Transition in the Post-Soviet State:
from Soviet Legacy to Western Democracy?

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Abstract

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Transition in the Post-Soviet State: From Soviet Legacy to Western Democracy?

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This thesis examines Georgia’s transition from a Soviet-style totalitarian state to a Western-style democracy between 1989 and 2004. Specifically, this paper poses the following broad question: What social and political forces made this process unique?

In 1992, almost one year after independence had been proclaimed, Georgia was officially recognized as ‘a failed state’, torn by civil war, ethnic conflicts, and constant Russian interference. It is thus all the more remarkable that a mere ten years later, George H.W. Bush, the President of the United States, called Georgia “the beacon of democracy” in the region. Georgia was soon seen as a “success story” for emerging democracies in the post-Soviet countries. This thesis argues that a black-and-white approach to analyzing a transition to democracy confounds the understanding of countries in transition. Indeed, the truth is usually somewhere in the middle, as it is not realistic to expect such radical changes in such a short period of time. Moreover, the very recent nature of events creates some difficulties in evaluating the results. At this stage of the transition it is crucial to explore – critically and realistically – the reasons for the successes and failures of the Georgian experience with the transition to democracy since 1989.

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Introduction

The last decade witnessed a wave of political and social change sweeping the republics of the former Soviet Union. As in so many other instances, the outward and obvious events are related to social and political undercurrents. While these changes culminated famously in the reform-revolutions of the 2000s (i.e., the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia in November 2003; the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine in November 2004; and the “Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan” in March 2005), they were also symbolic of the on-going transitions in these former Soviet states.

This thesis examines Georgia’s transition from a Soviet-style totalitarian state to a Western-style democracy between 1989 and 2004. Specifically, this paper poses the following broad question: What social and political forces made this process unique? To answer this question, it will be necessary to examine the development and growth of various social and political forces within Georgian civil society as these occurred during the transition from the Soviet legacy to the style of democracy practiced in Georgia today.

This thesis traces the initial developments of this post-Soviet transition beginning from the “nationalist mobilization” and the “Bloody Sunday” of 9 April 1989. Landmark events include Georgian independence in 1991, the rise of civil war and escalation of ethnic conflicts, and the dramatic collapse of Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s Presidency in 1992. These events laid the groundwork for later events and must be examined in order to completely understand the transition in Georgia.

The promotion of the former foreign minister of the Soviet Union, Eduard Shevardnadze, to chairman of the Georgian state council in 1992 was followed by a consolidation of his liberal-authoritarian, Soviet-type Presidency in 1995. This period witnessed the development of formal democratic procedures, ultimately coalescing to form an “illiberal democracy.” The negative results of this development are mostly connected to the peculiarities of the Soviet legacy, the ‘feudalization’ of power at the national and local level, a high level of corruption and crime, and immature governance structures. This period was ended on 22 November 2003 by a young reformist wing supported by civil activists and NGOs – the so-called Rose Revolution. A reform leader, Michail Saakashvili, was subsequently elected by an strong majority (96%) to advance policies aimed at keeping the ‘revolutionary promises’: The building of a truly democratic state and the changing of Georgia’s image from that of a ‘failing state’ to a ‘strong state’.

The thesis is organized into two chapters. The first chapter explores the relationship between democracy and nationalism. The defining of Georgia in the 1990s as a ‘failed state’ was in part due to ethnic conflicts and civil disobedience in two autonomous units of the state: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The inability to control its own borders as well as its integral units combined with the constant threat of war became the main destabilizing factor slowing Georgia's development. As the beginning of this process is in part due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the beginning of Georgia's

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3 Ibid.
independence, and Georgia’s active national mobilization, it is logical to explore the relationship between democratization and the growth of nationalism in Georgia.

The peculiarities of the development of nationalism in Georgia are also a part of the Soviet legacy. The paradox of Soviet national policy is perhaps best summarize by Boris Strugatsky: “The republics exhibit the full set of characteristics of independent states that have lost their independence, including their own languages, cultures and traditions as well as their own territories.” However, this policy was dubious and hypocritical in the extreme, as it relied on the classical model of “divide and rule” and maintained the republics’ strong dependence on the 'center' (Moscow) through manipulation and control.

The most interesting point of the discussion is connected with the controversial correlation between democracy and nationalism, which are often seen as Manichaean opposites; ‘democratization’ is ‘good’, whereas ‘nationalism’ is ‘bad’ (an oversimplification often perpetrated by Marxist historians). Such an approach does not help our understanding of the different outcomes during the process of democratization in post-Soviet republics.

In this regard the discussion centers on Gia Nodia's argument concerning the different roles of nationalism during the stages of the democratization process. This discussion is closely related to the correlation between nationalism and liberalism and liberalism and democracy, respectively. These issues have long been the focus of

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discussion for historians, sociologists, and political scientists, but this case is unique due
to an event without historical precedent, i.e., the “transition to liberal democracy after
communism.”\(^5\) The ethnic element of nationalism has played a controversial role during
the transition to democracy in post-Soviet states, from a positive inspirational role
ensuing in the democratization process to a negative, destructive role played by
chauvinistic elements in their 'holy war' against the 'others'. The Georgian phenomenon of
“Zviadism” will be discussed later in the chapter as a demonstration of the two
hypostases of the Georgian nationalism: positive and negative.

The short period of Georgian Independence (1918-1921) was the first chance for
Georgia to win back its independence since its annexation by the Russian Empire in
1801.\(^6\) Moreover, it was a symbolic moment as Georgia chose the Western parliamentary
democracy as its model. Georgians, from the radical nationalists to the more moderate
political and social strata of Georgian society, took advantage of the short period of
independence in 1918-1921, a time when Georgia made a choice to be independent and
democratic. The Russian Bolshevik government was forced to resort to military
intervention and occupation to make Georgia ‘Soviet’. This period of time also shares
some similarities as well as differences with the turbulent times of 1989-1991, when
Georgia finally achieved independence from the Soviet Union, which will be viewed
through analyses of historical events of that period.


Despite the abundance of threats and political turmoil throughout the Transcaucasion region in 1918, there seemed to be greater understanding of the Western model of democracy and the importance of strong governmental institutions than at the very beginning of the 1990s. This is perhaps because the liberal intelligentsia in Georgia in 1918 had been more exposed to modern Western ideas than their counterparts in 1991. Decades of living in a totalitarian state had wrought lasting damage to the intellectual elites, the traditional representatives of progressive thought. Seventy years of terror and intimidation, forced Russification, and a divisive ethnic policy led to dramatic decline in both the civil society and democratic values.

The second chapter discusses the pre-conditions of the particular social and political changes that took place in the 1990s (mostly through Shevardnadze’s reign) and led to the events of November 2003 (the Rose Revolution). The western model was ultimately chosen as the most suitable for the Georgian nation-building project, with the goal of becoming a democratic, European-style state. The choice of political model for Georgia greatly influenced the social transformation. For instance, Diamond has noted that the main problem for “late-developers” like Georgia is that they began their project after developed nations had already defined what it means to be developed and democratic. This situation leads such countries to imitate the successes of more developed nations while also trying to find a niche for the various historical, social, and cultural values specific to the individual country, regardless of whether such a country’s culture and values are compatible with Western democratic traditions.

