vote (DeWaal, 2010). This emboldened the protesters on Rustaveli Avenue who marched against the falsification of the Electoral Commission’s results (DeWaal, 2010). On November 22, 2003 opposition leaders, led by Mikheil Saakashvili who held a single rose, burst into the Georgian parliament (Jones, 2013). They drove out President Eduard Shevardnadze mid speech and destroyed whatever they could find on his podium (Jones, 2013). The following day, Eduard Shevardnadze announced his resignation; these events would later become known as the Rose Revolution (Jones, 2013; DeWaal, 2010).

Following these events, relations deteriorated between Georgia and its Autonomous Republic of Ajaria. Aslan Abashidze failed to recognize the legitimacy of the Rose Revolution (Hoch and Kopecek, 2011). On March 14, 2004 the Ajarian militia prevented Mikheil Saakashvili from entering Ajaria. In response, Saakashvili imposed an economic blockade on Ajaria and closed its border with Turkey and the rest of Georgia (Hoch and
Kopecek, 2011). The situation between Georgia and Ajaria quickly escalated and approached to the brinkmanship of armed conflict (ICG Europe Briefing 2004, p. 6-7). The Georgian government then gave an ultimatum to Abashidze demanding that he disband his militia and submit to the central authorities in Tbilisi (Gahrton, 2010). Abashidze responded by declaring a state of emergency on May 2 but his time was up. On May 4, a large opposition protest was attacked in Batumi by security forces loyal to Abashidze (Zurcher, 2007). This was met by even larger protests later in the same day where tens of thousands came to Batumi from all over Ajaria to demand Abashidze’s resignation (Zurcher, 2007). Abashidze could no longer hold onto power when protesters took control of central Batumi and Georgian Special Forces entered Batumi to disarm Abashidze’s militias (Zurcher, 2007). Abashidze, who had lost support in Ajaria, fled to exile in Moscow on May 6 (Gahrton, 2010; DeWaal, 2010).

Before the Rose revolution, Ajaria acted as a recalcitrant province in Georgia (Gahrton, 2010: Economist, March 2004) and many analysts predicted that Ajaria would be the next area of conflict in the South Caucasus (Hock and Kopecek, 2011). The exit of Aslan Abashidze and the integration of Ajaria gave Georgia political and economic control in the region. The Rose Revolution acted as a pivot for Ajaria’s modern history in the new Republic of Georgia. Before this historical event, it acted as a fiefdom to an autocratic ruler who stoked fears of separatism amongst the Georgian elite. After the revolution, Ajaria was integrated into Georgia and its autonomous powers were trimmed in order to avoid another potential situation like that in the 1990’s and early 2000’s.

Since Ajaria’s political and economic integration with Georgia in May 2004, autonomy has remained. The state of Georgia still values Ajarian autonomy as do the inhabitants of the province. Autonomy has shaped the regional identity of Ajaria which has altered since the Soviet Union. Ajaria was a region where the majority used to identify as Muslim, but now identifies mainly as Georgian Orthodox. Apart from religious identity which has formerly separated Ajaria from the rest of Georgia, most inhabitants of Ajaria identify as Georgian ethnically, culturally, and linguistically. Generally, autonomy is reserved for religious minorities in a state, but Ajaria is an exception where most of its inhabitants identify as Georgian. This raises the broader question of what benefits does Ajarian autonomy bring to the region and Georgia today.
Making Autonomy Local

My primary research question asks how Ajarian autonomy has evolved since the collapse of the Soviet Union and why it is beneficial for the Georgian state? It also inquires how autonomy has shaped Ajaria and why is it necessary in a region that identifies as Georgian? It contributes to the literature on the role of autonomy and how it has shaped local and national geopolitics within the country of Georgia. Drawing on semi-structured interviews in both Tbilisi and Batumi, I argue that the Georgian state has curtailed Ajarian autonomy since the Rose Revolution in order to prevent a fractious government similar to Aslan Abashidze’s regime. Ajarian autonomy remains intact today as a historical legacy with strong oversight from Tbilisi. Georgia uses Ajarian autonomy as a tool to resolve other regional separatist movements, to maintain good diplomatic relations with regional powers interested in Ajaria such as Turkey and Russia, and to adhere to the Georgian constitution which grants autonomous status to Ajaria.

In chapter two, I present a framework informed by geographic, political science, and international relations literature on separatism, integration, autonomy, and regionalism. The separatism and integration literature focuses on de facto states and their scope within the modern nation-state system. The section on political autonomy highlights autonomous regions and the typical situations when autonomy is granted to protect minority rights or give regions greater control over their political, cultural, or economic institutions. The regionalism literature focuses on how regional identity is shaped by historical, economic, socio-cultural, and political characteristics that make it noticeably different from other regions.

In chapter three, I write about the history of Ajaria and how aspects of autonomy are more salient over time in response to changing geopolitical circumstances. I summarize the past 500 years of history in Ajaria and identify the time periods where the concepts of separatism, integration, autonomy, and regionalism are prevalent. This information creates a foundation for a better understanding of Ajaria today and how its past has shaped its present.
In chapter four, I address the qualitative methods used to answer my research questions. To examine how Ajarian autonomy functioned before, during, and after the Rose Revolution, I rely on semi-structured interviews with politicians, government workers, NGO workers, and academics in Tbilisi and Batumi who have knowledge on Georgian and Ajarian politics. Secondary data such as government documentation is also used to address these questions and to present the rights granted to the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria. For the last question focusing on Ajaria as a means to resolve other separatist movements in Georgia, I rely on semi-structured interviews and previous scholarly work.

I present my research findings as a narrative in chapters five through eight. The first three chapters are presented chronologically beginning with Ajaria after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Rose Revolution, and Post Rose Revolution up unto present day. Within each of these sections, I present narratives espoused by my interview participants. These narratives are then addressed to the larger question of the reasoning for autonomy in Ajaria and how benefits both the Ajarian region and the state of Georgia. Chapter eight considers Ajaria as a paradigm of autonomy for other regional separatist movements within Georgia. I argue that Ajarian autonomy is a product of unusual circumstances and is not a proper model to resolve territorial issues within Georgia.
Chapter 2: Self-Governing to Varying Degrees

Political autonomy varies on a case by case basis in different regions of the world. In some instances, autonomy can mean complete political freedom from the center, while in others it is merely symbolic. Ajarian autonomy was established during the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921) and this autonomy received international recognition after Ajaria’s annexation by the Soviet Union. Since then, its autonomy has fluctuated, meaning that Ajaria had more political independence at certain times and less political independence at others. This chapter will examine the relationship between regional identities, such as the case in Ajaria and its relationship to the Georgian state, expressed as movements for autonomy, separatism, and integration.

Separatism and Integration

The acts of separatism and integration refer to a territory and its relationship to a sub-state or supra-state polity (Storey, 2001). Separatist movements which succeeded have done so in a variety of different ways, ranging from peaceful to violent movements. The same can be said about failed movements which also range from peaceful to violent. The question of how to integrate a territory into a polity has no simple answer. There have been numerous attempts at integrating territories into larger polities; some of which have been successful and some of which have not. This section will argue that separatism and integration is an expression of territoriality.

The ideas of territorial integrity can be traced back to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 (Krasner, 1999; Zacher, 2001; Murphy, 2002). The Westphalian model of sovereignty is based on two principles which are territoriality and the exclusion of external actors from domestic authority structures (Krasner, 1999). This gives states the political rights to exercise power over their own domestic authority structures within their territory. When an outside actor starts to meddle in the affairs and governance of a state, sovereignty
becomes violated (Krasner, 1999). Traditionally states have sought international legal sovereignty, the recognition by other states, since it gives them access to trade and diplomacy in the international arena (Krasner, 1999). It is harder for states to enter into trade agreements or conduct diplomacy when their sovereignty is not recognized. In order for a state to be recognized as sovereign, it must be recognized by other sovereign states in order to qualify as such (Agnew, 2005). Recognized sovereignty is known as de jure sovereignty; meaning legal sovereignty (Krasner, 1999). Amongst the community of recognized sovereign states, there are also unrecognized states, which do not have de jure sovereignty, and have existed since the creation of the modern state system (Anderson, 2011). States whose sovereignty is unrecognized can still contain de facto sovereignty meaning actual sovereignty (Krasner, 1999). This signifies even if a state has de facto sovereignty by controlling its own domestic structures and affairs, it can still lack de jure sovereignty by not receiving recognition from other states.

Formations of new internationally recognized states have been a rare occurrence in the last half century. During the 1990's, the breakup of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia created new states, which were recognized by the international community. Since 1965 with the exception of the previous states mentioned and states formed from decolonization, there have only been five instances involving self-determination disputes that have resulted in independence from a ‘parent state.’ (Caspersen, 2008). These states are Montenegro, East Timor, Eritrea, Bangladesh, Kosovo, and recently South Sudan who declared independence in 2011. The odds are against a state who attempts to secede from its parent state and is able to receive international recognition (Caspersen, 2008). Regardless of these odds, there are still scattered de facto states around the world that have declared independence but are not recognized by other states (Kolsto, 2006).

De facto states are viewed as a parasite in the modern day nation state system. By definition, when a claim to political independence is recognized by other states, its sovereignty is considered de jure. Since World War II, recognition has generally been normalized through admittance to the United Nations. Several unrecognized territorial entities such as Palestine and Taiwan remain de facto and not yet fully de jure which creates a level of uncertainty that can be destabilizing to the modern state system. A de
A de facto state exists where “there is an organized political leadership which has risen to power through some degree of indigenous capability; receives popular support; and has achieved sufficient capacity to provide governmental services to a given population in a specific territorial area, over which effective control is maintained for a significant period of time” (Pegg, 1998). The de facto state views itself as sovereign and might be recognized by a handful of other states as being sovereign, but will never gain substantive recognition from other states as being a legitimate state. In modern international politics, states seem reluctant to admit new members. As Samuel Huntington (1972) comments, “The bias against political divorce, that is, secession, is just about as strong as the nineteenth-century bias against marital divorce.” This means that the unrecognized states must either keep striving for recognition or turn back towards the parent state. Many of today’s unrecognized states came to being after a sustained period of real or perceived repression from the parent state (Anderson, 2011).

De facto states act as an expression of territory and territoriality. According to Storey (2001) territory has two different approaches to theory known as the biological/genetic approach and the socio-political approach. The biological/genetic approach view the idea of territorial behaviour as ‘natural’ rather than learned or contrived. The socio-political approach treat human behavior towards territory as something that is learned and not natural. Biologist, anthropologists, and psychologists tend to view territory through a biological/genetic approach (Storey, 2001). The socio-political approach will be used in this proposal and will use Sack’s work on territory. In 1986, Robert Sack paved the way for the contemporary notion of territory and territoriality. According to Sack, “territory provides not just physical or spatial context to human action but also a real embedding of power relations” (Sack, 1986). “This helps us understand human territoriality as a cognitive function as opposed to animal territoriality which is instinctual” (Sack, 1986). For this thesis, we will use David Storey’s definition of territory and John Agnew’s definition of territoriality:

Territory is a portion of geographic space which is claimed or occupied by a person or group of people or by an institution (Storey, 2001).
Territoriality is the use of territory for political, social, and economic ends. This is widely seen as a largely successful strategy for establishing the exclusive jurisdiction implied by state sovereignty (Agnew, 2005, p. 437).

In the case of de facto states, they claim a specified territory in order to create a new political polity. This act of disenfranchisement from the parent state is an expression of territoriality.

Amongst de facto states, violence can be a means of separating from a parent state. There are many cases of separatism from a parent state in the 20th and 21st century where a region has attempted to become an independent state through the use of violence. Examples of states that emerged from separatist violence to gain de facto independence are Abkhazia and South Ossetia separating from Georgia, Nagorno Karabakh from Azerbaijan, and Transnistria from Moldova. These states carry out the normal functions of a state within their own territory but other states still consider them as illegal entities (Berg, 2012). An example of regions that have used violence and were reintegrated by their parent state are the Republics of Chechnya and Dagestan who remain part of Russia.

Another option of separating from a parent state is through peaceful means. Examples of a successful and peaceful separation from a parent state where new states also gained de jure recognition amongst the international community are Montenegro from Serbia and Eritrea from Ethiopia. Examples of regions that tried to peacefully separate from the parent state but were reintegrated are Tatarstan and Bashkortostan by Russia.

The outcomes of regional integration into a parent state can be characterized as falling along a continuum between forced and voluntary integration. Historically speaking, the most likely fate for an unrecognized state is defeat on the battlefield and reintegration into the parent state (Anderson, 2011). This can lead to forced integration after separatism which is normally problematic and not very desirable by either the state or the separatist region. Voluntary reintegration is more desirable since it avoids violence. This option normally leads to a power sharing agreement or autonomy (Anderson, 2011).

Integration can take on different forms such as territorial or economic. Hartshorne’s theory of territorial integration argues that integration depends on two sets of forces known as centrifugal and centripetal forces. The former tends to fragment the unity of the state while the latter reinforces the state’s unity (Hartshorne, 1950). Some geographers
such as Agnew (2005), Agnew et Muscara (2012), and Antonsich (2009) introduce the idea of economic integration and societal integration which are aspects of territorial integration. Geographical studies of regional integration have tended to focus more on economics but there is still a good amount of integration literature focusing on the state and maintaining its territorial integrity.

Integration can also refer to creating a similar identity. In the integration literature, Weiner (1965) defines integration as bringing people together culturally and socially into a single territorial unit and establishing a similar national identity. Shulman (1998) has a similar definition stating that integration is the process by which the constituent regional, ethnic, social, and class subgroups of a state become unified into a common political community sharing a sense of collective identity. Hence Shulman (1998) hypothesizes that “the more a state’s ethnic groups or ethno regions are perceived by the citizenry as culturally similar to each other and culturally different from the populations of other states, the greater is the will of the people to identify themselves as citizens of the state.”

**Autonomy**

In the academic literature, autonomy can take on a variety of different meanings. Originally, the concept of autonomy was used in sociology (Harhoff, 1986). Today, it is used in three different branches of science which are philosophy, the natural sciences, and law/politics (Heintze, 1998). This section will present the autonomy literature from scholars in the fields of political geography, political science, and international relations. Since the term autonomy appears in various legal contexts (Heintze, 1998), it will be defined and its advantages will be depicted in this section. Differing cases of autonomy will also be introduced to help conceptualize different autonomy regimes.

This thesis defines autonomy using the Venice Commission’s definition which states in the context of Ajarian territorial autonomy, “The very meaning of autonomy is to have one’s own laws and institutions” (Council of Europe Venice Commission, 2004). In international law, autonomy means that part of a state’s territory is given authorization from the center to govern themselves in certain matters without constituting a state of its own (Heintze, 1998). This gives a specified group within a sub-national territorial entity
the right to self-govern as long as their laws and decisions abide by the state’s national constitution (Heintze, 1998). Generally political autonomy is granted to a group that differs from the majority population of a state, but constitutes the majority population in a region (Lapidoth, 1993). The degree of political autonomy a region receives varies significantly on a case by case basis, meaning autonomy takes on a variety of meanings (Heintze, 1998).

This creates differing models of autonomy which differ significantly. According to Harhoff (1986, pg. 31),

> Autonomy does not indicate any specific amount of legislative or regulatory powers to be transferred to the region, nor does it refer to any particular field of jurisdiction; this is exactly the main reason why the concept is so difficult to apply in a legal context.

In some cases, autonomy can mean that a region has exhaustive jurisdiction over its political and economic institutions, its own flag, its own constitution, its own police force, its own education curriculum, and so on. In other instances, autonomy can be symbolic and can merely mean that the state government will acknowledge in school textbooks that a particular region has autonomy and that the political and economic institutions are merely symbolic (Harhoff, 1986). Although the reality in the latter situation is that they have no political rights and autonomy is merely just de jure and not de facto.

In political discourse, autonomy has many synonyms such as independence, self-government, self-determination, self-direction, self-reliance, and self-legislation (Wiberg, 1998). Lapidoth identifies four different approaches to the concept of autonomy, the first notion being that it is a right to act upon one’s own discretion in certain matters; second as a synonym of independence; third as a synonym of decentralization; and fourth as exclusive powers of legislation, administration, and adjudication in specific areas of an autonomous entity (Lapidoth, 1993). Thus autonomy is a matter of degree and is not a dichotomy (Wiberg, 1998). Political autonomy functions in varying degrees ranging from near independence, but not exceeding the sovereignty of the state, to partial independence where there is a certain degree of self-governance (Heintze, 1998).

With the multitude of ethnic minorities in the world, advocates of autonomy argue that group rights need to be recognized at the sub-state level in order to avoid the
proliferation of states into hundreds of new entities (Cornell, 2002b). In most cases, autonomy is granted to geographically specific minority groups with a different ethnicity, language, religion, or culture from that of the state’s majority (Steiner, 2014; Heintze, 1998). This autonomous status in turn gives a group or entity a partial right of self-determination and self-rule within the state (Hannikainen, 1998) and can assist in preserving a minority group’s language, culture, or religion by giving them control over their local politics and protecting its diversity (Foldvary, 2011). Autonomy can also be used for other purposes such as settling or easing conflicts (Cornell, 2002b; Heintze, 1998), strengthening governmental institutions in geographically remote regions (Heintze, 1998), or it can be used to preserve a region’s historical or cultural development (Heintze, 1998). It is also important to note that autonomy does not only pertain to ethnic minorities. In the case of Hong Kong, autonomy was granted to region due to its political and economic development (Heintze, 1998).

Proponents against autonomy argue that protecting diversity might endanger a state more than enrich it (Cornell, 2002b). Other scholars claim that assimilation has advantages over autonomy because any differential treatment of people due to their belonging within a minority group can lead towards ethnic conflict (Sanders, 1991). Steiner (2014) makes the argument that autonomy is based upon the norm of equal protection, yet autonomy creates a form of institutionalized separateness from the state which creates a historical difference between groups. Also it can isolate the inhabitants of an autonomous region and prevent members from participating in the larger realm of the state (Cornell, 2002b; Heintze, 1998). This in turn can lead to isolation and potential ideas of separatism from the state (Cornell, 2002b; Heintze, 1998; Hale, 2004).

There have been many instances of states granting autonomy to regions within its borders. A good example of a state granting autonomy to different regions was the Soviet Union. According to Yuri Slezkine (1994), the Soviet Union was a communal apartment block where every unit housed a different ethnicity. During the 1920’s, a compromise was made between the central government in Moscow and its ethno-regions in which autonomy would be granted in return for becoming part of a highly centralized federal polity (Smith, 1995). A more modern example of autonomy would be the Basque region in Spain based off of their minority status of the inhabitants living in the north eastern part of
the country (Guibernau, 1995). The Aland Islands is another example that consists of a majority Swedish population which has autonomy in the state of Finland. This agreement has existed since 1920 and was reconfirmed in 1991 (Nordquist, 1998).

There have also been instances where granting autonomy might have done more harm than good. The Faroe Islands is an example of how autonomy created a negative effect due to the state of Denmark feeling less responsible for the development of the region (Lyck, 1995). Another way autonomy can fail is if the autonomous region secedes from the state. In 1993, shortly after the formation of the new Georgian state, Abkhazia and Georgia went to war which resulted in Abkhazia becoming a de facto state (Zurcher, 2007). Another example of an autonomous region declaring its intent to secede is Nagorno Karabakh from the Azerbaijan SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic) in 1987 (Zurcher, 2007). Public demonstrations announced that they wished to leave the Azerbaijan SSR and join the Armenian SSR (Zurcher, 2007). Today Nagorno Karabakh acts as a de facto state within the de jure boundary of Azerbaijan.

As evident in the academic literature, autonomy can be a successful compromise in some instances and a failure in others. In most cases involving autonomy, it is used as a political compromise between independence and integration (Foldvary, 2011). Although this might not always be the case because of other reasons in which a region might receive autonomy such as cultural reasons or economic reasons. Whether or not autonomy is a viable compromise is still debated, but the sentiment amongst scholars is that the advantages of autonomy outweighs the drawbacks (Cornell, 2002b).

**Regionalism**

The term region has numerous meanings and different scopes of territorial demarcation within geography. A region has many different functions but what separates it from other regions is its cultural heritage, economics, political institutions, and history (Keating, 1997). The combination of these processes are known as a regional phenomenon and bring about the term regionalism to reference them. This section will focus on regional identity and regional mobilization to help understand the contexts of my research questions.
Regions can be found at the sub-state level and the transnational level within world politics. Regions such as New England in the United States, Brittany in France, Catalonia in Spain, Kurdistan in northern Iraq, and Siberia in Russia are all examples of regions at the sub-state level. These regions can vary in size and tend to be associated with a strong sense of shared history, ethnicity, or a similar economic situation. Areas such as Catalonia in Spain identify as an ethnic minority within northeastern Spain and other areas such as the Midwest in the United States are characterized by their agrarian economy. There are also much larger regions which stretch across national boundaries such as Latin America, the Caucasus, or the Middle East. These types of regions are generally characterized by strong economic ties such as the European Union or similar cultures stretching across borders like the Arab populations of the Middle East (Keating, 1997).

The idea of regionalism and identity has been prevalent in geography for a long time (Paasi, 2003). The premodern state was a different polity consisting of several distinct regions which consisted of the same suzerain and answered to a central authority (Keating, 1997). These overlapping regions sometimes created a burden for the state when it came to creating a national identity and state building. Some states viewed these territorial disparities as a problem while other states used regions as a framework for cultural policies and granted concessions to the cultural particularities of certain regions (Keating, 1997). In some instances, the state would allow regional governments in order to enhance effectiveness and control at the regional level (Keating, 1997).

Currently, some geographers insinuate that region and regionalism are open to scrutiny and are in need of a fundamental overhaul (Jessop et al., 2008; Jones, 2009; MacLeod and Jones, 2007; Marston et al., 2005). Traditionally geographers viewed regionalism as the combination of economics, social, and political relationships converging in a neatly drawn territory which were governed by the nation-state. Now critical regional theorists are starting to think of regions as fluid and historically contingent social constructions (Jones and MacLeod, 2004; Paasi, 2003). The new perspectives on regionalism see places characterized by a global sense of place where everything is interconnected (Jonas, 2012). Additionally one can find that the recent literature reveals in the age of globalization, regions (also cities-regions) are becoming more effective and
resilient than the nation-state (Jonas, 2012). Although there is still a lot of discussion needed to discuss the role of the state and territory with this notion.

Regional identity has been recognized by scholars as a key element in the making of regions as social and political spaces (Paasi, 2003). The ideas of regional identity are tied to different elements such as culture, ethnicity, economic success, periphery/center relations, community, history, historical figures, language dialects, political symbols, regional foods, local governance, and many more elements (Paasi, 2003). These elements are used to create a regional identity and draw an imagined community amongst its inhabitants. The building of these identities vary greatly on a case by case basis. Some of these narratives are built from the central authorities of a state trying to implement an identity while others are created from forms of resistance against the state (Paasi, 2003). Also there are forms of transnational regional identities which are created by events such as a single economic bloc, religion, or cultural connections.

Territorial arrangements made by the central government can either encourage regional identities by dividing national space into regional governing units or this can backfire by provoking resentments from regional groups (Agnew, 2001). In the case of Chechnya, the Chechens received autonomy from Russia after the collapse of the USSR. Although they still demanded greater independence from Russia which led to the first Chechen war in 1994 (Toft, 2003). Chechen demands for greater independence withered quickly after the war. Contrastly in Belgium there is a language divide between a Flemmish speaking, French speaking, and German speaking areas. A federal structure in 1993 was implemented to cement these three language speaking areas and to create linguistic areas where these three language were spoken and were recognized by the central government in Brussels (Storey, 2001).

Regionalism also refers to the political governance of an area. As a political movement, it can be analyzed on its relationship to positions on social and economic issues and its stance on the question of regional autonomy (Keating, 1997). Some forms of regionalism steer more towards autonomy when others sway towards centralization with the state. In the case of poorer regions, they generally favor a more centralized approach to the state in order to help the region prosper. Examples of these would be the Spanish regions of Andalusia and Extremadura that enjoyed links with Madrid in the 1990's since
they received extra government funding from the center (Keating, 1997). In other cases, some regionalisms movements seek greater autonomy because they are more self-sufficient and resent central government mandates. These regions would rather retain their tax revenues than to have the central government redistribute them to other regions within the wider state. The Lombardy area in Italy and Catalonia in Spain are both two examples that would prefer decentralization (Keating, 1997). An exception to this would be when rich regions also happen to be the politically dominant regions within a state, then they prefer to be centralist. Examples of this happen in France and the United Kingdom (Keating, 1997).

Granting greater autonomy towards regionalisms can lead to integration or in other cases secession. A multiregional model of a state needs to establish a toleration of differences amongst the different regions and have the center act as a mediator. In order to accommodate and integrate these different regional identities it is sometimes necessary to deny a priority of one region’s identity in order to integrate a wider range of political identities (Agnew, 2001). This in turn can lead to a commitment amongst the different regions to work with the status quo of the state. Although partition into separate regions only seems to work well when regionalism has limited ethnic content and the territory is not claimed by other groups (Agnew, 2001). Otherwise this can lead to competing territorial claims within the state and create a problematic situation for the cohesion of the state. In other cases when a region is split on ethnic lines it can create secessionist tendencies or devolution. This can be found in the case of Northern Ireland where part of the population would prefer to devolve towards Ireland as opposed to remaining within the United Kingdom (Agnew, 2001).

**Conclusion**

Separatist, integrationist, and autonomous movements are part of what defines a regional identity. The study of Ajaria will analyze how these concepts have created a regional identity within the Autonomous Republic. In certain times of Ajarian history, some concepts were more prevalent than in other times. Ajaria has been part of numerous empires and in each one, an identity was forged amongst the local inhabitants. Within the
last 25 years, Ajaria has experienced certain aspects of separatism, integration, and autonomy. All of these factors have altered a new form of regionalism which slightly differs from the rest of Georgia.
Chapter 3: Historical Background on Ajaria

Autonomy in Ajaria is a historical legacy of the 1921 Treaty of Kars and its persistence is evident in its current autonomy within Georgia. Ranging back to the times of “medieval” Georgia up until the present day Republic of Georgia, Ajaria has existed within multiple empires and states. The past has shaped Ajaria and at times has alienated it from the rest of Georgia. Throughout all of these events, the inhabitants of Ajaria have kept speaking their native Georgian tongue, but their identity shifted. This is a stark contrast from today’s Ajaria where its inhabitants make it clear that they identify as Georgian and nothing else.

Before the Ottoman Conquest of modern day Ajaria, Christianity was the prevalent religion amongst the Georgian population. The area is believed to be the site of where Christianity first arrived in Georgia (Pelkmans, 2002). In the year 337 AD, King Mirian of Kartli was converted by St. Nino and Christianity became the official state religion (Gharton, 2010). During Georgia’s golden age under the rule of Queen Tamar (1184-1213), documentation reveals very little about Ajaria (Pelkmans, 2002). What is known about Ajaria during this time period is that there is evidence dating from the eleventh to the fourteenth century of a Christian past. At the end of the fifteenth century, Georgia found itself facing a difficult situation with the Ottomans conquering Istanbul and the Trebizond Empire. Also the age of discovery rendered the route from Europe to East through Georgia useless (Suny, 1994). The Ottoman Empire slowly approached Georgia and at the end of the sixteenth century, Ajaria was annexed into the Empire (Pelkmans, 2002).
Ottoman Ajaria

In the mid-16th century, the Ottomans conquered Ajaria and incorporated it into their empire (Blauevelt and Khatiashvili, 2016). During the beginning of Ottoman rule, Ajaria remained as a peripheral region within the Empire and escaped the direct control of the Ottoman rulers in Istanbul. A policy of indirect rule was established in Ajaria where the Ottomans left local clans to rule (Pelkmans, 2002). Rule by local clans under Ottoman sovereignty existed in Ajaria until the nineteenth century when the Ottomans started to reassert their power back in the region (Pelkmans, 2002).

The Ottoman sultans and government used the Islamic religion to govern Ajaria. As was common in the rest of the Ottoman Empire, the new government officials ruled using millets, which is the state sponsored system of religious communities. Through economic incentives, the Ottomans started to develop rural areas of Ajaria. Since the growth of these communities were in the hands of the Ottoman state-sponsored millets, the importance of religious allegiance prevailed over the importance of identifying with the culture and language of Georgia (Hoch and Kopecek, 2011). Conversion to the Islamic faith meant less taxes, the rights to own land, and a higher status in society (Pelkmans, 2002). This meant that religion became the main determinant of group status and was the foundation of socioeconomic organization in Ajaria (Zurcher, 2007).
Despite being annexed by the Ottoman Empire at the end of the sixteenth century, Islamization took quite a while to take hold in Ajaria. Until the 1770’s, most Ajarians still identified as Christian (Sanikidze and Walker, 2003). According to Meiering-Mikadze (1999), it is suggested that widespread conversion to Islam did not take place until the end of the eighteenth century and that until the beginning of the nineteenth century, people still visited the Church at night.

The inhabitants of Ajaria started to shift their identities towards the Ottoman Empire by the mid nineteenth century (Refer to Figure 3). During the Crimean War (1853-1856), the people of Ajaria for the first time fought with the Ottoman Turks against the Georgians and Russians (Hock and Kopecek, 2011). During the 1860’s, most of the residents of Ajaria were bilingual in Georgian and Turkish. The Ottoman authorities had planned for the Georgian language to gradually disappear from daily use by the end of the nineteenth century (Sanikidze and Walker, 2003). In the Turkish-Russian war of 1877-1878, Ajarians held top positions in the Ottoman Army and also contributed about 6,000-10,000 soldiers to fight (Sanikidze and Walker, 2003).

**Russian Empire**
In 1878, the Russian Empire took Ajaria from the Ottoman Empire naming it Batumi Oblast and made Batumi the main port for the South Caucasus (DeWaal, 2010) (Refer to Figure 4). By the time the Russian armies arrived in Ajaria, most Ajarians had been living under Ottoman Rule for 10 or more generations and its native population considered themselves Turks (Derluguian, 2001). Russian authorities feared Muslims in Ajaria would be disloyal to the czar and as a result, the authorities attempted to populate the region with Christians from Russia and promote Christianity in the region (Sanikidze and Walker, 2003). Russian rule also proved to be a hardship for many people since the Turkish border played an important role in economic life (Sanikidze and Walker, 2003). This prompted thousands of Ajarians to emigrate to Turkey during the beginning of Russian rule (Sanikidze and Walker, 2003). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Russian authorities tried to discourage emigration and win over the respect and loyalty of the Georgian Muslims in Ajaria (Sanikidze and Walker, 2003). Meanwhile the efforts to convert Muslim Ajarians to Christianity proved to be ineffective (Sanikidze and Walker, 2003).

**Democratic Republic of Georgia**
After the collapse of Tsarist Russia in 1917, Turkish troops occupied Ajaria and then were replaced by British troops in 1918. In May of 1918, Georgia declared the establishment of a newly independent country known as the Democratic Republic of Georgia (Derluguian, 2001). Within the new state, nationalism emerged as the most significant element (Hoch and Kopecek, 2011). Most patriotic Georgians firmly believed that Ajaria was an integral part of the state since Ajarians belonged to the Georgian nation (Derluguian, 2001). When the Democratic Republic of Georgia declared independence, Christoph Zurcher portrays Ajaria’s status in relation to Georgia quite well in his book:

It was during this period that the political status of Ajaria was contested. Azerbaijan insisted that Ajaria, being a Muslim Caucasian territory, should become its enclave on the Black Sea. British occupying authorities in 1919 favored free port status for Batumi. Both Ottoman and Kemalist Turks claimed it as their own, as did independent Georgia (Zurcher, 2007).

Figure 5: Democratic Republic of Georgia
Despite Ajarians ethnic and linguistic ties to Georgia, they kept their strong pro-Turkish affiliations. In a plebiscite in 1918, Ajarians voted to rejoin Turkey but the newly formed Republic of Georgia rejected this (DeWaal, 2010).

The issue of Ajaria was solved in 1920 during a Peace Conference in Paris. Turkey gained the southern part of historical Ajaria containing Rize and Artvin while Georgia received the northern part containing Batumi (Hoch and Kopecek, 2011). Within the 1921 Georgian Democratic Republic’s constitution, Ajaria (known as Muslim Georgia) was granted autonomy (Refer to Figure 5). This is the first time that Ajaria would receive autonomy based off of its religion. This autonomy was recognized by the Georgian Democratic Republic but was not recognized amongst the international community. Ajarian autonomy would not receive international recognition until it was incorporated into the Soviet Union.

**Soviet Rule**

In February of 1921, the Red Army invaded Georgia and installed a new government. Both exhausted from war, Russia and Turkey started peace negotiations later known as the Treaty of Kars where the present day border of Ajaria was drawn (Pelkmans, 2006). A few months later in July of 1921, the Soviet Union established the Ajaria Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (Ajaria A.S.S.R.) (Pelkmans, 2006). It became part of the Soviet ethno-federalist system which was directed towards representing all of the nationalities under one central government.

Soviet federalism combined ethnicity and territory within the Soviet Union (Slezkine, 1994; Wheatley, 2009; Hale, 2004). This compartmentalization of ethnicities into different federal states created an autonomous republic for the various nationalities within the Soviet Union that created a balance of power between the center and periphery (Roeder, 1991). The Soviet Union appeared federal in form but in reality is centralist in content where all important regulative tasks were centralized and assigned to the authority of the federal center (Zurcher, 2007). This helped foster the Soviet developmental strategy which created political institutions and expanded the regime’s control over social mobilization within each federal state and introduced modernization.
through industrialization (Roeder, 1991). Christoph Zurcher describes Soviet federalism as:

Nevertheless, these were quasi nation-states, and their parliaments had little influence, their border little meaning, their symbols little allure; and their freedom to maneuver was tightly restricted by the central hierarchies of the Soviet Union. Most important, the right of the S.S.R. (Soviet Socialist Republic) to national sovereignty and independence, as enshrined in the Soviet constitution, was never meant to be more than a placebo (Zurcher, 2007, p. 32).