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Georgians’ understanding of freedom, of ‘liberty’, in the beginning of the 1990s (when the independence began) seemed anarchic, expressed as a lack of restraint, chronic mistrust toward state institutions, and an unhealthy reliance on personal networks. Such attitudes may have surprising benefits, however, as according to Wheatley “this particular feature of the Georgian character helped Georgians to defeat attempts to establish autocratic rule, both in the populist version of Gamsakhurdia and the oligarchic version of Shevardnadze.”\(^8\) Still, this did not help Georgians build sustainable and effective democratic state institutions and even contributed to the state failure in the beginning of the 1990s. The subsequent establishment of a dictatorship was hindered by the particularly strong and numerous private interests, leading some local experts to describe Georgia as under “a rule of people… [rather] than a rule of law.”\(^9\)

In addition, the second chapter will explain the negative and positive changes taking place at this time within civil society as well as the forces leading these social transformations. The Rose Revolution was recognized internationally as the “success story” in the post-Soviet space. According to Fairbanks, “The Georgian revolution could disrupt so many old patterns only because it was seen as a revolution, abrupt and decisive, and because Georgians accomplished it themselves.”\(^10\) This helps show the significance of the alternatives Georgians began to see in the beginning of the 2000s and how their beliefs in the possibility of a decent life under real democratic rule and the rule of law were restored.

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\(^9\) Ibid., 21

In this regard, many foreign and local experts agree that NGOs played a significant role in the process.\(^{11}\) Therefore, the role of foreign and local NGOs during that time will be examined to discover their influence on people’s motivation and beliefs. The development of the relationships between donors and local NGOs and between the government and NGOs will be discussed to understand the reasons for this sector’s strong and rapid growth in Georgia. Questions abound. Did problems arise? How compatible were Western practices with Georgian cultural values? What problems hindered successful cooperation? How did the Soviet legacy influence this process? Finally, extensive interviews with local NGO leaders will clarify the relatively successful spread of positive practices in the rural areas, which has enhanced democratic values and helped to mobilize civil society.

In 1992, almost one year after independence had been proclaimed, Georgia was officially recognized as ‘a failed state’, torn by civil war, ethnic conflicts, and constant Russian interference.\(^{12}\) The nation sank into chaos and anarchy after the coup d’état in January 1992, when paramilitary formations and criminal groups tried to wrest control of the country. It is thus all the more remarkable that a mere ten years later, George H.W. Bush, the President of the United States, called Georgia “the beacon of democracy” in the region. Georgia was soon seen as a “success story” for emerging democracies in the post-Soviet countries.\(^{13}\)

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\(^{13}\) Ibid.
This thesis argues that a black-and-white approach to analyzing a transition to democracy confounds the understanding of countries in transition. Indeed, the truth is usually somewhere in the middle, as it is not realistic to expect such radical changes in such a short period of time. Moreover, the very recent nature of events creates some difficulties in evaluating the results. One is reminded of the famous answer of Zhou Enlai, the Chinese prime minister in the 1960s, when he was asked to evaluate the impact of the French Revolution: “It is too early to tell.”\(^{14}\) Still, it is never too early to start. At this stage of the transition it is crucial to explore – critically and realistically – the reasons for the successes and failures of the Georgian experience with the transition to democracy since 1989.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
Chapter 1: Nationalism and Democracy

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought with it a disintegration of the multi-ethnic society, followed by ethnic conflicts and the growth of nationalism in most of the former Soviet Republics. To understand the reasons for these changes, we must review the principles of Soviet national policy. According to Victor Zaslavsky, Bolsheviks used the power of nationalism to attract more followers in the beginning, including the right of nations to self-determination in their program\(^\text{15}\). However, later, after the Bolsheviks had come to power, through terror and oppression they tried to consolidate their power, using as a cover the slogan: “to be the first modern state to place the national principle at the base of its federal structure.”\(^\text{16}\) Thus, what is called the 'institutionalization of ethnicity' was implemented at all levels, beginning at the individual level by introducing the term 'nation' in the Soviet passport as well as at the state level with the creation of different republics and autonomous units.

Moreover, nationality happened to be the main official difference between the members of such an “egalitarian” society, as the Soviet Union proclaimed itself to be. Therefore, nationality quite naturally became the most important base of social mobilization upon the collapse of the Soviet Union. The methods for such mobilization are quite familiar from the history of many ethnic conflicts; they were directed against the “imperial center” and “hegemonic nationality” (generally), or against “identifiable” minorities living in the midst of a majority, especially if the latter represented the titular


\(^\text{16}\) Ibid.
nationality to which a particular territory was assigned (here Zaslavsky focuses mostly on the Central Asian states), or against any neighboring ethno-territorial formation “with the aim of vindicating historical grievances and redrawing borders”(such as was the case of Nagorno-Karabah).\(^{17}\)

Georgia is an exemplary demonstration of the origins and consequences of such policies. To understand why, however, it necessary to examine a short period of Georgian independence in 1918-1921 as it is that particular point in history to which most of the Georgian radical nationalists of 90s referred as a precedent for the [current] independent Georgian state which has accepted Western parliamentary democracy as a political model.

After the Russian February Revolution of 1917, Georgia had a unique chance to become an independent state. At that time the Mensheviks (Social Democrats) represented a significant force within the national leadership of Georgia. However, no single political authority had as yet coalesced. Instead, there was an interesting phenomenon of “dvoevelstie”, or dual power. The Provisional Government created its organization in Transcaucasia called Ozakom – ‘Osobyi Zakavkazskii Komitet’.\(^{18}\) The strong alternative to this official authority were the 'soviets'. The Georgian social democrats were in control of the 'soviets', which was especially true of Tbilisi.

Mensheviks did not hurry declaring independence directly after the revolution as the question of national autonomy in such a multicultural society as Georgia was a very

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

challenging one. As Ronald Suny has summarized, “three major revolutionary forces were three different social classes made up predominantly of three different ethnic groups and influenced primarily by three different political parties: the workers were largely Georgian and Menshevik; the soldiers were Russian peasants and supported the Social Democrats (SRs); and the “progressive bourgeoisie” was largely Armenian Dashnaks and the Kadets (Constitutional democrats).” The Mensheviks' position was focused on their belief that the tensions among these different groups could be resolved constitutionally through democratic policies.

The situation was changing constantly and dramatically during the spring and summer of 1917, reaching its apogee with the Bolshevik October Revolution of 1917. With the fall of the Provisional Government and dispersal of the Constituent Assembly, the Bolsheviks took power in Russia. Georgian Mensheviks put great hope in the ability of the Russian Constituent Assembly to solve the crises through democratic means. However, all their hopes were dashed after the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly by Bolsheviks in January 1918. From that moment it became clear that all three Transcaucasian Republics (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) were on their own. In the words of the prominent Georgian Menshevik Noe Zhordania, “[M]isfortune has befallen us. The connection with Russia has been broken and Transcaucasia has been left alone. We have to stand on our own feet and either help ourselves or perish through anarchy.”