Within the hierarchy of the Soviet federal system, the union republics are at the top, also known as Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR’s). These were ethnically defined and centered around a dominant titular nation (Pelkmans, 2006). Together these republics formed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (Zurcher, 2007). Second in the hierarchy of Soviet ethnofederalism were autonomous republics (ASSR’s) and were subunits of the union republics (Zurcher, 2007). According to the constitution of the Soviet Union, the former were “national states” and not “sovereign states” like the latter (Zurcher, 2007). An ASSR also had fewer rights than an SSR such that schooling and university education was only offered in Russian. Although they were allowed to form their own cadres and members of the titular nation of the ASSR were allocated a disproportionately large number of cadre positions and university places (Pelkmans, 2006; Zurcher, 2007). The Soviet Federal structure between the SSR’s and ASSR’s functioned to an extent as a counterweight to integrationist tendencies, but the ASSR’s also did not have the right to secede either from their SSR’s or the Soviet Union (Pelkmans, 2006, Zurcher, 2007).

Ajaria was an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Union republic of Georgia. Unlike other autonomous soviet socialist republics, Ajaria did not receive autonomy for ethnic or linguistic reasons. Ajarians were ethnically and linguistically similar to Georgians which meant that they should be part of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (DeWaal, 2010; Cornell, 2002b). However, Ajaria was granted autonomy on the basis of religion and only one other area known as the Jewish Autonomous Republic established in the Soviet Far East would receive autonomous status for similar reasons (Hoch and Kopecek, 2011). Mathijs Pelkmans (2006, pg. 104) argues two factors contributed to the establishment of the Ajarian ASSR.
First the immediate reasons for the creation of the Ajarian ASSR were not ideas of ethnic or cultural difference but were the direct outcome of political negotiations between the Turkish and Soviet governments, laid down in the Treaty of Kars (October 1921). The Turkish government insisted on this arrangement to guarantee protection of the Muslim population, as well as to leave open the possibility of later territorial claims. Second, the status of Ajaria remained vague. The issue of whether Ajarians should be considered a separate group was vigorously debated. The Georgian political elite had been vehemently against the idea of Ajarian autonomy, claiming that Ajaria was and should be an integral part of Georgia. The resistance of Georgian Communists was only broken by the personal intervention of Stalin during a visit to Tbilisi in 1921, when he forced Georgian Communist leaders to decree autonomy for Ajaria (Chavleishvili, 1989).

The formation of the Ajaria A.S.S.R. gave it a status similar to other autonomous regions in the Soviet Union based on ethnicity. They enjoyed territorial autonomy but were denied the one thing that distinguished them from Georgians, their Muslim religion (Zurcher, 2007) (Refer to Figure 6).

During the first few years under Soviet rule, collectivization, Sovietization, and the eradication of Islam from daily life took hold in Ajaria (Hoch and Kopecek, 2011). At the beginning of the Soviet era there were 158 mosques in Ajaria and the numbers declined after a decade of Soviet campaign against religion which led to only 2 mosques remaining in 1936 (Sanikidze and Walker, 2003). “As the religious component of their identity was constantly suppressed during the Soviet Union and ethnicity emphasized, Ajaria was secularized, which also meant Georgianized, since religion was the only factor separating them from the rest of Georgia” (Cornell, 2002a, p. 102).

In addition to religious freedom, cultural freedom was also suppressed in Ajaria following their annexation into the Soviet Union. In the first few years of Soviet rule, Soviet authorities were still relatively free to express their opinions without any fears of reprisal. K. Iust, who was the consul of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic (RSFSR) in Batumi, summarized some of the events that occurred in Ajaria during the first half of the 1920’s. According to him, local Soviet administrators created an unbridgeable divide between workers and farmers by excessive raids on Muslim leaders and combated everything that was not considered Georgian (Iust [1922] 1998, 14). In addition a lot of the Ajarian intelligentsia had been imprisoned and the only people who remained within positions of power within the Ajarian Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic were
 Georgians (Pelkmans, 2006). Early on under Soviet rule, this created a negative view of the new government by the Ajarian people.

During the remainder of the 1920’s, Ajarians were categorized as a distinctive ethnic group within the Soviet Union but this category would cease to exist in the 1930 census. The category of Ajarian was no longer an option, which left Ajarians no other choice but to identify as Georgian or a Meskhetian Turk (Tishkov, 1997). Although few Ajarians identified as a Meskhetian Turk since it was socially more beneficial to identify with the Soviet Socialist Republic which they belonged to. While their ethnic category disappeared from official Soviet documents, their political structures and autonomy still remained within the ASSR. Most of these posts were filled by Georgians and it would not be until the 1960’s when Ajarians started to become part of the ASSR’s political elite (Darchiashvili, 1996). It was by this time that most Ajarians stressed their identity as Georgian and no longer identified themselves as Ajarian (Pelkmans, 2006).
Starting in the 1950’s Ajaria emerged as one of the most prosperous provinces in the Soviet Union due to its subtropical climate on the Black Sea. The economic and political isolation of the Soviet Union put the few provinces with a good climate, beachside towns, and producers of tropical fruits in a monopolistic position (Derluguian, 2001). This created an enormous cash flow into Ajaria and its citizens cashed in by moving from the mountainous areas to the coastlines where they could grow tangerines or open up hotels and restaurants for the Soviet tourists who would flock to the Black Sea region. This in turn created a regional exceptionalism where Ajarians wanted to stay together and keep control over their autonomous republic (Derluguian, 2001). A sense of regionalism flourished within Ajaria as a result of the Soviet economy which barred competition from other subtropical/tropical climates outside of the Soviet Union. Ajarians prospered within this system and were better off than most other inhabitants of the Soviet Union.

This prosperity created a separateness of Ajaria from the rest of Georgia. Internal migrants from within the Georgian SSR would come to Ajaria seeking to partake in the benefits of the region but most Ajarians would refer to them as people from over the river (Derluguian, 2001). This referred to the river Rioni which separates the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria from the rest of Georgia. These Georgians that migrated to Ajaria would constantly remind the locals that their Georgianness was suspect. Although this tension between Ajaria and the other Georgian provinces never amounted to more than jokes and teasing (Derluguian, 2001).

After a strong campaign of atheization from the Soviet authorities, ties between the Muslim Ajars and Turks were severed. As the policies took hold, Ajarians were seen as ethnic Georgians and in the 1970’s and 1980’s a policy of total assimilation was introduced (Cornell, 2002a). Even though the Ottomans ruled Ajaria for almost 3 centuries, most Ajarians didn’t convert to Islam until the 19th century before Russian Tsarist rule. Apart from religion, Ajarians spoke the same language as Georgians and were ethnically Georgian. Additionally they shared the same history with the exception of Ottoman rule. “The Communist era eradicated the main factor of Ajarian “otherness” and problematic aspect—namely, political and cultural bonds with Turkey. This was due to short-lived Islamization and a successful Soviet policy of assimilation (Hoch and Kopecek, 2011. pg. 65).” Under
Soviet rule, Ajarians came to consider themselves as Georgian regardless of their religious background.

Towards the end of Soviet Rule in 1990, Zviad Gamsakhurdia was elected president of the Georgian SSR. He promised to scrap Ajaria’s autonomous status stating that it was redundant and anti-national (Derluguian, 2001). Strong Georgian Christian nationalism stoked by Gamsakhurdia would create tensions between Batumi and Tbilisi within the new Georgian Republic.

**Abashidze Era**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the declaration of Georgian independence of April 9, 1991, South Ossetia demanded to join the Russian Federation and war broke out between Abkhazia and Georgia (Gahrton, 2010). Unlike South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Ajaria did not attempt to secede from Georgia nor did violence occur between the Autonomous Republic and the state. Although relations between the Ajarian capital of Batumi and Tbilisi did start to worsen. Rumors started percolating that the Georgian parliament wanted to rid Ajaria of its autonomous status which prompted thousands of protesters to take the street in Batumi (Toft, 2003). Realizing the severity of the problem, the Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia upheld Ajaria’s autonomous status (Toft, 2003).

Ajarians wanted to keep its autonomous status but also wish to remain as part of Georgia; unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Toft, 2003). Leaders in Batumi accused Ajaria of separatist ambitions but memorandums were issued by the Ajarian parliament assuring Batumi of the Georgianness of Ajarians (Hoch and Kopecek, 2011). After the new president of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, was sworn into office in 1991, the head of the Ajarian autonomous region Aslan Abashidze stated his desire to maintain the territorial integrity of Georgia:

> The situation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia cannot be compared with the state of affairs in Ajaria. Our republic is an administrative unit that is inhabited by members of various nationalities, but all of them are citizens of Ajaria, and hence of Georgia as well. We have never had, and never can have, any territorial claims against Georgia. Ajaria is historically a part of Georgia, and there has never been any instance in history in which Ajaria has created problems for its motherland. Reports
that Ajaria intends to become part of Turkey are totally unfounded (Svobodnaya gruziya, 1991).

Unlike the Abkhazians and Ossetians, Abashidze and the Ajarian leaders emphasized their Georgianness (Cornell, 2002a).

Aslan Abashidze secured political power within the autonomous province of Ajaria 11 days after Georgian independence in 1991 (Derluguian, 2001). During the beginning of his rule, Abashidze secured political power for his autonomous republic and secured revenues from the border trade with Turkey (DeWaal, 2010). In 1995, Eduard Shevardnadze was elected president of Georgia and continued to work with Aslan Abashidze. Abashidze brought stability to Ajaria and in return, Shevardnadze let Abashidze maintain complete political control over the autonomous republic (DeWall, 2010). President Shevardnadze was unwilling to challenge the new formations of Aslan Abashidze and allowed him to run Ajaria as his own personal fiefdom (Aves, 1996, p. 44). Abashidze would remain in power until the new president of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili came to power in 2004.

As described in chapter one, Aslan Abashidze was removed as the head of the Ajarian government in 2004 shortly after the new president of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili came to power following the 2003 Rose Revolution (Garton, 2010). Saakashvili’s government gave Abashidze an ultimatum to leave Ajaria and on May 6, Abashidze fled to Russia under pressure from the Georgian government and protesters (DeWaal, 2010). Within a month of Abashidze’s departure, Saakashvili trimmed the power of Ajaria’s autonomous government and parliament, reducing them to a more or less decorative status (DeWaal, 2010, pg. 195).
Chapter 4: Seeking out Autonomy

The significance of Ajarian autonomy relates not only to the on-going political transformations within the former Soviet caucasus republics, but also to considering how autonomy operates as a means to protect an Islamic religious minority and other regional separatist movements. Interviews with local political elites are the most practical approach in studies on this issue but no such studies of Ajaria have been conducted since 2004 when Aslan Abashidze left Ajaria. Research on other autonomous regions also tend to include analyses of constitutional provisions, laws, and the institutional structure of local competencies in the autonomous region such as Gerard Toal and John O’Loughlin’s recent work on Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno Karabakh (2016) or Nordquist’s work on autonomy as a conflict solving mechanism (1998). Finally, studies of regionalist movements, whether or not they seek autonomy, often dwell on identity formation. Although Ajarian identity is in many ways at the center of this project, it is perhaps less controversial than in other autonomous regions around the world because Ajarians identify as Georgians, sharing many of the basic dimensions of national identity such as ethnicity, language, and shared history. Where religious identity becomes more salient in Ajaria today, such as around both Islamic and Orthodox religious sites, this study provides a brief examination of them as part of how the cultural landscape is managed in an autonomous region.

My primary research question asks how Ajarian autonomy has evolved since the collapse of the Soviet Union and inquires as to why autonomy remains necessary for the Georgian state? In elaborating these questions, the research begins by posing a series of sub-questions organized chronologically. First, how did Ajarian autonomy function in the period from the end of Soviet rule to the Rose Revolution? As explained in the previous chapter, this was a period of extreme political and economic uncertainty, including whether the South Caucasus would become fragment into a series of de facto independent states. Of
particular interest is whether Ajaria acted as a de facto state during this time, meaning did Ajaria function as its own state within Georgia. Second, what effects did the Rose Revolution have on Ajarian autonomy, especially on the autonomous region’s government institutions. Third, given the limits on Ajarian autonomy today, why is it still supported by Tbilisi? Moreover, do local Ajarian elites see the value of their autonomy in the same terms as Tbilisi? These three periods have likely had significant effects on the characteristics of Ajarian autonomy but this also raises a broader question: How does Ajarian autonomy compare and contrast with other regional autonomy movements? Could it provide a useful template for peaceful coexistence within the same state or does Ajarian autonomy benefit from what are perhaps relatively uncommon circumstances, such as elements of a common identity with the state and the need for legitimate solutions to region conflict given Georgia’s geopolitical context.

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews is the primary method used to address these research questions. Once these interviews were conducted, they were analyzed and used to address my research questions. I chose to interview community leaders such as political party leaders, government workers, politicians, academics, and NGO workers. In total, 22 participants were interviewed in 5 weeks. The number of interviews conducted (22) were not predetermined and is a result of trying to maximize the amount of interviews during my duration in Georgia. Semi-structured interviews were beneficial since it allowed me to respond to new and unexpected topics introduced by the participants while having questions to guide the process (Bailey, White, and Pain, 1999). It also allowed me to probe for answers specific to my questions such as asking the participant to elaborate on certain statements and it gave me the ability to ask the participant to recall certain information (Barriball, 1994).

In addition to semi-structured interviews, I contemplated conducting focus groups and surveys but opted against these two options. Since this research focuses on the
political issue of autonomy, a group discussion would have raised levels of discomfort by those who felt that their opinion might be deemed unpopular. Also surveys do not leave room for spontaneous engagement with participants or for the emergence of narratives (Secor, 2010).

Before departing for Georgia, emails were sent out to all potential interview participants. They were chosen based on their knowledge on local and national politics using the targeting technique which aims to contact a specific group of people (Secor, 2010). Also, I scheduled some appointments with Professors at Tbilisi State University within the departments of Political Science and International Relations. In addition to the 3 successful interviews I scheduled before arriving in Tbilisi, I also sent out over 30 emails to other academics, politicians, and NGO’s. Most of these emails went unanswered. Overall, I had a total of 6 responses before arriving in Georgia.

Once a potential participant responded, they were informed about the research and were sent a consent letter which described the topic in further detail. Interviews were then conducted in convenient locations which required minimal traveling for the participant and a place suitable for a discussion. All interviews were recorded with the participant’s permission and notes were taken by the researcher.

At the conclusion of every interview, the researcher asked the participants if they had any recommendations of who else they should contact for a potential interview. This process is referred to as the snowball technique when you use a contact to meet other contacts (Secor, 2010). It allowed me to network and schedule a majority of my interviews with other political elites and academics. This helped improve the quality of my research since most of my participants recommended friends and co-workers who they knew would be conducive to my studies.

My first respondent, Dr. Giorgi Gogsadze, a Professor of Geography at Tbilisi State University, was my main contact in Georgia. He helped me arrange interviews with other academics, NGO leaders, and former politicians as well as helped me find a translator in Tbilisi. Before arriving in Ajaria, like I did before arriving in Tbilisi, I sent out emails to numerous academics, NGO’s, and politicians. In Ajaria, my main contact was Aleksandre (Alek) Davitadze, an economic specialist at the Ajarian Supreme Council, who I had met through a respondent in one of my emails. Another one of my contacts was Lasha
Bazhunaishvili, an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Batumi State Shota Rustaveli University, who also introduced me to potential interview participants.

Interviews were conducted in both English and Georgian. Since I did not have the capability to speak Georgian, it was necessary to hire a translator and have my consent form translated into Georgian. Of the 22 interviews that were conducted, 10 were with a translator. Of these 10 participants, some knew English but preferred to be interviewed in Georgian while others did not speak English but were happy to participate with a translator. The remaining 12 participants knew how to speak English as a third language in addition to Georgian and Russian.

The interview participants for this study were from a variety of different backgrounds and professions. During the 2.5 weeks I was in Tbilisi, I conducted a total of 10 interviews. 2 of these interviews were with NGO leaders, one of which used to be a former politician. 1 interview was with the former Minister of Defense, 1 was with a historian who also happened to be a political TV show host. 6 interviews were with academics from Tbilisi State University, International Black Sea University, and Caucasus University. 6 of these interviews were in English and 4 were in Georgian. The remaining 2.5 weeks were spent in Ajaria where I conducted a total of 12 interviews. 6 of these interviews were in English and the other 6 were in Georgian. These consisted of 5 professors, 1 interview with the head of the Ajarian parliament, 1 interview with the head of the Ministry of Economic Affairs for Ajaria, 1 interview with a former lawyer and constitution specialist, 1 interview with an specialist in the Ajaria Supreme Council, 1 interview with a PhD student/former worker in the Ajarian government, and 2 interviews with local NGO workers. 6 of these interviews were held in English and the other 6 interviews were in Georgian (See Table 2 at end in Interviews Section).
Secondary Data Analysis

Secondary data analysis is the other method which was used for this research in order to complement responses from my interviews. Due to time constraints in the field and an abundance of data that is already published, this type of data was a feasible option in order to collect more data on Ajaria that I otherwise would not have access to (Elliot, 2016). Also most of this data was widely available for public use which made it convenient to use. Previous research on Ajaria, Census data, and documents from the Georgian government will help assess my research questions on Georgia. The collection of government data for secondary data analysis is a viable option for any project on contemporary aspect of human geography (White, 2003) which is why I chose to pursue this method.

The documents that I needed to acquire were available online through Georgian governmental websites. Documents such as the Georgian constitution and the Ajarian constitution were found online through the Georgian government website at gov.ge and the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria’s website at adjara.gov.ge. Both of these sites listed the rights of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria’s government in respect to the Georgian constitution and laws. Additionally, other online sources were used to collect data on previous constitutions of the Georgian Republic which detailed the rights of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria during the rule of Menshevik Georgia and the Soviet Union.
Census data is also used in this research from the Georgian government. Government data is a great source since they have a high level of funding and expertise that goes into its work (Smith, 2008). The data is collected from the websites census.ge and Geostat.ge are used to help address and clarify responses from participants on the question why autonomy is still necessary for Georgia. During interviews for this research, participants cited reasons as why Ajaria is successful and has benefited Georgia. Stats from the 2014 Georgian census is used to verify or refute these claims which were made. Also, in addition to the Georgian census of 2014, stats will be used from the Georgian census of 2002 to analyze Ajaria during the rule of Abashidze and how Ajaria is faring 10 years after the Rose Revolution.

Archival data analysis is also a method that was attempted for this research. The National Archives in Tbilisi had historical documents and newspaper dating back to the Pre-Soviet times of Georgia. The main issue with archival research in Georgia is that none of the documents are in English and all of them were either in Georgian or Russian. I found a translator through one of my contacts at Tbilisi State University. She would help me conduct research at the Georgian National Archives and for interviews as well. Since documents at the National Archives were in both Russian and Georgian, the translator would need to know both of those languages in addition to English. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, bureaucracy, and complications at the Georgian National Archives, I was not able to collect any documents for my research.

Conducting Research Internationally

As a foreigner conducting research in the country of Georgia, there were challenges and obstacles that I had to overcome and recognize while conducting research. According to Smith (2010), conducting fieldwork abroad can be difficult and build character for a researcher. Not only did I have to navigate around a language barrier, but also cultural barriers, and local cultural norms. I took these three variables for granted in the United States but they created a series of obstacles for me when I conducted research abroad.
The main issue that was encountered conducting research abroad was the language barrier. The national language of Georgia is Georgian which is situated in its own language family and has its own alphabet. I hired a translator in Tbilisi and Batumi to help conduct research and overcome this. Building trust with the translators was crucial since my research was dependent on the dialogue and information being translated through them. Not only were the translators needed for translating Georgian into English, but they also took the cultural context and related into terms that I could better understand in English (Smith, 2010).

Recognizing my positionality and differences in order to build trust and gain respect from my participants was also essential for research abroad (Skeleton, 2001). Being a researcher, we can never escape the power relations shaping the situation in which we conduct research (Smith, 2010). Since most of my participants were from highly educated backgrounds and positions of political and social influence, they carefully worded their statements. I also had to remain aware of my position as a foreigner. I was aware that most Georgians don’t like to “share their dirty laundry” with foreigners meaning that they like to shine a good light on their country and prefer to keep the bad things to themselves (Abramia, 2012). This required me to build trust with my participants and create a welcoming atmosphere during the interviews. This was done by speaking short Georgian phrases with the interview participants to build rapport and to show that I had a real interest in Georgia. Additionally I would open up the interviews learning more about the participants before I started asking my questions.

My positionality as a foreigner also had benefits working in Georgia. Holding an American passport, I had advantages which Non-Americans did not have. Speaking with some Georgian friends, they were impressed that I was able to get interviews with Georgian politicians as a Master’s student. My friends stated that local politicians would never speak with a Georgian Master’s student. Also participants wanted to share their stories and thoughts on Ajaria since they wanted to broadcast information to an International audience. So while there were limitations to being a foreign researcher, there were also advantages.
Conclusion

The methods conducted for this research are the foundation for addressing my research questions. Since qualitative methods were my primary approach for this project, the result sections are formulated as a narrative which will chronologically introduce Ajaria from 1991 until present day. The four sub sections to my research question are divided amongst 4 chapters which introduce my interviews into the broader narrative of Ajarian autonomy. Also data from secondary sources and government sources will be used to identify findings within my interviews and to present a more accurate representation of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria.
The question of how Ajarian autonomy functioned from the end of the Soviet Union until the Rose Revolution can be summed up by Aslan Abashidze’s rule. Abashidze’s leadership was bereft of democratic rule in which he displayed signs of separatism, ruled Ajaria like a de facto state, and displayed disregard towards Georgian constitutional law. He became entangled in organized crime and sparked concerns of separatism amongst the Georgian political elite. While Abashidze’s rule was marred by these concerns, he did protect Ajaria from events that occurred in the rest of Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Additionally Ajaria’s autonomy was preserved, which at times looked more like de facto state than an integral part of Georgia. This section will examine Abashidze’s style of rule by analyzing whether or not Ajaria ruled as a de facto state during this time or if its government ruled within the confines of the Georgian constitution. The situation in Ajaria during Abashidze’s rule will then be compared to the academic literature on autonomy, separatism, and integration.

On April 20, 1991, eleven days after Georgian independence from the Soviet Union, protestors marched into the main square in Batumi. They demanded against the will of Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia that Ajarian autonomy remain intact and that Aslan Abashidze be instated as their leader (Derluguian, 2001). As legend has it, Nodar Innadze, the leader of the Gamsakhurdia’s party the Round Table Bloc in Ajaria and a supporter of abolishing Ajarian autonomy, burst into Ajaria’s Supreme Soviet and shot at Aslan Abashidze wounding him (Zurcher, 2007). It is then rumored that Abashidze and his bodyguards shot back at Innadze and killed him (Derluguian, 2001). This set off a wave of protests where protesters stormed administrative buildings in Batumi and demanded the resignation of certain officials (Zurcher, 2007). Gamsakhurdia who was already facing numerous problems in Tbilisi and trying to fend of separatist notions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia chose not to interfere in Ajaria. This lead to the establishment of Aslan Abashidze as the head of the new Post Soviet Autonomous Republic of Ajaria.
After the Georgian government decided to let autonomy remain in Ajaria, there was still distrust by the government about separatist ambitions in the autonomous republic. Politicians in Tbilisi accused Batumi of separatism and displayed fears that it would become a reality (Toft, 2003). From the Ajar point of view, they were concerned about the nationalistic rhetoric of President Gamsakhurdia. They knew that he wanted to abolish their autonomy and also had concerns about the government’s strong bend towards Christian-Georgian nationalism (Toft, 2003). Although Abashidze never showed any signs of separatist tendencies, the Ajarian parliament issued a statement in 1991 stating:

We remind everybody, both friends and enemies, that Ajaria is the region in which the population has not only heroically defended itself over centuries, but has also defended the whole of Georgia and has constituted a kind of shield for it. Ajaria has heroically resisted countless conquerors, has been the first to take upon itself the blows of the invaders, has been a support for our fatherland, and has held high the banner of Georgian unity. The unshakable spirit and the genetic code of our heroic ancestors are still alive in us. If the interests of our motherland demand this, all of Ajaria will rise again and be the vanguard of it defenders (Svobodnaya Gruziya, 1991).

The Ajarian government had to remind Tbilisi that they were in fact Georgian but this idea never seemed to endure with the central government in Tbilisi.

Shortly after Gamsakhurdia’s overthrow in 1991, Abashidze’s government declared a state of emergency and took steps which displayed signs of separatism from the Georgian state. Ajaria closed its borders and didn’t allow the newly elected officials of the Supreme Soviet in Ajaria to sit in Batumi (Zurcher, 2007). Abashidze also took control over the customs division on the border, the Batumi seaport, other important government installations, and the Batumi based 25th brigade of Georgia’s defense declared allegiance to him (Zurcher, 2007). Abashidze quickly consolidated power within the autonomous republic of Ajaria and had full control over governmental institutions. He ruled by decree like a dictator, had his own militia, and garnered support from the people in exchange for protecting them from warlords roaming the Georgian countryside (Zurcher, 2007). Despite his actions, Abashidze still never declared separatism from the state and always declared that Ajaria was an integral part of Georgia.
When it came to the Georgian people, local residents in Ajaria never second guessed their own Georgianness albeit they did question Ajaria’s role within Georgia. When I asked my interview participants about Abashidze’s rule, they described Ajaria using various connotations such as de facto state, fiefdom, totalitarian state, or a separatist state. Some participants claimed that Tbilisi had control in Ajaria while others blamed the situation on a weak National government. A few participants even stated that Ajaria had true autonomy. One participant named Zviad Diasamidze, a native of Batumi and a former worker in the Ajarian government, described Ajaria as a de facto state.

After Zviad Gamsakhurdia was in trouble, he (Abashidze) immediately took a chance and established himself as the leader of this region and separated the whole region from the country. But he did not manage to separate it like it was done with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Because there you have the other ethnicities, here we have Georgians of course. What he did was separate it economically. He did not pay taxes to the central government. He ruled Ajaria like a de facto region. But he would always state, ‘no no we are in Georgia, it’s not Abkhazia or South Ossetia, we are Georgians of course, we are here, they are bad we are fine, they are criminals we are ok’, and he used this just to create a small de facto state (Diasamidze Interview, 16 July 2016, Batumi).

Under Abashidze’s rule, as expressed to me by Ajarian political observers of that era, there was every kind of political crisis in Ajaria such as corruption, withholding tax revenues from the central government, organized crime, nepotism, illegal weapons trade and a drug trade. It was an era of uncertainty where the inhabitants of Ajaria were nervous under Abashidze’s rule. Another participant, Alexandre Kukhianidze, viewed Ajaria in the 1990’s and early 2000’s as a de facto state. Dr. Alexandre Kukhianidze is a professor of Political Science at Tbilisi State University who grew up in Ajaria. He remembers the rule of Abashidze as an abnormal situation in Georgian history.

The only abnormal situation was under Aslan Abashidze’s rule. He took hold of power in the early 90’s when Zviad Gamsakhurdia was president but shortly after
Gamsakhurdia was dismissed. Shevardnadze returned from Moscow and Abashidze was there as the head of the Ajarian Autonomous Republic. I would call it a small Feudal or a small Autonomous Republic. He tried to create this system, but he never openly declared secessionism or separatism, he always said that Ajaria was a part of Georgia but he behaved like a typical separatist (Kukhianidze Interview, 17 June 2016, Tbilisi).

Abashidze never openly declared separatism and in fact was an advocate for maintaining Georgia’s territorial integrity (Toft, 2003). When it came to separatist tendencies, Abashidze withheld tax revenues from Tbilisi, formed his own militia, and created his own internal border with Georgia. Other participants did not go as far claiming that Ajaria was a de facto state under Abashidze. Avtandil Beridze, who is the former Chairman of the Supreme Council of Ajaria and a member of the Georgian Dream Party was asked about whether Ajaria acted as a de facto state under Abashidze.

The Autonomous Republic of Ajaria was never a different state. It was under the supervision of the Georgian government more or less. In the 2000’s, the problems with the central government were not critical and there was not any increased control from the center. Since 2000, when Aslan Abashidze tried to create a Senate instead of a Supreme Council. He had a very bad constitution, he had his military formations, he tried to establish a constitutional court in Ajaria, he created his own currency, he had separatist hopes, but these hopes were not irredentist and he didn’t want to unite with Turkey or Russia and he was called a Pasha which meant leader in the Ottoman Empire. He had something like a fiefdom (Beridze Interview, 11 July 2016, Batumi).

-Interview conducted in Georgian with an English translator

Avtandil Beridze was not the first nor the last interview participant to describe Abashidze’s rule as a fief lord over his fiefdom. In addition to my interview participants, scholars Aves (1996) and Toft (2003) similarly refer to Abashidze’s rule as a feudal lord over his fiefdom. The remaining interview participants also described Abashidze’s rule in Ajaria as an atypical situation. Half of the participants claimed that Abashidze had separatist hopes and
authoritarian tendencies. Some even suggested that Ajaria acted a de facto state within Georgia and that Abashidze acted as a dictator. Although all of them agreed that in some way Abashidze violated the Georgian constitution citing facts such as withholding tax revenues from Tbilisi and forming his own militia. Despite the fact that a consensus was made on Abashidze’s separatist tendencies, not everyone agreed on the fact of whether or not his government was autonomous. Some viewed it as a true autonomous republic while others claimed it was something more than that.

While most participants claim that Abashidze’s rule was authoritarian, they did praise some of his good qualities such as guaranteeing safety to Ajaria’s inhabitants during a time when warlords were roaming the countryside of Georgia looting and pillaging. The warlords were known as Jaba Ioseliani and Tengiz Kitovani. They were heads of the Georgian militia who often operated against the will of the Georgian government, such as the case when Kitovani entered Abkhazia in 1993 against the will of the Georgian president (Gahrton, 2010). Unlike in Abkhazia, these militias were never able to enter Ajaria despite their attempts to do so. When I asked one of my interview participants Vakhtang Maisaia, a professor at Caucasus International University, why violence broke out in Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the collapse of the Soviet Union but not in Ajaria, I received an interesting response.

*In 1992 during the early days of Eduard Shevardnadze (President of Georgia), all the power was given to the Military Council. A military Junta was created in which two warlords known as Jaba Ioseliani who was known as a Georgian Mafia, and Kitovani, who was the commander of the National Guard and would later become the Minister of Defense in Georgia. Together this military Junta ruled the country. They tried to widen their area of control and tried to enter Ajaria but Abashidze deflected them by using the Russian military force. These two warlords acted like gangsters and I will say that Abashidze at the time was absolutely right to deny them entry (Maisaia Interview, 23 June 2016, Tbilisi)!*

Abashidze had a good relationship with Moscow and the commanders at the Russian military base in Ajaria. Every time Ioselini and Kitovani threatened to enter Ajaria, they
were always met at the border by Russian tanks and local militia volunteers (Derluguian, 2001). This benefitted Abashidze during the wars in Georgia during the early 1990’s and kept the violence out of Ajaria. When I asked other participants about the advantages of Aslan Abashidze, they would give a similar response regarding the protection he brought to Ajaria. One participant named Aleksandre Davitadze, who works at the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria, stated:

_We were managed by locals, all of the top management were local people from Ajaria. And we felt safe here. We had crime here still but no war. Those were our advantages (Davitadze Interview, 20 July 2016, Batumi)._ 

Additionally Aleksandre stated that the reason Abashidze didn’t enter the war in Georgia is because he knew that his people wanted peace and always had their interest at heart. He believed that Abashidze had good intentions for the inhabitants of Ajaria but also acted like a dictator.

In retrospect, the actions of Aslan Abashidze displayed totalitarian tendencies. His family members were given government positions while his son Giorgi became the mayor of Batumi. According to some of my interview participants, no one in Ajaria could have a nicer car than Giorgi Abashidze. If Giorgi Abashidze saw someone driving a nicer car in Batumi, he would stop them and take it. In addition to Giorgi Abashidze, other family members directly benefitted from Aslan Abashidze’s rule, such as his brother in law who was made director of the port in Batumi (Pelkmans, 2006). Other institutions like the customs offices and state security forces were controlled by a handful of families close to Aslan Abashidze (Pelkmans, 2006). This created a network of nepotism and cronyism which were the norm in Ajarian politics during the 1990’s and early 2000’s. According to Aleksandre Davitadze, everyone living in Ajaria knew they could never be higher than Abashidze’s family or his close friends.

In respects to adhering to the Georgian constitution, Aslan Abashidze defied it. As mentioned earlier, tax revenues from Ajaria stayed within the Autonomous Republic and never went to Tbilisi. Borders were established around Ajaria which were outside of Georgian state control, including the international border with Turkey. Abashidze created
his own courts that handed out judicial rulings independent of the national government. In February of 2000, he created his own Ajarian constitution and officially declared himself president in 2003 (ICG, 2004). One of my interview participants Levan Jakeli, who is an Associate Professor of Law at Batumi State University, summed up the situation during our conversation.

_The government of Ajaria ignored the Georgian constitution and established and enacted the laws that were beneficial for them. He (Aslan Abashidze) was the general of Ajaria. He had a constitutional court and a supreme court of Ajaria. He formed a parallel government in Georgia. Back then in the period of Aslan Abashidze all of the money stayed here and maybe a little part went to Tbilisi (Jakeli Interview, 13 July 2016, Batumi)._ -Interview conducted in Georgian with an English translator

Another local of Batumi named Zura Kvirkvaia who is an advisor at the Constitutional Court of Georgia located in Batumi and a professor at Batumi State University, had similar opinions as Levan Jakeli.

_Abashidze had an army and a Constitutional Court. The Constitution of the Central Government and the Constitution of Ajaria were opposite of each other in some aspects and Abashidze established situations that were prohibited by the constitution of the Central Government (Kvirkaia Interview, 20 July 2016, Batumi)._ -Interview conducted in Georgian with an English translator

On the issue of borders, Nika Chitadze who is a Professor of International Relations and Politics at the International Black Sea University in Tbilisi, mentions that Abashidze also executed actions that violated Georgian law. This was a response after I asked him whether or not Ajaria acted as more of a de facto state or autonomous region during the 1990’s and early 2000’s.
At the same time, at the Ajarian border, he deployed policemen and they controlled the borders and checked the passports of those traveling into Ajaria. Partly maybe it was semi-independent at that time (Chitadze Interview, 27 June 2016, Tbilisi).

Some of my other interview participants mentioned that during the 1990’s and early 2000’s, they needed to carry their passports while leaving or entering Ajaria.