The vacuum of power in Transcaucasia led to the establishment of the Transcaucasian Commissariat on 14 November 1917 and later the creation of the

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19 Ibid.

legislative body, the Seim. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Mensheviks in Georgia considered the Bolsheviks' power illegitimate. Georgian Mensheviks (taught by Russia’s experience) decided to eliminate all Bolsheviks from government structures. The newly formed Transcaucasian Commissariat included Mensheviks as well as the Muslim Musavat party, Armenian Dashnaks, and SRs; it did not include Bolsheviks. It should also be noted that the Musavat party (Muslim nationalist party) in Azerbaijan as well as Armenian Dashnaks (the Armenian Revolutionary Federation) in Armenia were very clearly expressed national parties differing greatly from the Georgian Mensheviks, who were cherishing more international goals.

Events on the international arena also played a very significant role. With the departure of the Russian army and the approach of the Turkish army in February 1918, a serious threat hung over the Transcaucasia region. Meanwhile, on 3 March 1918, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed, in accordance with which Georgia lost one of its most important port-cities, Batumi, and some territories near the Armenian border to the Ottoman Empire, leading to patriotic indignation in Georgia. A prominent Georgian Menshevik, Irakli Tsereteli, expressed a commonly held opinion in his speech from 13 April 1918 in Transcaucasian Seim (Diet):

> Turkish imperialism has issued an ultimatum to Transcaucasian democracy to recognize the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. We know of no such treaty. We know that in Brest-Litovsk the death sentence was passed upon Revolutionary Russia, and that death sentence to our fatherland we will never sign! 21

> The most interesting point of this speech is Tsereteli’s concern for the fate of Revolutionary Russia, as Social Democrats like Tsereteli sincerely believed that Georgia

21 Ibid., p. 203.
would become a guardian of the Russian Social-Democracy until the Bolsheviks’ defeat, indicating that at that point the issue of Georgian independence was not a priority, even though it as appeared to be a natural step.

The final stage of that patriotic rise was the declaration of war on the Ottoman Empire by the Trancaucasian Seim, which did not seem the most reasonable action considering the circumstances described above. On 15 April 1918 the Turkish Army occupied Batumi. It was that indisputable argument which forced the Transcaucasian Seim to agree to the Turkish demands. This also pushed Transcaucasian Seim to proclaim the independence of the Democratic Federative Republic of Transcaucasia (28 April 1918), which had existed for a very short term - around one month.\textsuperscript{22} The reason for such a short term was that all three national units of the Democratic Federative Republic of Transcaucasia – Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan – had different aspirations and pre-conditions as well as differing tactics of survival. Taking into consideration the very different attitude of the main local ethnicities toward the Turks, the existence of that Republic was likely doomed from the onset. Naturally, Armenian Dashnaks (the Armenian Revolutionary Federation) perceived the Turks as a serious threat and were resistant to independence from Russia. Mensheviks in Georgia were also nonplussed about the prospect of dealing with Turkey by themselves. In contrast, strongly pro-Turkish Azerbaijan with its Musavat Party (Muslim nationalist party) embraced their chance for independence from Russia.

At that point another hegemonic power arrived in the region – Germany. Georgians, who held strong admiration of German culture as one of the strongest in

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 205.
Europe, placed great hope in this newly arrived power. That is why the events unfolded rather quickly as Georgia decided to use its opportunity to become a protectorate of the Western European power and seize the moment to escape the Turkish expansion at the expense of Georgian territories (Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki). On 26 May 1918 Georgia (as a part of the Transcaucasian Federative Republic) received a Turkish ultimatum to answer the Turkish demands regarding significant tracts of Georgian territory; the Turks insisted an answer be forthcoming within seventy two hours. On the same day, the first Prime Minister of the Georgian Republic, Noe Zhordania, announced the establishment of the independent Georgian Republic (after 117 years of Russian Imperial rule), and German representatives officially established a German protectorate over Georgia.23

However, this German-Georgian ‘idyll’ did not last long, as Germany was soon officially defeated in November 1918. The British, who cherished the idea of creating a strong anti-Bolshevik base in the Caucasus, took charge over the Transcaucasia. Unfortunately, there was not little sympathy in Britain for Georgia because of Georgia’s previous relationship with Germany. At the same time, there was a strong interest in the part of the British government to create a unified anti-Bolshevik force in Transcaucasia as well as a strong economic interest relating to Baku (Caspian) oil. Still, the British were discouraged by the existence of numerous ethnic tensions there (and even conflicts, such as between Georgia and Armenia in 1918) as well as the strengthening position of Bolshevik Russia. That is why the official recognition of Georgia by the Allied powers

23 Ibid., p. 206.
did not occur until January 12th, 1920 during the Peace Conference in Paris, when it had become clear that the Allied Powers would leave the region.\(^{24}\)

By now it should be evident that Georgian independence was not the planned goal. Rather, it was a consequence of the fall of the Russian empire, the strong desire of Georgian Mensheviks to separate themselves from the Bolsheviks' Russia, and the immediate threat of the Turkish invasion.

What is important for consideration is that when Georgia decided to pursue independence, the Western Parliamentary Democracy was taken as a model for the Democratic Republic of Georgia in 1918. The elections to the Georgian Constituent Assembly again showed the strong population support for Mensheviks, who received "109 seats out of 130, with the rest distributed among National Democrats, Social Revolutionaries and Social Federalists."\(^{25}\)

The Menshevik government also faced confrontations within, mostly between social democrats with internationalist orientation (mostly Russians and Armenians) and nationalist orientation (mostly Georgians). However, the biggest threat came from pro-Bolshevik forces trying to create pockets of insurrection in rural areas of the more mountainous regions of northern Georgia. Mensheviks had concluded that “dvoevlastie” (dual power) was a huge threat and acted resolutely by forcing soviets to give up their power to the “legally constituted democratic government” and by persecuting Bolsheviks.\(^{26}\) Most such insurrections were suppressed by the Menshevik Peoples' Guard. Mensheviks, fully aware of the growing threat of invasion from Bolshevik Russia, tried

\(^{24}\) Ibid., p. 207.


\(^{26}\) Ibid., p. 189.
to find a Western power willing and able to protect Georgia. Unfortunately for them, this search was in vain.

In their turn, the Bolshevik government in Moscow admitted its inability to gain popular support in Georgia and was determined to intervene militarily. Ironically, the most active proponents of the invasion were Stalin and Ordzhonikidze (both Georgians), while Lenin and Trotsky adopted a more open and watchful position. Thus, the Soviet Government even signed a peace treaty with Georgia on 7 May 1920, only to break it in the near future.27 Already in November 1920 Stalin stated that “Georgia, which has been transformed into the principal base of the imperialist operations of England and France and which therefore has entered into hostile relations with Soviet Russia, that Georgia is now living out the last days of her life.”28

By the winter of 1921 Georgia was surrounded by Bolsheviks as Azerbaijan and Armenia were forced to become “Soviet”. Finally, on February 15th 1921 the Soviet Red Army invaded Georgia, forcing the Menshevik government into exile. On February 25, 1921 the Socialist Soviet Republic of Georgia was declared by the Bolshevik government29. Any kind of resistance was brutally suppressed by the Red Army.