For the most part, Ajaria was outside the rule of the Georgian government which had a very weak to almost nonexistent writ in Ajaria during Abashidze’s rule (Economist, March 2004). After the coup which overthrew Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia in 1991, Eduard Shevardnadze became the new leader of Georgia. He reached out to Aslan Abashidze in Ajaria and asked for a loyal Ajarian administration and a pledge to refrain from supporting the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Hoch and Kopecek, 2011). Abashidze concurred and in return was able to create an authoritarian government with his own economic policy independent of Tbilisi (Hoch and Kopecek, 2011). Most of the revenues from local shipping stayed in Batumi (DeWaal, 2010) and transit trade with Turkey brought in additional revenue for Ajaria (Derluguian, 1998). In 1988, Moscow permitted cross border trade in at Sarpi (the border crossing in Ajaria with Turkey) just south of Batumi where the barter trade was estimated to be $60 to $70 million dollars a month (Derluguian, 1998). Traders came from all over the Caucasus and Russia to import goods from Turkey via the border crossing in Ajaria (Zurcher, 2007). Having an agreement with Shevardnadze, most of the trade and tax revenues collected by Abashidze in Ajaria never made it to Tbilisi (Zurcher, 2003). As Georgi Derlugian (1998) points out, this is perhaps what Aslan Abashidze meant when he admitted that “Ajaria has nothing of value except the good humor of its people and geopolitical advantages.”

All of my interview participants agreed that Abashidze’s government had overstepped the Georgian constitution. His rule became more authoritarian as it continued whereas during the second half of the 1990s, the Ajarian government managed to control most of the important economic assets of Ajaria and suppressed most political opposition (Pelkmans, 2006). This then poses the question of whether the government of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria had separatist tendencies or if it was acting as a truly autonomous institution. As Heintze (1998) states in the literature, autonomy gives a region
authorization to govern themselves on certain issues without constituting a state of its own. The question that then needs to be addressed is what constitutes a region as a state of its own and did Ajaria ever meet this definition.

The literature on separatism and integration uses Gilmartin’s (2009) and Agnew’s (2005) definition of a state which requires other states to recognize it as sovereign. In the case of Ajaria, the international community, Georgia, and even the ruling class of Ajaria never viewed or claimed Ajaria as a sovereign state. There were fears of Abashidze having separatist ideas, but these ideas never came to fruition. The question then of whether or not Ajaria acted as a de facto entity within Georgia during Abashidze’s rule needs to be addressed using Scott Pegg’s definition of a de facto state. According to Pegg’s (1998) definition, a de facto state is essentially a separatist region that has yet to obtain international recognition. Ajaria never attempted to separate from Georgia under Abashidze’s government which means that Ajaria would not qualify as a de facto state under Pegg’s definition.

This then begs the question of whether Ajaria was truly autonomous under Abashidze’s rule. As one of Lapidoth’s (1993) arguments for autonomy, Abashidze had exclusive powers of legislation, administration, and adjudication in Ajaria. Aslan Abashidze had more self-governing rights within Ajaria as an Autonomous Republic than other regions in Georgia. Although he violated the Georgian constitution by refusing to send tax revenues to Tbilisi, by taking control of an international border, and by creating his own militia. Autonomy gives a specific group the right to self-rule as long as they abide by the constitutional laws of the state (Heintze, 1998). In the case of Abashidze, he violated the Georgian constitution and governed beyond his de jure powers granted to him by the country of Georgia. According to Heintze this would be a violation of autonomy but as it is evident in the literature, autonomy can have numerous meanings. According to Foldvary (2011), Abashidze’s Ajaria would be autonomous since autonomy is a simple compromise between integration and independence. This was also evident in my interviews where some of the participants claimed that Ajaria had real autonomy during Abashidze’s rule and others claimed that it did not.
Chapter 6: The Rose Revolution and Ajaria

The Rose Revolution changed the identity of Georgian politics and the focus of power in Ajaria. Georgia transformed from a parliamentary to a presidential system (DeWaal, 2010) while Abashidze would flee Ajaria shortly after (Zurcher, 2007; Gahrton, 2010; DeWaal, 2010). Politics and autonomy in Ajaria underwent an overhaul whereas more central government oversight became the new norm in the Autonomous Republic. This chapter will focus on how the Rose Revolution affected Ajarian autonomy and what happened to local governmental institutions in Ajaria. It will then look at the academic literature on integration and analyze how it pertains to the situation in Ajaria immediately following the Rose Revolution.

After the Rose Revolution, Mikheil Saakashvili embarked upon a monumental task of state building and strengthening Georgia. One of his main goals was to strengthen the territorial integrity of Georgia and integrate the three regions of Abkhazia, a contested region with Russian peacekeeping forces, South Ossetia, another contested region with Russian peacekeeping forces, and Ajaria, an autonomous republic ruled by an authoritarian leader who displayed disregard for the Georgian constitution (DeWaal, 2010). His first major accomplishment came on May 6 when Aslan Abashidze fled to Russia and Georgia fully integrated Ajaria back into its sphere of control (DeWaal, 2010). This was a big political victory for the new government and was also a turning point in the modern history of Ajaria within the new Georgia.

The inhabitants of Ajaria were elated about creating a regime change in the local Autonomous government but for some, this excitement would be short lived. Georgians in Ajaria relished the fact that a totalitarian governor had been removed and economic opportunities were increasing but were hesitant about the new oversight from the central government in Tbilisi (DeWaal, 2010). I can remember sitting with Lasha Bazhunaishvili in his office at Batumi State University and his friend’s Malkhaz Nakashidze on a hot summer day in 2016. Lasha works as a Political Science Professor at the University and Malkhaz is a
lawyer/constitution specialist who used to work in the Ajarian government from 2004 to 2007. During our interview Lasha joked that the Rose revolution protests in Batumi started in the room we were sitting in. He then looked at me smiling and said that this is a historical location right here.

Regardless of where the protests to oust Abashidze in Batumi started, they were a monumental occasion that changed the power structure within the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria. As Malkhaz said to me during our interview:

> *Now there are no separatists and the situation we had before 2004 is no longer. We had a totalitarian governor in Ajaria named Aslan Abashidze (Nakashidze Interview, 5 July 2016, Batumi).*

At the time there was a sense of hope amongst the inhabitants of Ajaria and I pressed on further asking Malkhaz and Lasha what has changed politically. Lasha gave me a response stating:

> *We are well integrated (with Georgia), we have our rights from the constitution, we have our constitution of Ajaria which helps us have good political relations with the Georgian state. I think Malkhaz will agree with me that politically we have had no crisis since the 2003 Rose Revolution. Because up until this, during the Abashidze regime there was a political crisis and some economic issues between the center and this region (Ajaria). There was a budgetary crisis and after 2003 everything was regulated by the law. And now the law is regulating some economical interrelations, political interrelations, legal interrelations, and we have guaranteed our political rights and legal rights (Bazhunaishvili Interview, 5 July 2016, Batumi).*

Other interview participants voiced similar sentiments as Lasha and Malkhaz. They felt a sense of uncertainty under Abashidze’s government and were ready for a change. Zviad Diasamidze also noted that the political and economic situation changed drastically after the Rose Revolution.
The situation in Ajaria changed massively in 2004. At the beginning (Right after Abashidze was ousted) corruption was an issue and was taken away by the state. Economically they started a lot of investments and overhauled the tax system which made sure revenues first went to the Central Georgian government and then came back to Ajaria. It was very important for this region of course to be part of Georgia, the country where it belongs. From an economic point of view we cannot deny that everything which happened is nothing short of a miracle because lots of things went extremely fast and it was more than welcome when investors came. Every type of investor came including from the tourism sector which had the most investors during this period. As you see the Sheraton, Radisson, and numerous hotels were constructed. From the economic point of view everything changed massively. From a political point of view under Abashidze, you had everything as a political crisis, and he never abided by the law of Georgia. In this case now you have the opposite picture, everything is dominated by the central government (Dasamidze Interview, 16 July, 2016, Batumi).

The economic situation became more prosperous in Ajaria as more investors were free to operate in the Autonomous Republic. On the political spectrum, Zviad makes an eye opening comment when he says that the current government is exactly the opposite of Abashidze’s. What was once an authoritarian government that defied the center, the Ajarian government now has strong oversight from the central government in Tbilisi.

After Aslan Abashidze fled Ajaria to Russia, the new Georgian government lead by Mikheil Saakashvili wanted to ensure that a political situation similar to Abashidze’s government never repeated itself in Ajaria. In order to do this, the central government in Tbilisi enacted new laws on the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria which trimmed the powers of the autonomous government and parliament (DeWaal, 2010). Autonomy still remained in Ajaria, but to a lesser degree than during Abashidze’s term (Gahrton, 2010). I asked Kornely Kakachia, who is a professor of International Relations at Tbilisi State University, about the special privileges Ajaria has that other regions in Georgia do not? His response elicited a reference to the Rose Revolution and how it altered Ajaria’s government.
Yes this is a very good question. Officially yes they have their own government and they have a head of government which normal regions don’t have. They have their own parliament which is very unique compared to other regions. But it became very small after the Rose Revolution. They have nominally small symbols of state such as their own flag and their own ministries. But these ministries were cut down a lot after the Rose Revolution because during the Abashidze era it was sometimes too much (Kakachia Interview, 21 June, 2016, Tbilisi).

The institutions and symbols of autonomy still remained in Ajaria after the Rose Revolution and the parliament was reinstituted (Abashidze closed down the Ajarian Supreme Council). A lot of my interview participants mentioned that Saakashvili’s government curtailed the powers of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria in order to avoid another political situation like Abashidze’s rule. Zura Kvirkvaia also had a similar sentiment to that of Kornely.

I think this perspective is that we have very weak autonomy here in Ajaria. Because the government is scared of separatism. Because of the fact that we, meaning Georgia, have little experience of being an independent state, only 25 years. The government institutions are not well developed and the political figures play a crucial role in making decisions and they play a similar role as the institutions. When the Central Government was developing Ajarian Autonomy, they developed this autonomy in a way that the next leader wouldn’t have more rights and wouldn’t become the next Aslan Abashidze. Because during Abashidze, Ajaria had a border and because of that, the Central Government developed an autonomy that was efficient for them (Kvirkvaia Interview, 20 July, 2016, Batumi).

-Interview conducted in Georgian with an English translator

As some of these quotes signify, some of my interview participants viewed the Rose Revolution and the ouster of Aslan Abashidze as a good change. Although they were disheartened by the checks in power of Ajarian autonomy. While this was a theme amongst some, not everyone agreed that Ajarian autonomy dwindled.
All of my interview participants believed that Ajaria still had autonomy after the Rose Revolution since it governed itself in certain matters free from Tbilisi while autonomous government institutions and symbols still remained. Although my participants disagreed on the extent of self-governance that Ajaria retained. One of my interview participants Sergi Kapanadze, who was the former deputy foreign minister of Georgia, stated that the Ajarian government ruled outside of the Georgian legal sphere during Abashidze’s rule. When asked about Ajaria’s autonomy since the breakup of the Soviet Union, he stated:

*After 2004 when Abashidze was driven away, what happened was that we had the return of Ajaria to its legal sphere of influence. Since then they have retained autonomy and their self-governance. They are able to solve their own issues and at the same time the problems that endured during Abashidze will not reoccur. The problems of not paying taxes and things like that. That’s why I say they have autonomy but at the same time they are part of Georgia (Kapanadze Interview, 28 June, 2016, Tbilisi).*

Ajaria’s autonomous functions should be carried out, but legally while adhering to Georgian national laws. This aligned with Sergi’s statement that Ajaria’s autonomy should be constitutionally analogous with Georgian laws. Differing slightly from Sergi’s comment on Ajaria, another one of my interview participants, Malkhaz Chkadua who is head of the Transparency International Office in Batumi, noted that autonomy decreased after Abashidze’s rule.

*As I mentioned, the style of ruling by Abashidze was a style of ruling like you’d see in the Middle Ages. He had some confrontations with Eduard Shevardnadze, but when the Rose Revolution was coming, they agreed about negotiations and friendship. That’s why on Rustaveli Avenue in 2004 in November, the period of Abashidze, certain guys went there to say that Saakashvili and his allies would not win. So, yeah and of course Abashidze got forced out of Ajaria in 2004 and Saakashvili said that Ajaria is free and Aslan has left Ajaria. This was a phrase in 2004 and everyone was chanting this. After this, of course the scale and level of autonomy was decreasing because of the*
experience and somehow I can say that Saakashvili was indirectly ruling Ajaria
(Chkadua Interview, 18 July 2016, Batumi).

While Malkhaz points out that autonomy decreases, he follows this up with a statement that Saakashvili was indirectly ruling Ajaria. This analysis is similar to the comments made by other interview participants who stated that Ajaria went from too little oversight to too much oversight from the central government.

Out of all of my interviews, not one participant voiced displeasure about the ousting of Aslan Abashidze following the Rose Revolution. Some thought that he had good intentions and others thought he had a few good policies, but at the end of the day, they viewed his totalitarian tendencies as being excessive. On my last night in Batumi during the summer of 2016, I sat with my friend Aleksandre Davitadze at a cafe located on a pier on the Black Sea. We ate and drank while talking about Ajaria when Aleksandre made a comment that stuck with me. He emphasized that he didn’t think Abashidze was a bad person and truly wanted the best for the Georgian people living in Ajaria. Although, Aleksandre went on to say that everything became better in Ajaria after Abashidze left and despite his intentions, Abashidze acted as a dictator. Aleksandre’s point of view was one of many that I encountered while talking with people in Batumi. I can remember when I was interviewing Levan Jakeli at Batumi State University, he refused to even utter Aslan Abashidze’s name out of contempt. Other participants such as Zviad Diasamidze spoke about Abashidze like he was the head of the mafia in Ajaria while others claimed he acted like a feudal lord. Despite these different outlooks on Abashidze, Levan and Zviad agreed with Aleksandre that they were essentially dictated and that the situation in Ajaria started to prosper after Abashidze left.

Following the Rose revolution, Ajaria became economically and politically integrated with Georgia. Scholars such as O’Loughlin et al. (2014) and Gahrton (2010) claimed that Ajaria was integrated by Mikheil Saakashvili in 2004. Expounding on the idea of integration, the academic literature defines it as bringing subgroups of a state together socially and culturally and creating a shared sense of national identity and a shared political community (Weiner 1965; Shulman, 1998). In the case of Ajaria, Ajarians view themselves as Georgians (Toft, 2003) which meant that this definition would not be
suitable. Albeit while Ajaria was ethnically Georgian, Svante Cornell (2002a) notes that the economic and political institutions of Ajaria were isolated from Georgia. Ajaria was politically integrated and brought back into control of the Central government. Economic integration also occurred whereas tax revenues started flowing from Batumi to Tbilisi.

In the case of autonomy in Ajaria, it still remained with its institutions and laws intact. The Venice Commission sums up the new law passed on Ajaria following its integration with Georgia.

Moreover, the draft regulates in detail the internal structures of the Autonomous Republic, while this should largely be left to the discretion of the democratically elected organs of the autonomy, and it provides for excessive interference of Georgian state organs in the affairs of the autonomy. This is certainly an understandable reaction to the recent negative experience of Georgia with the abuse of the autonomy during the Abashidze period. However, this approach does not take into account the fact that during the second rose revolution the people of Ajaria freely and voluntarily expressed their wish to be part of Georgia and to abide by the rules established by the Georgian Constitution. It does therefore seem likely that the institutions elected in Ajaria will exercise their powers responsibly without being subject to constant supervision. However, should the unlikely case arise, that the institutions of Ajaria (again) do not exercise their powers responsibly, the Commission is of the opinion that the generally accepted powers of supervision as they exist in states granting autonomy and as they are provided for in the Georgian Constitution, as properly interpreted, are sufficient to successfully resolve such a situation (Council of Europe Venice Commission, 2004).

Autonomy functioned in Ajaria following the Rose Revolution but as noted by my participants, there was excessive oversight from the central government. The people of Ajaria had expressed their will to be part of Georgia albeit within an Autonomous Republic. As Toft (2003) states in her work, the inhabitants of Ajaria has always seen themselves as Georgian.
Chapter 7: Post Rose Revolution

Following the Rose Revolution, Ajarian autonomy was still supported by Tbilisi. After Abashidze’s departure, Ajaria was integrated back into Georgia’s political and economic sphere of influence. Some Georgian parliamentarians quickly sought to abolish Ajarian autonomy but the Georgian government held steadfast on their promise to maintain Ajaria’s autonomous status (Civil Georgia, May 7, 2014). The government of Georgia reinstated the Ajarian Supreme Council which was dissolved under Abashidze and held elections on June 20, 2004 (ICG, 2004). Two weeks later a new constitutional law on the status of the Autonomous Republic was passed in Tbilisi (ICG, 2004). As the international Crisis Group (2004) assessed in their findings, they were concerned by the speed and the lack of transparency of the changes in law, not to mention the law’s substance. The ICG (International Crisis Group) then questioned the degree to which Ajaria really controlled its own affairs.

State and Local Governance

The best way to introduce the powers granted to the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria, is to be familiar with the government of Georgia. Under President Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia was a ‘super-presidential system’ (Jones, 2013). This meant Georgian parliament was very weak during his tenure and had very little likelihood of achieving three-fifths majority needed to veto presidential legislation, or two-thirds for presidential impeachment (Jones, 2013). Within this system, the vast majority of legislative initiatives came from the president and his government totaling about 80% in 2003 (Jones, 2013). The powers within this Presidential system is centralized meaning that very little power is given to the local provinces within Georgia (See figure 1). In the 2010 revision of the Georgian Constitution, Chapter 7, articles 101.1, 101.2, and 101.3 gives the Georgian government supervision over the local governments.
In 2013, the Georgian government underwent an overhaul and the constitution was amended to give the parliament more power. In this new form of government, the prime minister is the head of state and takes responsibility for domestic and foreign policy (Jones, 2013). As Stephen Jones (2013) goes on to state in his analysis of the new system, Georgia essentially shifts from a super-presidential to a super prime ministership. In regards to constitutional rights for local governance, he argues that Georgia is a centralized state where power is focused within the national government. He compares local governance to being bedridden and sums it up as:

Georgia's post-Soviet governments have consistently resisted decentralization. In 2005, local government budgets amounted to a total of 597 million GEL, or just over one-fifth of the national budget, despite serving over half the population. Laws that transferred property to local governments and expanded their budgetary powers
failed to overcome the political and financial controls of the Ministry of Finance. Most local government bodies still depend on the Ministry for 90 percent of their expenditures (Jones, 2013, pg. 176).

Politically, all things must go through Tbilisi since little power is devolved to the local governments. In Georgia, centralization has been the norm which is reminiscent of the Soviet era.

Unlike other provinces in Georgia, Ajaria has benefited from more political and economic freedoms as an Autonomous Republic. Shortly after Abashidze fled Ajaria, the question of how to regulate the two Autonomous Republics of Ajaria and Abkhazia (A separatist region outside the control of the Georgian government) was left ambiguous. The main challenge after Abashidze was to determine the relationship between Tbilisi and Batumi whereas Georgia had left its internal state structure largely unregulated (ICG, 2004). When Georgia became independent in 1991, there was no law passed on the status of Ajaria. In article 3.3 of the original Georgian Constitution, the status of autonomy in Ajaria was not clarified. It stated: The status of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria shall be determined (in the future) by the Constitutional Law of Georgia “On the Status of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria.” It would not be until July 7, 2004 when the Georgian parliament passed a law on the legal status of Ajaria (ICG, 2004).

The 2008 constitution of Ajaria guarantees certain rights to the Autonomous Republic. First Ajaria has a Supreme Council which acts as a representative body of the republic. Within the Supreme Council there are 21 deputies, 15 who are elected through a proportional electoral system and 6 of which are elected through a majoritarian electoral system for a term of 4 years. Second, Ajaria is allowed to have a government which acts as the executive body of the republic. The government consists of a Chairperson who is nominated by the President of Georgia and 4 ministers who lead the Ministry of Finance and Economy, the Ministry of Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sports. The ministers are appointed by the Chairperson of the government and need to be approved by the Supreme Council of Ajaria. The government of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria is held accountable to the President of Georgia and the Supreme Council of Ajaria. In addition to having an executive and legislative branch, the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria has its own government budget,
which according to the Constitution of Ajaria (Article 42.1), the Autonomous Republic enjoys financial autonomy within the scope of the laws of Georgia. Other general provisions are also granted in the constitution such as the right for the Autonomous Republic to have a flag and its own coat of arms.

![Figure 8: Satellite Imagery of Ajaria](image)

**Political and Economic Benefits of Autonomy**

The political rights for the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria are guaranteed by the constitution but these rights are questionable when it comes to the status of autonomy. Article 3.1 of the Ajarian constitution states that there are substantial competencies belonging to the autonomous republic such as tourism, culture, sanitation, agriculture, forest management, and other responsibilities. These are all important distinctions of
autonomy when it comes to governance in Ajaria compared to other regions such as Guria or Kvemo Kartli. Albeit some of these competences granted to Ajaria are vaguely defined within the constitution. An example would be article 3.d which allows for the promotion of education and science, but does not define what this entails such as how to promote these fields and to what extent? Another example is article 3.g which allows for construction and urban development of local importance which can be loosely interpreted by authorities. When it comes to the government of Ajaria, article 29 states that the President of Georgia nominates the chairperson of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria’s government. If the Supreme Council fails to nominate the candidate twice in a row, it can be dismissed by the President of Georgia. According to the Venice Commission in 2004, this provision is incompatible with a status of autonomy but overall, the constitution does grant substantial powers to the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria.

When asked about the benefits of autonomy, my participants talked about the legal and economic benefits which Ajaria receives as opposed to other regions in Georgia. When I was sitting with the head of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria in Chakvi, Avtandil Beridze, he gave me a great example of one of Ajaria’s benefits of autonomy.

*The benefit of people in Ajaria is that Ajarian autonomy has its own budget and the Ajarian government established and controls the budget. It also has ministries to supervise this budget. For example in Keda (A sub-region of Ajaria), there was a flood which destroyed bridges and roads and the approximate damage is 100,000 Lari (~$40,819). The benefits and the privileges is that we can handle and manage this damage from Batumi because we have our own budget. For example if it was in Guria (A region just north of Ajaria), they would have to ask for financing from Tbilisi from the central budget (Beridze Interview, 11 July 2016, Batumi).*

*Interview conducted in Georgian with an English translator*

Essentially Ajaria’s government is more efficient than the central government, which enables it to respond faster to disasters than other regions in Georgia. Additionally there is also less bureaucracy within the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria since they do not need to
go through the center (Tbilisi) for funding. As Avtandil Beridze said, this is a benefit of having autonomy within Georgia. Aleksandre Davitadze, who works in the Supreme Council of Ajaria, gave another example of what benefits autonomy brings.

**Aleksandre:** As inhabitants of Ajaria, we have more privileges. We have a local budget and a regional budget. Also as you know, there are 5 subregions in Ajaria known as Khulo, Keda, Kobuleti, Shuakhevi, Khelvachauari, and one administrative center which is Batumi. So what I wanted to say is that all of the sub-regions have a local budget. In addition to this, they have an Ajarian government budget and a Georgian government budget. For example let’s say a person, a citizen of Guria (another region in Georgia), needs surgery and they don’t have the money to do this. The hospital then needs to ask the central government in Tbilisi for money. Our hospitals can ask the sub-regional budget for money, then they can ask the Ajarian government, and then the Georgian government. So we have more finances and programs which make us stronger. These are health care programs and social programs which make our citizens more secured. We also have tourism programs to help tourism develop, we also have an agricultural program. Only local citizens of Ajaria have this privilege. So for me, it’s very important. My region is more developed than other regions. In our legislation, our Ajarian budget is collected from taxes. So this is what we are doing, all income taxes collected in the Ajaria region are going to the Ajarian budget, the local budget. So we have income taxes, other taxes, what do other taxes mean? Taxes if the government collects from private organizations, all income taxes go to the local Ajarian budget, also if a new building is built here in Ajaria, half of the income goes to the Federal budget and the other half stays here locally (Davitadze Interview, 20 July 2016, Batumi).

**Me:** So this means that Ajaria has more money than other regions?

**Aleksandre:** Yes. This is most important. So me as a citizen, if my region, and I am earning more than other regions, why should I not have privileges. It is my income, I should have more privileges. So what I wanted to say is that the local inhabitants of Ajaria do not want to lose these priorities (Davitadze Interview, 20 July 2016, Batumi).
Aleksandre sums up political benefits of autonomy in Ajaria quite well. Healthcare, tourism, local taxes, and local revenues are all in control of the Autonomous Republic’s government. It is better for someone to live in Ajaria since it is more advantageous than other regions. As Aleksandre points out, the inhabitants of Ajaria can see their tax money being put to use where they live as opposed to other regions, whereas tax revenues go to the central government and get redistributed across the country. Most regions depend on money from the central budget whereas Ajaria and its sub-regions have their own budget. According to the head of the Supreme Council of Ajaria, the budget for Ajaria from local tax revenues grew from 150 million Lari in 2004 to 215 million Lari in 2016 (Beridze Interview, 11 July 2016, Batumi). This money first goes to Tbilisi and then is sent back to the local Ajarian government budget whereas other regions in Georgia don’t have a local budget so all the tax revenues stay in Tbilisi.

Economic benefits of Ajarian autonomy are also noticeable compared to the other regions in Georgia. Benefitting from autonomous governance, Ajaria has its own budget which it can work with, a Ministry of Finance and Economy, its own tourism bureau, and benefits from domestic and foreign investments. When I asked Zviad Diasamidze, a former government worker in the Ajarian government, “what his perspective was on Ajaria’s status within Georgia today?”, his first response pertained to the economic situation.

*I think the last 10 years Ajaria has played a very big role. First economically as it has changed massively in the last 10 years there has been energy, a big border with Turkey which is a significant source of income, transit, we have a harbor, we have tourist businesses which has changed completely in a positive way in the last 10 years having places like Sheraton and Radisson. I think this shows how big of an impact Ajaria has been for the development of the country from an economic point of view. And most importantly you have local investments coming from investment groups. So for example I am working for a hydropower group Shuakhevi the largest investment in Georgia. Having investments from India, Norway, and having the International Financial Corporation, Members from the World Bank, so we already understand how*
important this region is for the country’s development from an economic point of view (Diasamidze Interview, 16 July, 2016, Batumi).

Zviad mentions that Ajaria brings in revenue from trade, tourism, and investments which substantially benefits the Autonomous Republic and the country of Georgia. There is no doubt that Ajaria has prospered and as Sergi Kapanadze (Ex Foreign deputy Minister of Georgia) points out, Ajaria has had the biggest economic growth in Georgia in the last ten years. Its geographical location on the sea and sharing a border with Turkey has proven advantageous to the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria and points to the question of whether its economic success can be attributed to its autonomy, or simply to its amazing location? Albeit regardless of geography, it is Ajaria’s autonomous status which allows for the local government’s revenue to thrive and prosper from its location.

Shortly after Abashidze fled Ajaria, lots of domestic and foreign investment poured into the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria. Almost immediately, the Georgian government started investing money into the Autonomous Republic. Construction projects started, the tourism industry grew, and businesses came to the region. When asked about why Saakashvili poured money into Ajaria, Malkhaz Chkadua who is a journalist at Transparency International in Georgia, stated:

After breaking down Aslan Abashidze’s regime, it was necessary to somehow change Batumi. Because the people needed to see the effects of change and Saakashvili used to say that Batumi felt like a daughter to him and that he loves her. Also the decision to invest in Batumi had a great role in the Georgian economy. Because lots of people came there for tourism and lots of businesses came (Chkadua Interview, 18 July, 2016, Batumi).

Not only did Ajaria benefit from an increase in investments, but Georgia as a whole did. Ajaria was one of Mikheil Saakashvili’s biggest political successes and he wanted to make Ajaria prosperous which signifies that Autonomy works in Georgia. As my friend Zviad Diasamidze points out, Georgia is a small country so it is hard to attract foreign investors. Therefore the central government must get involved in order to bring investors which is
what happened in Ajaria. He then contrasted Saakashvili’s government with the current government who has decreased domestic investments in the region. Professor Lasha Bazhunaishvili and Constitutionalist Malkhaz Nakashidze voiced similar sentiments when asked about investments in Ajaria.

The Georgian government supports the Ajarian budget for example. We have a lot of money from the central budget. This in itself is an investment in the Ajarian region. But a lot of investments are coming from other countries, from international companies for example, Turkish companies, we have a lot of them in Batumi. There are more investments from Turkey, Azerbaijani investments, SOCAR for example. Also investments, from the Gulf States, European states. The central government is encouraging investments because all of us know that the Ajaria Autonomous Republic has the capacity to reap in the benefits. People are benefiting from these investments. From 2004 until today there has been a progressive process of investments and there are a lot of Turkish investments because Turkish people are interested in investing here mostly for tourism and the service industry. But the current government is weaker than the government of Saakashvili. Their (Saakashvili’s) government was effective you know and they made a decision very quickly. Now they (The current government) are thinking and thinking. If you want to make a commission you should make a decision whereas they sit around and just think (Nakashidze and Bazhunaishvili Interview, 5 July, 2016, Batumi).

The government of Mikheil Saakashvili invested lot of money in Ajaria whereas domestic investment has slowed under the current government (Lead by the Georgian Dream coalition). Although it is important to note that the amount of Foreign Direct Investments in Ajaria has increased under the current government. Currently the Ajarian region remains the second highest recipient of Foreign Direct investment after Tbilisi. In 2016 Ajaria bought in $160,976,900 of foreign direct investment with the third region after it being Kvemo Kartli who received $77,478,500 of foreign direct investment (National Statistics Office of Georgia). Compare this to 2013, the last year under Saakashvili when
Ajaria received only $61,544,300 in Foreign Direct Investment, less than half of what the region received in 2016 (National Statistics Office of Georgia).

**Why Remain Autonomous?**

Ajaria benefits from Autonomy but the question of why it still has autonomy and its role in Georgia needs to be addressed. For historical reasons which were addressed in Chapter 3, Ajaria received autonomy because of its majority Muslim population within a mainly Christian Orthodox country. This agreement is known as the Treaty of Kars which was signed in 1921 between Turkey and the Soviet Union (Pelkmans, 2006). Turkey agreed to leave Ajaria within the control of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in exchange for autonomy in the region despite the fact that the Turks viewed it as their own land (Kiladze Interview, 30 June 2016, Tbilisi). Ajaria would remain autonomous within the Soviet Union for 70 years until Georgia declared independence. Under the new Georgian leadership, Ajaria’s autonomy would endure as an Autonomous Republic in the new state (Toft, 2003). In 1992, Georgia chose to start new diplomatic relations with Turkey and reaffirmed the borders between the two countries. It was during these talks where both sides decided to uphold the Kars Treaty and keep the borders the same and uphold Ajarian Autonomy (Kiladze Interview, 30 June 2016, Tbilisi).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, religious identity amongst the inhabitants of Ajaria started to change. During the Soviet Rule when religion was banned, Georgian national discourse proved effective because its identity was disconnected from religion, hence the inhabitants of Ajaria started to view themselves as Georgian (Pelkmanns, 2006). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, most Georgians in Ajaria started to practice religion again while being assertive of their Georgian identity. Unfortunately, Georgian and Muslim identities became incompatible prompting the inhabitants of Ajaria to choose between their religion and their professional career as well as status in Georgian society (Pelkmanns, 2006). During the 1990’s, numerous Ajarians converted back to Christianity claiming that their great-forefathers (before Ottoman rule in Ajaria) used to be Christian and therefore they were also Christian themselves (Pelkmanns, 2006). When looking at Islam in Ajaria today, the 2014 Georgian census states that there are about 132,852
Muslims in Ajaria. Compare this with the total population of Ajaria which is 396,600 people, roughly 33% of Ajaria’s population in 2014 identified as Muslim. According to a study by the United Kingdom Foreign Commonwealth office, most of the Muslim inhabitants of Ajaria live in rural areas and are part of the older generation (UK, 2014).

Originally, Ajarian autonomy was created to protect the Muslim population yet Islam is no longer the dominant religion (Georgia 2014 General Population Census; UK, 2014). In most cases autonomy is granted to regions with a group of people with a different ethnicity, language, religion, or culture from the majority (Steiner, 2014: Heintze, 1998), yet present day Ajaria does not meet these criteria. The people living in Ajaria identify as Georgian, they speak Georgian, the dominant religion is now Christianity, and Ajaria is considered the sight where Christianity first arrived in Georgia (Pelkmans, 2002). Albeit 33% of the population of Ajaria in 2014 identified as Muslim which is a sizable portion. It is also estimated that most of the Muslim population is old and the younger generation is becoming predominantly more Christian (UK, 2014). Ajarian autonomy which was based on protecting a religious minority within Georgia is now a region whose religious demographics are looking more similar to the rest of Georgia every year. Autonomy in Ajaria appears to be a historical legacy, but the reasons behind its sustainability are intertwined within the domestic and international politics of Georgia.

Securing Georgia’s Territorial Integrity

Georgia uses Ajarian autonomy as a tool to help resolve other regional separatist movements within the country. In 1990, South Ossetia declared independence from Georgia and in response, Georgia abolished its autonomy (Gahrton, 2010). Shortly after in 1992, Abkhazia would also separate from Georgia and declare independence (DeWaal, 2010). Whereas violence broke out in 2 of Georgia’s former autonomous regions in the Soviet Union, the third one Ajaria remained stable. During the 1990’s, Ajaria’s leader Aslan Abashidze displayed some separatist tendencies but nevertheless supported Georgia’s territorial integrity (Toft, 2003). “By the time the 2004 crisis had passed in Ajaria, Tbilisi
had come to see the Ajars as the Ajars saw themselves: true and loyal Georgians, whose petition for autonomy had been just that, nothing more” (Toft, 2003).

After retaining its autonomy post Rose Revolution, Ajaria was used by Mikheil Saakashvili’s United National Movement party and the succeeding Georgian Dream Coalition government as a paradigm of autonomy in Georgia. The former head of the Ajarian Supreme Council, Avtandil Beridze, is a member of the Georgian Dream Party and advocates for the restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity. When I walked into his office, I can vividly remember that there were two maps on his back wall, one of Ajaria and the other one of Abkhazia. Towards the beginning of the interview, he pointed to the map of Abkhazia and said that today Abkhazia is occupied by Russian forces but is part of Georgia. Not thinking much of it, I continued with the interview and asked if Ajarian autonomy benefited Georgia’s domestic issues. Part of Mr. Beridze response related directly to Abkhazia.