Returning to the issue of nationalism and democracy, it is important to stress that even among Georgian Bolsheviks there was still hope for what they call ‘national communism’. On April 10th 1921 a mass meeting of workers was held in Tbilisi during which resolutions were passed on the following issues: “to defend Georgia’s rights to self-determination and independence; to hasten the formation of a national Red Army of

29 Ibid., p. 200.
Georgia; to secure for the working masses of Georgia the right to select their representatives by free elections; to ensure that the new Soviet order was introduced into Georgia in such a way as to respect the customs of the people; and to legalize the existence of all the socialist organizations not actually engaging in activities directed against the regime.”

The main opponent of such actions was Stalin, then the commissar on nationalities. He was against what he called “local chauvinism” and urged local Communists to fight “the hydra of nationalism.” Local Communists as well as some representatives of the highest Soviet authorities (Trotsky, Lenin) did not agree with this, perceiving a divergence from one of the main Communist doctrines: self-determination for all nationalities. Lenin in his letter even openly called Stalin “that Georgian who is the truly [sic] Russian Derzhimordy.” The Chairman of the Georgian Communist Party, one of the most prominent old Bolsheviks, Filipe Makharadze, even sent the report to Moscow, stating that:

The arrival of the Red Army and the establishment of Soviet power in Georgia had the outward appearance of a foreign occupation because in the country itself there was nobody who was ready to take part in a rebellion or a revolution. . . . We must realize that the Georgian masses had become accustomed to the idea of an independent Georgia... We were announcing that we were working towards the creation of an independent Georgia.. while taking systematic steps to nullify our promise.. This was an intolerable situation, as it is impossible to deceive the masses in a political question of this nature, and especially the Georgian people, who had gone through ordeals of fire and water in recent years. . . .

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31 Suny, p. 188.
32 Ibid., p. 189.
This controversy led to a serious political conflict known as the “Georgian Affair”. Unfortunately for Georgia, Stalin and Ordjonikidze (as more reactionary forces) won that battle. Consequently, the moderate line of Georgian Bolsheviks (and even more so Mensheviks) was first discredited and later eliminated through purges.

There were several attempts by Georgian Mensheviks to create insurrections with the goal of freeing Georgia from Soviet power. The most serious was the attempt on 28 August 1924, which was intended to be quite large. However, due to the work of secret agents of the Cheka (the Soviet secret police), the insurrection lacked sufficient strength and size. It was strongest in Western Georgia, where the peasantry strongly supported Mensheviks. Within three weeks the insurrection was utterly crushed. The number of victims reached 10,000 (including women and children). After this event the influence of the Mensheviks in Georgia was almost eliminated, and the country was forced to follow the course of 'dictatorship of the proletariat' under the Soviet rule.

The Soviet national policy, expressed by the slogan 'national in form, socialist in content', complicated the development of nationalism in Georgia. The policy of 'korenizatsiya' (indigenization) combined with the rapid industrialization and growth of education created a solid base for the strengthening of the Georgian elites. At the same time, 'korenizatsiya' also improved the position of the ethnic minorities inside Georgia, creating Abkhazian and Ossetian Communist elites, which led to dissatisfaction among local Georgians and planted the seeds of the future conflicts. Hence, Stephen Jones is likely correct in his analysis that Bolshevik nationality policies in Georgia in the 1920s showed their contradictory nature when “socialist policies of national equality and

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cultural development strengthened ethnic attachments which in turn hindered integration in the new proletarian state.”35

National oppression also became a serious issue for Georgians as their national consciousness grew during the short period of independence. Furthermore, this image of independence was connected with the Menshevik government, while the image of oppression was connected with Bolshevik Russia. The forced inclusion of Georgia in the USSR through the Transcaucasian Federation brought a feeling of national indignation even to Georgian Bolshevik party members - 'national deviationists'. For instance, during the second Georgian Communist party congress, one of the so-called national deviationist, Sergo Kavtaradze, made the next statement: “Our party is pursuing a colonial policy in Georgia...The use of this term in our polemic may seem bizarre, but this term must be applied in exactly the same sense to both the imperialist state and to the group (in Moscow) that pursues a colonial policy.” 36

The most common form of nationalist expression thus became cultural forms. Stephen Jones argues that many writers, artists and other representatives of local intelligentsia quite openly expressed nationalistic ideas in their works. One of the greatest Georgian writers, Constantine Gamsakhurdia (father of Zviad Gamsakhurdia), in 1923 called for a Georgian “cultural dictatorship”, stating that “when a people is defeated on the political front, it puts all its strength onto [THE] cultural front.”37

36 Ibid., p. 626.
37 Ibid., p. 635.
The situation of 1917-1921 resembled to an extent the situation in 1989-1991 when the collapse of the Soviet Union was inevitable. Again, Soviet Russia (like Bolshevik Russia in 1921) could not accept the loss of Georgia. Unfortunately for Georgia, in 1991 (as in 1921) there was no Western power taking a strong interest in Georgia. The main difference is that the Soviet ideology at that moment (1989-1991) extirpated itself, and radical nationalism became the main ideology of the society in transition. In terms of understanding democratic values and ideals, seventy years of isolation from Western community had its tragic consequences, as even the stratum of society which traditionally carried the most progressive ideas – the ‘intelligentsia’ – lost contact to similarly minded European (Western) fellows.

In terms of the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, there are additional parallels. For instance, Bolshevik Russia exerted strong influence in these regions. Many Bolsheviks had to flee to Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia, due to their persecution in Georgia in 1918. In Vladikavkaz the Caucasian Bureau of the All-Russian Communist Party established the South Ossetian Revolutionary Committee to reinforce their propaganda and military provocations against Georgia’s Menshevik Government.

Again, the provocative situation was created to discredit the power of the legitimate Georgian government by pursuing an aggressive anti-Georgian course without making Soviet Russia appear to be the aggressor. As a result of this propaganda, between 1918 and 1920 South Ossetia saw several peasant uprisings, all of which were suppressed by the Mensheviks’ People’s Guard. The reaction, according to David Lang, was swift, "In 1919, the Tbilisi regime outlawed the so-called National Soviet of South Ossetia, a
Bolshevik-dominated body, and refused any grant of national self-determination for the Ossetes.”

These efforts failed to stop the Bolsheviks, and on 20 June 1920 a serious armed revolt, arranged by the South Ossetian Revolutionary Committee and aided by strong military support from Bolshevik Russia, crossed the Georgian border and attacked the Georgian army in South Ossetia. Uncowed, the Georgian Army and People’s Guard repulsed the defeating attackers with determination and ferocity. According to David Lang, “Five thousand people perished in the fighting and 20,000 Ossetes fled into Soviet Russia. The Georgian People’s Guard displayed a frenzy of chauvinistic zeal during the mopping-up operations, many villages being burnt to the ground and large areas of fertile land ravaged and depopulated.” The situation in Abkhazia was also complicated. The Independent Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia was proclaimed on 31 March 1921. In December 1921 Abkhazia joined the Georgian SSR under a Treaty of Union. By 1931 the Abkhazian Republic was incorporated into Georgia as an autonomous republic – the Abkhazian ASSR, a situation that has led Abkhazian separatists to use this short period of independence as grounds for separation from Georgia (referring to the Abkhazian Constitution of 1925).

The Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic consisting of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia was organized in December 1922 as a part of the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), with Tbilisi being the capital of that formation. The 1920s

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39 Ibid., p. 229.
40 Ibid., p. 230.
and 1930s were characterized by the consolidation of the Bolsheviks’ power in Georgia as well as by the implementation of different reforms varying from NEP (New Economic Policy) to the collectivization and rapid industrialization of that traditionally agricultural region. The policy of 'korenizatsiya' brought with it what could be called the 'Georgianization' of the state and party institutions, with Georgians reaching up to 66% of the Communist party membership in 1929.41 Due to an awareness of the lack of popular support, the new power supported adaptation to the new Communist order by promoting Georgian culture, language, literature, and art. However, the 1930s were characterized with the unleashing of the Stalinist terror, which was particularly harsh in Georgia (taking into consideration that Lavrenti Beria was at that time the head of the Cheka in Transcaucasia). In 1931, with the appointment of Beria as the First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, the process of the complete subordination and incorporation of Georgia into the Soviet system was accelerated.42 The policy of 'korenizatsiya' was changed in the middle of the 1930s with the rapid spread of Russian language and culture.

The bloody purges of the 1930s resulted in the elimination of the majority of the Communist party elites in Georgia (mostly old Bolsheviks and national communists) as well as the cream of the Georgian intelligentsia, bringing to the top Stalin's loyalists like Beria, who in 1937 was rewarded with a promotion to the directorship of the Soviet NKVD for his 'successful' accomplishments in Georgia. As of the 1930s there is almost

42 Ibid., p. 238.
no sense in relying on any Soviet history accounts by Soviet historians as the falsification of history became routine in efforts to please the leadership.

It took next sixty years until the national independence movement in Georgia revived, provoked by the policies of ‘perestroika and glasnost’ and the rapid degeneration of the Soviet ideology. At this time, the 70 years of Soviet rule were condemned as an illegal occupation by an imperial power. Spyros Demetrou argues that by “Drawing on popular conceptions of Georgian nationhood, symbols of social, historical and cultural community were linked with the explicit political framework of the 1918-21 Republic, and used as a mobilizing discourse for pro-independence activities.”43 Thus, it was the radical national movement in Georgia combined with the fall of the Soviet Empire that brought Georgia independence in 1991.

Again, as in 1918, the image of the Western democracy was taken as a political model. Unfortunately, that transition coincided with the growth of the ethnic conflicts, which in their turn created a serious threat to the viability of the newly independent state known as the Republic of Georgia.

It is a truism that national conflicts contain a mixture of reasons, taking into consideration the nature of nation- and state-building in the Soviet Union. However, the current focus is on the correlation between nationalism and democracy. Zaslavsky offers the perspective of Marxist historians about nationalism as a negative factor, as expressed with clarity by Eric Hobsbawm’s argument: “The characteristic nationalist movements of

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the late twentieth century are essentially negative or rather divisive.” Zaslavsky does not agree with this approach, being more optimistic and citing the examples of the Baltic states and ‘Slavic republics’ as more successful cases of nationalist revivals in democratic transitions. However, he does refer emphatically to the national movements in the Caucasus as the most disappointing examples of traditional (not civil) nationalism and “pre-modern ethnocentric mobilization.” He finds justification by looking at the final goals of the states, which imply that only the Baltic- and other “Slavic republics” chose the proper goals, which in Zaslavsky's view are not expressed by “regaining their sovereignty,” but rather by becoming “full-fledged” members of the European Community and finally by “join[ing] the global material civilization created by Western progress.” As a result of this approach of positing the reasons for successful or unsuccessful democratic transitions and national mobilizations, the author prompts the consideration of the short-term results of the first stages of the transitions instead of careful examination into the causes of the different paths to what are likely common goals (as it will be quite surprising to know that the peoples of the Caucasus, Central Asia, or other non Slavic Republics may refuse to accept the “civilized, progressive and democratic ideals” of the Western community). The final “optimistic” remark on the vital role of an international police force “capable of nipping in the bud such bloody conflicts”


46 Ibid., p.110.
reveals the author's lack of faith in the ability of the nations with more complex and painful inheritances to reach the level of democratic liberal states.47

Also interesting is the approach of another expert in post-communist transitions and nationalist policies, Jack Snyder. Usefully, from the beginning he defines his notion of nationalism as “the doctrine that the people who see themselves as distinct in their culture, history, institutions, or principles should rule themselves in a political system that expresses and protects those distinctive characteristics.” 48 Snyder emphasizes that the difference between “the rule by the people” and “the rule in the name of a people” can be blurry, which often leads new elites in post-Soviet societies to use nationalism for mass mobilization and mass support – often through undemocratic means. Snyder tries to trace why, in the former republics of the Soviet Union, the paths of nationalism and democratization were so different, particularly between such regions as Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Baltic. To distinguish these different patterns, the author differentiates between ethnic nationalism and civic nationalism. He does, however, point out that these are the ideal types, as “no actual nation is purely civic or purely ethnic.” 49 To understand the relationship between nationalism and democratization, Snyder also distinguishes between “mature democracies” and “democratizing states”. The former term is related to the Western liberal democracies, while the latter term is characterized by a very broad variation of post-Soviet nation-state building projects.50

47 Ibid., p.111.


49 Ibid., p.25.

Still, Snyder’s main goal is to show the relationships between nationalism and democratization in their various forms, one of which (widespread in the former Soviet republics) is nationalist conflict. He concludes that “democratic consolidation reduced ethnic conflict, but the initial steps in the rocky transition to democracy increased it, especially in new states”, which does not represent a new argument but is certainly a more positive view of the correlation between democratization and nationalism than the traditional one, according to which democratization is associated with positive, progressive and modern trends, and nationalism with backward and negative ones. The significance of Snyder's approach is that he does not deny the correlation between the two processes nor see them as mutually exclusive.

The cases of the former Soviet republics are the most difficult to explain, according to Snyder, as some of them went through violent conflicts, while others managed to avoid them. Snyder attributes this difference in outcomes to another layer of decisive factors: “1) the pattern of threats to elite interests, and 2) the institutional legacy of the Communist period.” Both of these elements could be applied to the Georgian case. Concerning the Communist legacy, it is essential to mention that Soviet influence created not just an Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia in Georgia, where the Abkhaz minority constituted just 1.8 percent of the population, but also an Autonomous Region of South Ossetia, where Ossetians constituted around 3 percent of the population. Also, it is important to take into consideration the existence of the North Ossetian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic inside the Russian Federation, where the majority of the

51 Ibid., p. 28.
52 Ibid., p.30.
population was Ossetian. There was not a lot of common sense in such divisions inside a multi-ethnic country, but the Soviet government held to the well-tested policy of ‘divide and rule’.

To understand this policy and its manifestations more fully, we need to go back further to the origins of the national policies of the Soviet Union. According to Victor Zaslavsky, the main reason for the “success” of this policy was that “the federal political-administrative system served as an elaborate framework for maintaining ethnic inequality.” This means that territories were usually divided not in accordance with the recognized origins or sizes of the ethnic groups but rather according to the most convenient way for the Soviet government to manifest its vision of its control. A complex hierarchy was elaborated to keep these ethnic groups under strict control and fully dependent on the “center”, using elaborate schemes of distribution as well as the revocation of privileges. This included a hierarchy inside the ethnic groups, according to which national elites were pushed toward “Russification” regarding their education and social position. This oriented them toward Moscow (the “center”), distancing them from the majority of their ethnic peers, who, in the case of Georgia, lived in villages and small towns (which supports Snyder’s argument concerning the elites as a factor). Worst of all in this scheme was that the natural, and historically established borders of ethnic territories were broken, and new, “artificial,” ones were formed, creating potential for conflict.

53 Zaslavsky, 86.
54 Ibid.
Such was the case with the Meskhian Turks, when approximately 100,000 of them who were living along the border with Turkey in the Meskheti region of Georgia were deported to Central Asia in 1944.\textsuperscript{55} A cruel fate pursued these unfortunate people when in 1989, during the period of Gorbachev’s “perestroika”, they became victims of pogrom in Fergana Valley, Uzbekistan as a result of ethnic conflict. Thus, the Meskhian Turks had to be evacuated from Uzbekistan, yet Georgia did not hurry to take them back, as the growing nationalism inside Georgia, with its emphasis on Georgian Orthodoxy, tended to accept only those people who declared themselves ethnically Georgian and religiously Georgian Orthodox.

In the case of Abkhazian and Ossetian conflicts, the impact of Soviet legacy is unmistakable. The main argument of Georgian nationalists against the autonomous status of South Ossetia reaches deep into history and is connected with the first appearance of Ossetians as newcomers to the region in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century, in contrast to the Abkhaz people, who had been in the region from the times of a legendary Colchis kingdom in 13\textsuperscript{th} century BC.\textsuperscript{56} Moving on to more recent times, it is possible to trace the Soviet national policies during Stalin's epoch. It is difficult, however, to trace their logic, as, for instance, in 1922 Abkhazia's status was changed to the level of Union Republic and included in the Transcaucasian Federation. This status also did not last long, as the Transcaucasian Federation was disbanded in 1938, upon which Abkhazia became an autonomous part of the Republic of Georgia. Stalin harbored suspicions against the Abkhazs, seeing them as a potentially disloyal population on the strategic border with Turkey, for some Abkhaz

\textsuperscript{55} Suny, p. 285.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
were Muslim and had a pro-Turkish orientation (even now there are more Abkhazs who live in Turkey than in Abkhazia). Thus, Stalin’s policies toward the Abkhaz were oppressive, resulting in the importing of many non-Abkhaz people to live in Abkhazia. Conversely, in the 1970s the Soviet government took measures to satisfy the protests of the Abkhaz against such discrimination, which improved the Abkhazs’ position and finally made Abkhaz a 'titular nationality' in a region where they were a minority.

Still, even though Snyder tries to differentiate numerous reasons for ethnic conflicts as well as their absence within different states of the former Soviet Union and connects them with the different patterns of democratization, some cases show more contradiction than consistency. For example, Snyder states that: “mass nationalism is rarely well developed before democratization”, yet examples from the Caucasian Republics show a different pattern. During the post-Stalinist era (in 1956 and 1978) Georgia experienced its most serious nationalist uprisings. During the 1980s strong sentiments concerning the national language and culture were expressed in Georgia quite openly compared with other Soviet republics. Snyder admits that Georgia could be referred to as a country where “national identity was well established before independence”.

Thus, Snyder connects the rise of the ethnic conflicts in Georgia more with the absence of strong democratic institutions, which found expression not just in

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58 Ibid., p. 126.
60 Ibid., p. 160.
61 Snyder, p. 236.
ethnic tensions but also in most spheres of social life, reaching its apogee in civil war and partial anarchy in 1992-93. The numbers presented by him are also impressive; in the case of Georgia, in 1996 17,500 people were killed and around 500,000 displaced as a result of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (in a country with a population of five million).\(^62\)

These tragic outcomes could make one think more critically about the role of nationalism in the process of democratization. Here, Gia Nodia’s argument concerning the different roles of nationalism in the different stages of the democratization process in the emerging democracies offers significant insight. In his article “Nationalism and Democratization”, he points out that nationalism “is needed to get the democratic enterprise started” and describes the role of nationalism in “sustaining this enterprise as different.”\(^63\) What are the differences? A further argument where the author states that emergent democracies and nationalism “are often the one and the same” does not persuade.\(^64\) How do we know that the desire to be an independent nation coincides with a movement toward liberal democracy? What we can see is that not many of the newly independent states had the liberal democratic model in mind during their transitions (Central Asia, Belarus, etc). For example, the many different parties emerging during the first years of Georgian independence reflected strong interest in the monarchy as well as a new combination called 'theo-democracy': “a Christian state ruled on democratic but

\(^{62}\) Ibid., p.238.


\(^{64}\) Ibid., p.10.
not secular principles.”\textsuperscript{65} Liberal democracy as the ideal can become a goal, but it is not always nor immediately the impetus.

This leads directly to the issue of the correlation between nationalism and liberalism. Nodia defines liberalism as “the doctrine which holds individual human liberty to be the foremost political value.”\textsuperscript{66} However, the difference between personal choice and collective choice is often a problem. The (potential) conflict between the “unreal” nature of nations and the “real” nature of individual persons is clear, but Nodia tries to reveal the positive link between nationalism and liberalism through a novel comparison, arguing that “when a nation ‘imagines’ itself, it sees not a family (community), but a unique personality with a distinct character.”\textsuperscript{67} This is incomplete, however, as the image of a nation is also connected to community, especially in the case of small nations where family ties and kinship values prevail over individual ones.

More cogent is the argument of Zaslavsky, who states that during the severe crises and dramatic following Soviet Union’s collapse there was an activation and reliance on these kinship and ethnic ties in order to survive, which led to a pushing out of outsiders. In most areas of the first violent conflicts in former Soviet countries, the fear that the “outsiders” not belonging to this kin, group or nation may have claims to the “scarce resources” (one of the most ancient and essential of which is land) led to the forced mass emigrations of these so-called “guests” (minorities).\textsuperscript{68} In the case of Georgia, Abkhazia’s

\textsuperscript{65} Shireen Hunter, \textit{The Transcaucasus in Transition Nation-Building and Conflict} (Center for Strategic \& International Studies, 1994), 112.

\textsuperscript{66} Nodia, p. 10.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., p. 11.

\textsuperscript{68} Zaslavsky, p. 61.
strategic position as a Black Sea port and its rich resources and resort areas presented a very important value, as did Adjaria.

Nodia does not accept Fukuyma’s definition of nationalism as “megalothymic” (demanding of greater recognition) and liberal individualism as “isothymic” (demanding of equal recognition). It seems that in the process of this positive affirmation of nationalism, Nodia tends to idealize it, stating that ”proper” nationalism does not “extend recognition only to members of a given national or ethnic group”. 69 He characterizes this type of situation as 'racism' or 'chauvinism'. Still, is there such notion as a 'proper' nationalism? It is easier to define proper democracy than proper nationalism. Finally, are these two notions mutually exclusive or complementary?