*Ajarian Autonomy is a good example to show to the Abkhazian people. It is also a good example to show Europe that in Georgia, we have a democratic government and an autonomous republic where people live in good conditions. Ajarian autonomy with democracy, free healthcare, free media, and free educational programs is a good example for Abkhazian people. It shows what we can offer to them such as prosperity and that we can build a new country together. For example in the Ossetian Autonomous Republic in today’s Russian Federation, there is not a single Ossetian court and they aren’t teaching their language to the student’s because the Russian Federation forced them to assimilate and take away the identity of other ethnic groups. And in Abkhazia when it was part of Georgia, there was Abkhazian courts, universities, printed media, televisions, and all these forms of regional identities. Abkhazian people always lived with Georgian people and the Ajarian autonomy is a great example of why they should remain and that they can maintain their identity within Georgia (Beridze Interview, 11 July 2016, Batumi).*

- Interview conducted in Georgian with an English translator
Avtandil Beridze voiced that Ajarian autonomy acted as an incentive for Abkhazia to enjoy life within Georgia as an autonomous republic. To me, the maps on his wall symbolized two things. Both displayed the Georgian government’s views of its two autonomous republics that are part of its territorial integrity. The second symbol is a lack of a South Ossetian map. According to the Georgian Constitution, there are only two autonomous republics which are Ajaria and Abkhazia. Georgia views South Ossetia as part of its territorial integrity but does not believe that it should have autonomy. Therefore, the two maps on the wall in the head of the Supreme Council of Ajaria’s office symbolized the two Autonomous Republics within Georgia, despite the fact that Abkhazia currently is a breakaway region.

According to my interview participants, Abkhazia is the main reason for Ajarian autonomy. When speaking with Soso Tsiskarishvili, the President of the Independent Experts Club in Tbilisi which is an NGO of political experts in Georgia, I asked him why there is still autonomy in Ajaria.

*It is because of our problems with Abkhazia. If something changes, it will no longer have this status (Autonomous Status in Ajaria) but we are trying to see, trying to show Abkhazia what kind of successful systems we have in Georgia (Tsiskarishvili Interview, 24 June 2016, Tbilisi).*

Soso believes that the sole purpose of autonomy in Ajaria is to serve as a model for Abkhazia and states that once Abkhazia is integrated, then autonomy in Ajaria is no longer necessary. In addition to Soso Tsiskarishvili, other NGO workers I met with expressed similar sentiments. In Batumi, I met with the Regional office manager of Transparency International whose organization’s statement is to rid governments and civil society of corruption. The manager’s name is Malkhaz Chkadua and when meeting with him, I asked about Ajarian autonomy and what role it played in Georgian society.

*So first of all, you know about our two occupied regions. Maybe somehow the Georgian state will think about how to ban Ajarian Autonomy. But Ajaria is playing a role for Abkhazia and South Ossetia too. If Tbilisi gave a different perspective to Ajarian autonomy, it will play as a role model for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. If Tbilisi*
cancelled Ajarian autonomy, it would be a clear message to Abkhazia that it would not be autonomous within Georgia (Chkadua Interview, 18 July 2016, Batumi).

Both Soso Tsiskarishvili and Malkhaz Chkadua voice their beliefs that Ajaria has autonomy because of Abkhazia. However Soso articulated more clearly his beliefs that Ajaria will lose autonomy after Abkhazia’s integration with Georgia whereas Malkhaz leaned towards the same conclusion but was not as certain.

Interestingly, the money invested into Ajaria when Saakashvili was president can be connected to Georgia’s territorial integrity. Before meeting with Malkhaz Chkadua at Transparency International, I met with one of his coworkers, Nino Sioridze, who is a lawyer. Similar to my other interviews, Nino stated that Ajarian autonomy was an example of autonomy for Abkhazia. This lead me to ask her about the investments Saakashvili made in the region during his presidency.

Because of this status, we have invested so much money in Batumi. Because we all know that Batumi isn’t that big of a touristic place because most days here are rainy days, also the sea is not that good. So it’s not a touristic place but Saakashvili invested so much money here because he wanted to show to others, mainly Abkhazians that you can have this opportunity (Sioridze Interview, 6 July 2016, Batumi).

The Poster is titled "6 Years After the War." On the left it states, "Batumi, Georgia "lost" a war." On the right it states "Sokhumi, they were "Saved" by Russia."

Figure 9: Posters circulating on Facebook
Georgia invested lots of money into the region in order to show Abkhazia that this could be them. Within the Georgian constitution, it references Abkhazia as an autonomous republic in addition to Ajaria. The Georgian government strives to create a successful image of autonomy within the country. The purpose of this is to show Abkhazia that as an autonomous republic within Georgia, they will be successful. At the end of the interview with Nino, she shared a meme with me that circled on Facebook 6 years after the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia (Figure 9). It is Georgian propaganda aimed towards Abkhazians showing them how much better their situation could be. It compares Sokhumi (the de facto capital of Abkhazia) with Batumi. Batumi looks vibrant and beautiful after the 2008 War which Georgia lost to Russia. On the right, Sokhumi looks decrepit even though they are supported by the Victors (Russia) of the 2008 war. Other pictures also circulated online comparing the two regions of Abkhazia and Ajaria. The next one below (Figure 10) compares the boardwalk in Batumi (pictured below) and Sokhumi (pictured above).
above). It is also supposed to have the same effect by showing how much better the situation is in Batumi than it is in Ajaria. Albeit it is important to note that while both of these posters depict Batumi in a much better situation than Sokhumi, they are used for political purposes of trying to restore Georgia's territorial integrity. Abkhazia endured a war while war never came to Ajaria or Batumi. Also the Georgian government has invested money in the Ajarian Autonomous Republic and if the same amount of money were invested in Sokhumi, these posters would most likely not be relevant anymore.

For domestic reasons of remaining autonomous, I got very few other explanations from my interview participants for Ajarian autonomy. Besides the fact that Ajaria's autonomy is guaranteed by the Georgian constitution, some participants argued that they are a proponent for decentralization in Georgia. They believed that Ajaria's government was a good example since local matters should be solved locally. As Malkhaz Nakashidze shares, he believes that decentralization is a better form of governance.

_The Georgian government can make the decisions to amend the constitution and make decentralization in Georgia. We need more local rights for local government. It is a better way to be more democratic than now (Nakashidze Interview, 5 July 2016, Batumi)._ 

A lot of my participants shared the same attitudes as Malkhaz and believed in more decentralization. They believed that autonomy is a good thing for the region, they wanted more control at the local level and less dependence on Tbilisi. This prompted me to ask one of my participants about decentralization and if other regions could benefit from a similar type of government that Ajaria has.

_Woah, this is a hard question. To be honest, Ajaria should not..... The question like you are giving now and have gave me before, it separates us by trying to understand why Ajaria is different than the rest of Georgia. To understand that Ajaria is a different place than the rest of Georgia is quite harmful for me. Because I don't even, 0.000000001% feel different than other Georgians. All of us, we are Georgians (Davitadze Interview, 20 July 2016, Batumi)._
This response is surprising due to the fact that Ajaria likes to advertise its benefits. Also the inhabitants of the region are proud of Ajaria. When I asked the question about why other regions in Georgia shouldn’t receive similar benefits of a decentralized government, Aleksandre felt uncomfortable since it implied that Ajaria was different from other regions. The relationship between the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria and Tbilisi as of right now can best be described as a symbiotic relationship. Decentralization benefits Ajaria while Ajaria also serves as a model to Abkhazia and why it should reintegrate with Georgia. Although Ajarian autonomy extends beyond the sphere of Georgian politics and enters international geopolitics with Georgia’s neighbors.

**Georgian and Turkish Geopolitics**

Since Ottoman rule, Turkey has had a big influence in Ajaria. When Ajaria came under Soviet Occupation in 1921, it was Turkey who insisted Ajaria receive autonomy based on religious purposes. This autonomy was officially recognized in the Treaty of Kars which proclaims that Turkey has the rights to protect the Muslim inhabitants of Ajaria. During the Soviet Occupation, Turkey had almost no access to the Muslim inhabitants of Ajaria due to the Iron Curtain (Pelkmans, 2006). This border would remain closed during most of Soviet rule severing ties between Ajaria and Turkey. It would not be until the late 1980's when the border reopened under Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika reforms (Pelkmans, 2006). Ever since, Turkey has been part of the economic and religious sphere of influence in the region.

Once the border reopened, Turkish influence and money flowed across the border into the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria. While there are no exact numbers about how much foreign investment flows into Ajaria from Turkey, it is estimated that half of foreign investments coming into Ajaria are from Turkey (Interview, Davitadze). While this is an estimation, it signifies that Turkey is a significant player in the region. Notable investments in Ajaria by Turkey include the Batumi International Airport which is owned and operated by a Turkish company (Civil.ge, April 28, 2006), the Metro Bus Company, hotels, casinos, and numerous restaurants and small businesses.
Turkey also takes a significant interest in the local Muslim population in Ajaria. Since the Muslim population is a minority in a state dominated by Orthodox Christianity, there are special bonds between the Muslim community and neighboring Turkey. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, funding for new mosques in Ajaria have come from Turkish citizens of Georgian heritage (Sanikidze and Walker, 2004). Additionally the main mosque in Batumi had a new minaret constructed which was financed by the Turks (Sanikidze and Walker, 2004). With little opportunity for Islamic education in Georgia, Muslims in Ajaria go abroad for religious education. The religious administration in Turkey known as the Diyanet is a popular choice for a lot of religious students (Sanikidze and Walker, 2004). Once these students are done with their studies abroad, they tend to return to Ajaria.

The role of Turkey in Ajaria is questioned by locals who are skeptical of Turkey's intentions. In 1992 the Turkish president Turgut Ozal visited Georgia to sign a Treaty of Friendship and Goodwill. During the meeting, the president of Turkey demanded that Georgia provide proof that Tbilisi would abide by the treaty's conditions which reinforced the continuation of the Kars Treaty (Sanikidze and Walker, 2004). This ensured that Ajaria’s autonomy would continue and that Turkey would still be deemed as one of its guarantors. Other statements from prominent Turkish politicians have also caused concern for local inhabitants of Ajaria. The Ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Ahmet Davutoğlu, said in an official statement that he sees Batumi as an area of Turkish/Ottoman influence and he thinks that it should remain so (Kvirkvaia Interview, 20 July 2016, Batumi). In addition he stated that Turkey should maintain influence of course not by the military, but that it should be done economically (Kvirkvaia Interview, 20 July 2016, Batumi). Some local perceptions of Turkey can also be demonstrated by the attitude of students at Batumi State University. Professor Zura Kvirkvaia described his student’s attitudes:

*I have 400 students every year. And part of them are Muslim and part of them are Christians. And they have never had any problems with each other. But all of them are negative about Turks. They make some statements about Turks. And I have to fight this kind of position with the students because they don’t like Turks (Kvirkvaia Interview, 20 July 2016, Batumi).*
This root of these xenophobic attitudes towards Turks is unknown but most likely can be attributed to the fact that there is such a large presence of Turkish tourists and economic influence in Ajaria. Inhabitants of the region are skeptical of the major influx in Turkish businesses and tourists albeit the fact that they boost the Ajarian economy and create jobs for Georgians. Other inhabitants of Ajaria are also nervous about Turkish nationalist’s rhetoric who still believe that Batumi should be part of Turkey (Matsaberidze Interview, 21 June 2016, Tbilisi).

Despite the fact that some inhabitants of Ajaria are skeptical of Turkey, a lot of inhabitants of Ajaria view the relationship with Turkey as positive. The former chairman Jemal Putkaradze of the Healthcare and Social Issues Commission in the local Ajarian government, emphasized that the partnership between Georgia and Turkey are mutual and that there are no political issues. Another local inhabitant of Ajaria, Zviad Diasamidze commented that Turkey has a lot of money compared to Georgia. It is only natural that they invest here since it is easy to start a business. Similar comments were made by Malkhaz Chkadua at Transparency International who stated Batumi is growing and therefore business are coming from abroad. All of these viewpoints reflect the ideas that Turks are coming to help improve the Georgian society in Ajaria. It is only natural that Georgia’s neighbors invest in the Ajarian region since it has proven to be profitable.

During the 2008 Georgian Russian war, bombs were dropped in Ajaria which prompted a quick reaction by Turkey. One of my interview participants, Alexandre Kukhianidze, described the Russia motives of bombing Ajaria.

> As I know they bombed 2 or 3 places in Ajara in the mountains. But that was psychological pressure. In order to see how Turkey would react. Because there was a real fear and expectation amongst Georgians that if Russians will enter Ajara and violate the Kars Treaty, then Turkish troops may enter Ajara from the South (Kukhianidze Interview, 17 June 2016, Tbilisi).
During the war, there were more geopolitical risks for Russia when it came to entering Ajaria. It was protected by nearly a century old treaty and there was a lot of uncertainty about how Turkey would react. A few days after the war started between Georgia and Russia, the Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan flew to Moscow to meet with President Medvedev. After this meeting Ajaria was no longer affected by the fighting (Maisaia Interview, 23 June 2016, Tbilisi). It appeared that Turkey still chose to uphold the Treaty of Kars and had an interest in protecting the local population of the Autonomous Republic against Russia who originally granted Ajarian autonomy in the Soviet Union.

Georgian and Russian Geopolitics

Originally, Moscow had interests in Ajarian autonomy since it was part of the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and a declaration of independence, Ajaria became an autonomous Republic within Georgia. Throughout Abashidze’s rule, there was a Russian military base in Ajaria which he used to his advantage to help defend his territory from outside aggression. After Abashidze was ousted in 2004, Russian influence in Ajaria started to dwindle and became almost nonexistent after the closure of its military base in 2007. As one of the original backers of the Treaty of Kars, the question of Russia’s role today in Ajarian autonomy needs to be discussed.

Unlike Turkey, Russia does not have a big economic influence in Ajaria albeit the fact that a plethora of Russian tourists come to Batumi during the high season. As it is noted from the head of the Ajarian Supreme Council, today Russia does not have any influence economically or politically in the region. While Russia might not have any influence in the local economy or politics, they do have some influence on the basis of the Treaty of Kars. As Dr. Irakli Manvelidze of Batumi State University puts it, Ajarian autonomy is protected by international law and Russian politics. Meaning that Russia was one of the original guarantors of Ajarian autonomy. Apart from the Treaty of Kars, Russia no longer has the presence in Ajaria that it once wielded.
Is there Autonomy?

The rights of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria are granted in the Georgian constitution and the reasons for autonomy are rooted in Georgia’s territorial integrity, including its relationship with its neighbors. Although the question of whether or not Ajaria has real autonomy was an interesting topic of debate amongst my participants. Of the 22 interviews I conducted in Georgia, only 20 respondents gave a straightforward response on whether or not Ajarian autonomy is de facto or de jure. Albeit most responses did not consist of an outright yes or no, and typically tended to lean more strongly in one direction or another. 13 of my participants believed that Ajarian autonomy is generally de facto while 7 of them questioned autonomy and voiced their concerns that it is more nominal.

The evidence of Ajarian autonomy being de facto is evident by its special advantages compared to other regions in Georgia. The former chairman of the Ajarian Ministry of Healthcare and Social Issues Commission, Jemal Putkaradze describes Ajarian autonomy as de facto.

"Autonomy is a way of self-governing and is either cultural or political autonomy, but in our case Ajarian autonomy is political autonomy. It is based on historical purposes and on the wishes of several people. As a politician of Ajaria, I saw and I worked within this autonomy because it is based on the constitution (Putkaradze Interview, 11 July 2016, Batumi)."

-Interview conducted in Georgian with an English translator

What is most salient in Jemal Putkaradze’s response, is the notion that Ajarian autonomy is guaranteed by the Georgian constitution. Similar responses were given by other interviewed politicians who pointed to Ajaria’s autonomous rights within the constitution. Factually the Georgian constitution guarantees more rights to Ajaria than other regions in Georgia, albeit some privileges it guarantees are vague.
Another common theme amongst interview participants who believe Ajarian autonomy is de facto is that Ajaria has its own governmental institutions. Unlike other regions in Georgia, Ajaria has its own parliament and government.

_No, we cannot say that it is nominal because they have government bodies. There are elected officials. It has a constitution, and a flag_ (Chitadze Interview, 27 June 2016, Tbilisi).

The physical symbols of government bodies and elected officials within Ajaria display a functioning autonomy. The symbol of a flag is also unique due to the fact that other regions in Georgia do not have their own.

A sub group within the 13 participants who believed Ajaria has autonomy emphasized that it was a weak autonomy. One of the participants, Zura Kvirkvaia shared his views on the state of Ajarian autonomy.

_Because of previous experiences with Autonomous Republics in Georgia, I think the perspective is that we have very weak autonomy here in Ajaria. Because the government is scared of separatism. Before the situation in 2004, we had complete autonomy in Ajaria, not autonomy, but complete local governance and independence. Now we have moved to an autonomy that is completely dependent on the Central Government_ (Kvirkvaia, 20 July 2016, Batumi).

-Interview conducted in Georgian with an English translator

This fear of separatism is rooted in the two breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both of which had autonomy and separated from Georgia. Since Abashidze fled Ajaria in 2004, the central government wants to ensure that another leader like him never rules again in Ajaria. This was a popular consensus amongst my interview participants explaining why privileges were curtailed in the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria after the Rose Revolution.