This question is analyzed in great depth by Nodia, who says that perhaps democracy and nationalism should not be divided into two diametrically opposed notions (according to the traditionalist contemporary Western view), since in reality they could be interconnected. Moreover, perhaps nationalism is a “component of the more complex entity known as “liberal democracy.”70 Nodia points out that even the universally accepted notion of liberal democracy contains two different notions – liberalism and democracy – that also have not always gone well together. To strengthen the analyses, Nodia suggests that we should consider that nationalism can play a different role in “mature” democracies and “emerging” democracies as well as in ”homegrown” and “imported” liberal democracies56.

69 Nodia, p. 12.
70 Ibid., p. 14.
However, the main challenge to the re-evaluation of the correlation between democracy and nationalism lies in the nature of this unprecedented moment in history, of “the transition to liberal democracy after communism.”71 Not everything in such a process is endowed with a rational explanation, and if it is, then the claim of “We the People” could be found legitimate and natural for both notions. Furthermore, he states that it is impossible to deny that nationalism was actually a very essential historical force in the formation of nation states (political units) where later democracy appeared as a form of governance. It is important to understand that during “perestroika” the process of the formation of independent states occurred with national mobilization as the main force. Here it is difficult not to agree with Nodia, except that it is not always necessary to assume that “liberal democracy” was the final goal of such transitions. So, why we should call them democratic transitions? Did it depend on their final goals, such as building democracy, or the choice of means, i.e. how to reach it? This is perhaps best analyzed by Shlomo Avineri, who states that “No universal code applies to all, and anyone who wants to know whether a given society will go about solving its problems amicably or violently would do better to look to historical and national traditions rather than to quantitative data concerning economic development, GNP figures, and the like.”72 It is necessary to remember that in the beginning of the massive social and political reconstruction project called “perestroika”, the Soviet leadership did not intend to build a liberal democracy or dissolve the Soviet Union and give freedom to all the nations who had been forced into membership. The intention of Mikhail Gorbachev was

71 Ibid, p. 15.
72 Ibid., p. 16.
the opposite, as he wanted to strengthen the Soviet Union and to “revitalize socialism” to make it stronger. The problem was that Gorbachev did not understand the power of the long slumbering forces he awoke. Moreover, he did not understand the nature of the problem. Shireen Hunter argues persuasively that Gorbachev's statement that the “Nagorno-Karabakh dispute was a stab in the heart of perestroika” shows this perspective quite clearly. Although unable to control the situation with the strong nationalist movements all over the Soviet Union, he did convince the Western powers that only Moscow could keep violent ethnic conflicts under control; he was actually merely trying to keep the Soviet Union intact as long as possible by manipulating the situation with the well known approach of 'divide and rule'.

The truth is that the most important end goal of most of the republics was national independence and freedom, and the words 'independence' and 'democracy' very soon became the main slogans of the independence movements; indeed, they were considered to be identical. On the other hand, it is worth remembering that the 9th of April protests in Tbilisi (1989), which were the strongest demonstration of the desire to be independent from Russia, began in reaction to the Abkhaz demands of secession from Georgia (in order to join Russia) and in the span of a few days, protesters created a new primary agenda – to be independent.

The main idea of the radical approach to Georgian national independence has been cogently analyzed by Gia Nodia: “The radicals defended the thesis that the existing

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74 Ibid., p.144.

75 Ibid., p. 145.
political structures represented the 'regime of occupation' and that any participation in
them, including taking part in official election – even if they met democratic standards –
was morally and politically unacceptable." Nodia's explanation of this moral choice as a
choice between the decent independent existence and a miserable existence in the 'Gulag'
(the radicals’ perception of the Soviet Union) sheds light on such an extreme approach.77
Most important, however, is that Georgia was one of the only former soviet republics (the
Baltic states being the others) where such an approach gained strong support from the
population and became a base for the future policies under such controversial political
figure as the first Georgian President - Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

Gia Nodia's explanation of the nature of Georgia revolutionary radicalism
supports unequivocally Avineri’s argument, stressing that: “Decades of communist rule
had destroyed the elements of civil society and civic consciousness that had emerged
before the Soviet occupation of 1921, and left people with mostly medieval ideas of
political behavior, which easily could be traced to Georgia's glorious past in medieval
times.”78 Unfortunately, the ruling style of ‘Zviad the Saviour’ (Gamsakhurdia)
resembled in some ways the dictatorial style of Stalin’s (minus the mass executions and
imprisonments) – all who did not agree with his polices were seen as ‘enemies of the
nation’ or ‘agents of the Kremlin.’79 Such rhetoric was troubling to many observers (and
Georgians).

76 Gia Nodia, "Political Turmoil in Georgia and the ethnic Politics of Zviad Gamsakhurdia." In Contested
77 Ibid., p. 76.
78 Ibid., p. 78.
79 Ibid., p. 79.
Thus, the worst outcome of the ethnic conflicts in the beginning of the 1990s in Georgia was what Shireen Hunter called the “erosion of people's faith in the democratic process and a generalized state of physical and emotional fatigue, which made them yearn for order and peace even with repression.”80

One good point made by Nodia refers to the United Nations as the example of “isothymic” nationalism, which leads us to his next valuable argument: “Nationalism is a coin with two sides: one is political, the other is ethnic.”81 Nodia consciously avoids the kind of simplification that often presents these two sides as simply “good” and “bad”, stating that both characteristics are naturally present in nationalism. Nonetheless, it is particularly important how, through democratic institutions and policy, the ethnic element of the nationalism can play its positive role.

Nevertheless, there are also numerous examples in history where the ethnic element of nationalism found its expression in chauvinism or even fascism. Nodia emphasizes repeatedly that Western liberals’ strong aversion to nationalism stems from World War II, yet he rejects this reactionary aversion, writing persuasively that “denouncing all nationalism as 'would-be fascism' makes no more sense than denouncing all religion for ultimately leading to fanaticism”82

Returning to the situation of post-communist countries, one must ask why the role of nationalism is different in “homegrown democracies” compared with “imported democracies”. The absence of specific preconditions (political, economic and social) greatly complicates the importing of the Western model. The pattern differs greatly from

80 Hunter, p. 145.
81 Nodia, p. 78.
82 Nodia, p. 80.
previous ones, including those of Third World countries, where traditional societies and "backwardness" were the conditions to overcome. The transition from communism is very different, as communism itself was directed in most cases against similar conditions but used very different means. Here, Shlomo Avineri cogently argues that communism also tried to "impose its version of modernity on nationalism", even achieving some results, though with "terrible and totally unjustifiable cost." The current situation is the consequence of past experiments and seventy years of isolation from, and conflict with, the international community. The main problem that Nodia sees is the interruption of the nationalist political tradition and the predominance of the ethnic element, which can lead to nationalist conflicts.