In the same group of the 13 participants who believed Ajaria has autonomy, another subgroup of participants stated their beliefs that Ajaria autonomy remained for geopolitical
reasons. One of my interview participants who is a professor at Tbilisi State University believes that autonomy exists in Ajaria but not by the will of the Georgian government.

After Abashidze escaped, the Georgian government could not eliminate Ajarian autonomy. If Georgians were to eliminate the autonomous status of Ajaria, that would be a good argument for Abkhazians and South Ossetians to say look, Georgians are our enemy. They want to eliminate us. So you cannot do it. You should, as a country demonstrate to them that under Georgia, a united statehood, autonomous republics can be prosperous (Kukhianidze Interview, 17 June 2016, Tbilisi).

This professor is referring to Georgia’s territorial issues with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Eliminating Ajaria’s autonomous status would sever any prospects of reintegrating these two breakaway regions. He believed Ajarian autonomy was weak but still had some competency within its local government institutions.

Overall, the 13 respondents who believed that Ajarian autonomy is de facto gave me numerous examples of autonomy and how it functions. As stated above, the reasons for Ajarian autonomy range from its own constitution, to its elected officials, to its local government bodies. They agreed that Ajaria has a functioning autonomy albeit there was a disagreement on the extent of this autonomy. Some of the participants voiced that it was a fully functioning autonomy while other voiced that it was weak.

Of the opposite opinion, 7 participants agreed that Ajarian autonomy is more nominal than de facto. Of these 7 participants, some voiced that Ajaria has autonomy, albeit very weak while others voiced that it is essentially nominal and just a formality within Georgia. Two of my interview participants in Batumi agreed that autonomy in Ajaria is a formality. When asked about autonomy and the local government institutions, one of them stated that there is significant oversight from the central government.

It is difficult to answer directly because Ajaria has its own chairman of government, council chairmans, their local election, and so on. But I think that they should decide big problems for themselves but not in the frame of negotiation with Tbilisi. But I
cannot say that everything is agreed with Tbilisi, but only the very important cases are (Chkadua Interview 18 July 2016, Batumi).

This respondent is referring to the fact that the local politicians never make decisions on their own and always have to confirm their decisions with Tbilisi. While Ajaria might have their own local government institutions, they are not completely autonomous. The respondent then went on to talk about how he could not remember any time that the high council of Ajaria had passed a law. I followed up on this statement with a government worker in the Supreme Council. He was not able to give me a response and made a statement that within the high levels of the Ajarian government, politicians were becoming fed up with Tbilisi because of the lack of local independent decision making.

Some interview participants went as far as saying that Ajarian autonomy was nominal. For similar reasons as stated above, these participants believed that the local autonomous government has too much oversight from the central government in Tbilisi. When I met with a group of professors at Batumi State University, they voiced that Tbilisi controlled the local politics in Ajaria.

Today Ajarian Autonomy and its government is formal because it is limited by the constitutional law. It is limited because autonomy is concentrated in the center. In the future this may cause a political crisis (Menvelidze Interview, 13 July 2016, Batumi).

-Interview conducted in Georgian with an English translator

They declared that autonomy is nominal in Ajaria and made it clear that most functions of the local government had to be approved by the central government. According to them this proved that autonomy is nominal as opposed to de facto. These sentiments were shared by other interview participants who also claimed that Ajarian autonomy is a formality and is nominal.

Amongst the 20 interview participants, there is no concrete opinion on the status of Ajarian autonomy. Aside from the politicians, all of my interview participants said that Ajaria had a weak to almost nonexistent autonomy that is dependent on the central government in Tbilisi. Although their opinions on the extent of Ajaria’s autonomy
fluctuated. The participants pointed to the empirical evidence of Ajarian autonomy through its symbols of governance, its elected officials, government institutions, and its status within the Georgian constitution. Although when it came to the functions of autonomy, it did not operate as they thought it should. As a local in Batumi put it, economically speaking Ajaria’s autonomy is successful but on the political side, it isn’t where it should be.

Autonomous Identities

My interview participants were unable to agree on whether or not Ajaria has autonomy. This relates to Harhoff’s (1998) statement where autonomy is difficult to quantify and therefore define. When it comes to scholars that view autonomy as a source of conflict (Cornell, 2002b; Sanders, 1991) which can lead to separatism (Heintze, 1998; Hale, 2004), Ajaria has proven to be resilient and remains a peaceful region within Georgia. Although this peace could be attributed to the fact that Ajaria benefits from unusual circumstances compared to other autonomous republics. Unlike most autonomous republics, the inhabitants of Ajaria identify as Georgian and a majority of them do not view themselves as a minority.

As a region, Ajaria differs notably from other regions in Georgia. Most noticeable is its autonomous political structure followed by its high influx of foreign investment and its history which at times has differed from the rest of Georgia. Today this has created a sense of regionalism amongst the inhabitants of Ajaria who share similar identities with people in the region while Georgians outside of it have not had this shared experience. Regional identities are historically contingent constructions (Jones and MacLeod, 2004) and Ajarian identity fits this mold. In the last century Ajarian identity has turned back towards Georgia and are quick to remind anyone that says anything else. Although while the inhabitants of Ajaria are Georgian, they enjoy more privileges than other regions such as their autonomous status. This autonomous status and a history of an Islamic past has created a regional identity distinct from the rest of Georgia.
Chapter 8: Autonomy in Ajaria, Separatism in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ajaria is the only former Autonomous territory in Georgia that did not experience violence. The other autonomous republic Abkhazia and the autonomous oblast of South Ossetia experienced war in the 1990’s. Today both Abkhazia and South Ossetia are considered de facto states while Ajaria is an Autonomous republic within Georgia. As stated earlier, Georgia is attempting to use Ajaria as a template of autonomy in order to attract the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia back into its sphere of influence. This chapter will delve further into the details of whether or not Ajaria can be used as a paradigm of autonomy in the region or if it benefits from uncommon circumstances.

The former autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are no longer under the de facto sovereignty of Georgia. During the Soviet Union, the Georgian SSR contained two autonomous republics known as Ajaria and Abkhazia and one autonomous oblast known as South Ossetia. During the early 1990’s shortly after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Abkhazia and South Ossetia both fought wars with Georgia and declared independence (Gahrton, 2010). In 1992, a ceasefire was enforced by Russia in the Ossetian-Georgian conflict and again in 1993 to halt the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict (O’Loughlin et al, 2014). These former autonomous regions within Georgia had become separatist states which still remain outside of Georgian de facto sovereignty today. Currently, there are 5 states that recognize Abkhazia has a sovereign country and 4 states that recognize South Ossetia (O’Loughlin et al, 2014). The remaining 190 and 191 countries recognized by the UN do not acknowledge Abkhazia and South Ossetia as sovereign countries and instead view them as the de jure sovereign territory of Georgia.

The most prominent difference that differentiates Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Ajaria is the ethnicity of the local inhabitants. As Toft (2003) writes about in her work, Ajars did not advance any demands that threatened the ethnic identity of Georgians. In fact, the term Ajar seemed to be nearly nonexistent in my research in Ajaria. As Avtandil Beridze noted during our discussion, all the inhabitants of Ajaria are Georgian citizens and there is
no such thing as an Ajarian citizen. I also had similar comments from Alexander Rusetsky who is the head of the South Caucasus Institute for Regional Security.

_Ajarians are a big part of the Georgian population. Part of the Georgian ethnic group._

_In Abkhazia is another picture. We have a very difficult ethnographic picture (Rusetsky Interview, 20 June 2016, Tbilisi)._  
-Interview conducted in Georgian with an English translator

This contrasts the ethnic makeup of Abkhazia and South Ossetia where the locals consider themselves a different ethnicity and whose predominant language is not Georgian (O’Loughlin et al, 2014). Although as Christoph Zurcher (2007) argues in his book, ethnicity alone was not the driving factor behind secessionism since Armenians and Azeris constituted a larger minority in Georgia in the 1990’s than Abkhazians and Ossetians. He credits Soviet Ethnofederalism as the driving factor which equipped the Abkhazians and Ossetians with political institutions which facilitated separatism. Although the third autonomous territory Ajaria had these same institutions yet viewed itself as Georgian. As Toft (2003) and Zurcher (2007) argue, ethnicity is a factor behind Abkhazia and South Ossetia becoming breakaway regions, yet it is not the whole picture.

Unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Ajaria never advanced demands that threatened the territorial integrity of Georgia (Toft, 2003). The former ruler of Ajaria, Aslan Abashidze, constantly vouched for Georgia’s territorial integrity and claimed that Ajaria is and always has been part of Georgia. Ajaria only vouched for autonomy in the new Georgian state and nothing more. Dr. Alexandre Kukhianidze who grew up in Ajaria and is now a professor at Tbilisi State University also made a similar statement.

_In Ajaria there was never a claim to secede which is why there was never war (Kukhianidze Interview, 17 June 2016, Tbilisi)._  

In the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both regions declared independence from Georgia. The reasons for declaring independence can be traced back to the idea that neither the Abkhazians nor the Ossetians wanted to be a minority within a nationalistic Georgia
(Zurcher, 2007). These nationalist mobilizations were additionally bolstered by the ethnonational structure of the Soviet Union which granted Abkhazia and South Ossetia autonomy (Zurcher, 2007). With the nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia in control of Georgia, this stoked fears amongst the minorities in these republics which lead to the outbreak of war.

A third factor which enabled Abkhazia and South Ossetia to secede from Georgia in the 1990s is geography. Sergi Kapanadze who is the former deputy Foreign Minister of Georgia referenced Russia as a reason for why Ajaria avoided wars during the 1990’s.

The one major reason is that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are bordered by Russia. So the Russians were able to have a bigger presence there than in Ajaria (Kapanadze Interview, 28 June 2016, Tbilisi).

Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia share a border with Russia who also recognizes both of these regions as sovereign states. In the war with Abkhazia, Georgia could have defeated any armed forces in this regions, it could not defeat a Russian reinforced army (Toft, 2003). An Abkhazian army backed with Russian support and weapons quickly forced the Georgians out and took control of the area (Zurcher, 2007). In Ossetia, the Ossetians never received any direct support from Moscow but received support from North Ossetia which is part of Russia (Zurcher, 2007). This helped the Ossetians who were able to sustain the fighting until Russia became involved. A peace agreement between Russia and Georgia was signed halting the fighting in South Ossetia (DeWaal, 2010). Additionally, Sergi Kapanadze also attributed Ajarian peace to it location next to Turkey.

I think the border is important since Ajaria bordered Turkey and Turkey opposed the idea of Ajaria being annexed by anyone else (Kapanadze Interview, 28 June 2016, Tbilisi).

In reference to the Treaty of Kars, Turkey still views itself as the protector of Ajaria’s Muslim population. Any attempt to cause discord in the region would also involve Turkish interests.
The last factor that differentiates Ajaria from the two breakaway regions in Georgia is Aslan Abashidze. As Vakhtang Maisaia, the head dean at Caucasus International University describes, it was Abashidze who tactically kept Ajaria at peace. Abashidze deflected Georgian paramilitary leaders at the border and kept them out of Ajaria using his militia and the Russian military. One of these paramilitary leaders known as Tengiz Kitovani initiated the war in Abkhazia (DeWaal, 2010). Christoph Zurcher (2007) argues that Ajarian stability can also be attributed to Aslan Abashidze where the political elite in Ajaria knew and respected him while he also had the support of his people. Zurcher’s (2007) last argument for peace also is a viable one attributing Ajarian peace to luck and time. He states that Gamsakhurdia was facing separatists in South Ossetia and had opposition in his own government while Shevardnadze faced a conflict in Abkhazia and was under the constant threat of military warlords who tolerated him (Zurcher, 2007, p. 208). Therefore avoiding violence in Ajaria was the best option for both Georgia and Aslan Abashidze at the time.

These factors signify that Ajaria benefits from unusual circumstances in Georgia and is not a good model of autonomy for Abkhazia or South Ossetia. It is apparent according to my interviews that Georgia uses Ajaria as a means to help reintegrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Ajaria is a relatively prosperous Autonomous Republic when you compare it to other regions in Georgia although its autonomy is a result of a historical legacy. Nowadays the inhabitants of Ajaria identify as Georgians, speak Georgian, and are culturally the same who live in an Autonomous Republic whereas autonomy is generally meant to protect minority populations from the majority (Steiner, 2014; Heintze, 1998). From this a sense of regionalism has emerged in Ajaria where its history, political institutions, and economic institutions are different from the rest of Georgia. As Paasi (2003) argues in his work, regional identity can be formed by distinct political and economic institutions which has been the case in Ajaria. Similarly Abkhazia and South Ossetia also have a sense of regionalism in which they differ not only politically and economically from the rest of Georgia, but also in ethnicity, culture, and language. Abkhazians and Ossetians have more differences from Georgia and if integrated would be a minority population within the state. This cannot be said in Ajaria which is mainly inhabited by Georgians.
Chapter 9: Conclusion

On July 6, 2016, the Chairman of the Ajaria Autonomous Republic, Archil Khabadze, resigned (Civil.ge, July 6, 2016). Within a week a new head Chairman named Zurab Pataradze was nominated by the President of Georgia, Giorgi Margvelashvili (Civil.ge, July 15, 2016). He was then confirmed by the 21 person Supreme Council of Ajaria with 12 votes, 1 more than is required for his confirmation (Civil.ge, July 15, 2016). This transfer of power marked the beginning of a new government in the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria. One which instigated gossip amongst the inhabitants of the region only a week earlier. Some of the locals were concerned that Pataradze was not from Ajaria since his surname is not common to the area (Davitadze Interview, 20 July 2016, Batumi). Once it became common knowledge that Pataradze was born in Ajaria, people were put at ease preferring a local politician over an outsider from elsewhere in Georgia.

My research notes that autonomy has altered significantly in Ajaria since the collapse of the Soviet Union and still remains beneficial to Tbilisi. Most noticeable is Ajarian autonomy being integrated into Georgia following the Rose Revolution. As a result of this autonomy, a regional identity has become more salient in Ajaria. It is important that they are governed by locals and prefer Tbilisi to stay out of local matters. Additionally the local inhabitants are proud of their institutions and the benefits that they reap from autonomy. Their political identity revolves around local governance in addition to Tbilisi. The relative economic prosperity of Ajaria also is a pull factor for regions surrounding it. The sense of prosperity, economic success, and autonomy has created an identity in Ajaria which is different from other regions in Georgia.

The contributions that this research can make to the field of geography and geopolitics is a new case study on autonomy and how it functions as a historical legacy within Georgia. In geopolitics, the literature on separatist movements is bountiful but is not nearly as prevalent on autonomy. This research portrays the example of Ajarian autonomy within a regional and global context while addressing the question of whether or not
autonomy can here can be used as a paradigm or if it benefits from unusual circumstances. As Georgia awaits a solution to its territorial integrity, it is unknown what will happen with Ajarian autonomy in the future and how important it is for Turkey’s geopolitical agenda. Within Georgia, Ajarian autonomy is not a major political issue and when my interview participants were asked how important it was, most responses indicated that it is not near the top of any politician’s agenda. Within Ajaria, most people prefer that they have more freedom to rule independent of Tbilisi.

The connection between autonomy and minority populations is prevalent in the literature. This study gives a case where the minority religious population is no longer a majority in Ajaria. I outline how separatism/integration and autonomy has created a new regional identity within Ajaria and the effects it has on local Georgian politics and international relations. I argue that Ajarian autonomy benefits from unusual circumstances and is not a proper paradigm for other regional separatist movements within Georgia. By elucidating these, I conclude that Ajaria and Georgia both benefit from autonomy.
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# Interviews

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<td>Batumi</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avtandil Beridze</td>
<td>Head of the Supreme Council of Ajarja (2012-2016); Member of Georgian Dream Party</td>
<td>7/11/2016</td>
<td>Batumi</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jemal Pulkadze</td>
<td>Former Chairman of Healthcare and Social Commission, Ajarja Autonomous Republic, Member of Georgian Dream Party</td>
<td>7/11/2016</td>
<td>Batumi</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalia Lobja</td>
<td>Assistant Professor, Department of Public Affairs and Political Studies, Batumi State University</td>
<td>7/13/2016</td>
<td>Batumi</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irakli Menvelidze</td>
<td>Associate Professor, Department of Public Affairs and Political Studies, Batumi State University, Research focuses on Autonomy</td>
<td>7/13/2016</td>
<td>Batumi</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levan Jekeli</td>
<td>Associate Professor of Law, Batumi State University. Research focuses on human rights.</td>
<td>7/13/2016</td>
<td>Batumi</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zvlad Diasmidze</td>
<td>Former Chief Specialist of International Affairs Department, Government of Autonomous Republic of Ajarja</td>
<td>7/16/2016</td>
<td>Batumi</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malkhaz Chkaidze</td>
<td>Regional Office Manager, Transparency International Batumi, NGO promoting transparency in government and politics</td>
<td>7/18/2016</td>
<td>Batumi</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zuria Kvirikava</td>
<td>Professor of Theory and Justice, Advisor in the Constitutional Court of Georgia</td>
<td>7/20/2016</td>
<td>Batumi</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aleksandre Davitadze</td>
<td>Senior Specialist at the Supreme Council of Ajarja</td>
<td>7/20/2016</td>
<td>Batumi</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Interview Participants