What, then, are the consequences of such an unfortunate combination? Nodia admits that they vary from "witch-hunts" to hysterical conspiracy theories (under Gamsakhurdia) to a constant desire to blame all the troubles of the past and present on what Nodia diplomatically calls "a particular stratum of society", which in the common language means minorities. He goes on to confirm that "almost all post-communist countries with ethnic minorities must face painful problems that pit unstable and insecure majorities against even less secure minorities." How are they going to solve these problems? Here, the most common patterns are of either anarchy or authoritarianism, each of which is based on nationalism as a leading ideology. At this point it becomes less clear whether nationalism might be an unavoidable, or essential, element for democratic

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83 Ibid., p. 81.
84 Ibid., p. 82.
85 Nodia, p. 18.
development. Moreover, if it is essential, and helpful in reaching liberal democracy
during the transitional stage (as Nodia argues in the beginning), then Frances Fukuyama’s
question is well justified: “Is there any reason to think that in the end, when democratic
stability and prosperity are achieved, people are going to find it more satisfying to live in
nationally defined political entities than in liberal ones that recognize only one's formal,
abstract humanity?”\textsuperscript{86}

This leads to a series of questions even more pessimistic than Fukuyama's: What
if liberal democracy is not reached (in the short term), nor prosperity, and a nationalist
ideology remains the leading one – what is the outcome of such a transition? And is the
presence of the West as a counterbalance the only hope for post-communist states?
Taking into consideration that Nodia's article was written in 1992, it is not surprising that
he did not have much hope in direct international involvement. Georgia in the early
1990s, even while sinking into chaos and anarchy, ethnic conflicts, chauvinistic
leadership and civil war, was not a focus of the West. Moreover, during this period
Georgia completely lost its international reputation. Most western publications described
Georgian development under Gamsakhurdia as “bizarre”, led by a new political elite
described as something between insane and fascist.\textsuperscript{87} However, this begs the question as
to whether this situation was predetermined only by the personality of the first
democratically elected President of an independent Georgia or did other pre-conditions
portray Georgia as a 'failed state' in the eyes of the Western community?

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., p. 20.

\textsuperscript{87} Swante Cornell, \textit{Small nations and great powers : a study of ethnopolitical conflict in the Caucasus}
(Richmond, Surrey, England : Curzon, 2001), 120.
It is true that the image of the first Georgian President - Zviad Gamsakhurdia – is usually connected with radical nationalism. However, in terms of political style the label of “authoritarian populist” strikes closer to the truth. Gamsakhurdia did, certainly, arrive on a wave of popular nationalism, and many of his slogans, including the infamous “Georgia for Georgians”, serve as a clear demonstration of his agenda. Coming from his dissident background and combined with a highly patriotic and strongly anti-communist environment, he was a perfect match to the public agenda and mood of the time.

On October 28th, 1990 the nationalist coalition “The Round Table”, led by Gamsakhurdia, won the multiparty parliamentary elections, and its leader was chosen as the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Georgia. Later, in November 1990 he became the Chairman of the Parliament. These events were the beginning of the end for Communist rule in Georgia. It should also not be forgotten that Gamsakhurdia left the circle of radical opposition in May 1990 before the fall elections to the Supreme Soviet of Georgia. It is difficult to tell if this was a step taken by a populist who wanted to attract all the layers of the electorate, including more moderate ones, or if at that point he disagreed to overtly with other leaders of the radical national movement, such as Giorgi Chanturia and Irakli Tsereteli. This resulted in a controversy described below in excerpts from Gamsakhurdia’s interview with American journalist Edmund Stevens, published in the newspaper “Tavisupali Sakhartvelo” on 25 November 1990:

S: - Mr. Gamsakhurdia, there is the fact that on the eve of initially planned elections on March 25th 1990, there was a Conference organized by the national liberation movement, where you urged to boycott the elections to the Supreme Soviet of Georgia, to create oppositional national Duma, and, in case of elections

88 Jones, p. 12.
to the Supreme Soviet, the latter should be self-liquidated. Besides, it was decided at the same conference that all the units of the national movement which would decide to participate in the elections, should be excluded from the national movement. However, you not just participated in the elections, but also became the Chairman of the same Supreme Soviet, liquidation of which you had urged before. How can you explain such a transformation of your position?

G: - The one-Party elections which were planned on March 25th 1990 were based on the antidemocratic principles and could not express the will of Georgian people. That is why we boycotted those elections. However, when with the efforts of and protest actions of the block – “Round Table - Independent Georgia” the new Law on elections was passed, it became possible to conduct free multi-party elections. Only after this we took part in the elections and fairly won them. Therefore I became the Chairman not of the old Supreme Soviet, which I urged to liquidate, but of the new multi-party one, which represents already not an old Soviet structure, and can be fairly called the National Parliament of Georgia. It also need to be mentioned that the elections to the Supreme Soviet were held that time without the regulation by the Soviet Constitution and different parties were registered not by Soviet authorities, but by the Central Electoral Commission. Moreover, the first time foreign experts were invited to observe the elections, which became the expression of the will of the Georgian people.90

From this answer we can see that there was not much controversy in Gamsakhurdia’s behavior. However, there was a dark side accompanying the happy tidings of the first free, multi-party elections. Already at this point it was possible to foresee the dramatic divisions becoming extant in the Georgian national movement, divisions which would play a fatal role in future events bringing Georgia to civil war and near collapse. Regarding democratization there was a further serious setback in these elections as ethnic minorities had no chance at equal representation. Gamsakhurdia's coalition pushed through a new electoral law stipulating that “only parties operating through the whole territory of the republic could contest the elections, which effectively disenfranchised the non-Georgians whose parties were limited to specific regions.”91


91 Suny, p. 235.
Stevens proceeds to ask Gamsakhurdia about his political opponents – Chanturia and Tsereteli – who were two other prominent leaders of the national movement. They were known for having held elections to the National Congress in opposition to the elections to the Supreme Soviet. The journalist also asked Gamsakhurdia about the conflict between the proponents of the coalition “Round Table” and the proponents of the National Congress, as the confrontation between official (Supreme Soviet) and non-official (National Congress) power structures in the country overstepped the level of the arguments and reached armed clashes. Gamsakhurdia’s answer shows his uncompromising position towards the opposition as he emphasized that the National Congress did not have any political power, that the elections there were falsified and that it was just a “fiction.” Moreover, Gamsakhurdia brought up the connection between the mafia and the National Congress. Here, he referred explicitly to the Mkhedrioni military formation under the leadership of Jaba Ioseliani, calling it a “gang of criminals”. But there were not just ‘criminals’ in the National Congress; they were the same radical nationalists who, like, Gamsakhurdia had fought against Communism in the 70s and 80s. In particular, the young prominent leader of the revived Georgian National Democratic Party, Giorgi Chanturia, had even more radical nationalist views than Gamsakhurdia, pushing for the militarizing of the Georgian state (based on the Israel model) and the joining of NATO. In the interview Gamsakhurdia expressed his disagreement with this position, including the NATO issue, putting the priority on joining EU organizations.

93 Ibid.
One of the more interesting questions from that interview is related to nationalism. Stevens broached the issue of contradictions in Gamsakhurdia's statements concerning the national question by referring first to Gamsakhurdia's statement from November 1st 1988, when Gamsakhurdia announced that he had information about the Georgian government’s plans to sell part of Eastern Georgia to Azerbaijan and immediately brought up the question of expelling the Azeri population from Georgian land, which had been illegally seized (at least according to Gamsakhurdia). Then, Stevens refers to Gamsakhurdia's speech at the meeting on November 11th 1989, where Gamsakhurdia announced that if the Ossetians did not want to live in peace, they should leave Georgia. Last of all, Stevens produced a statement connected with the Meskhetian Turks, which Gamsakhurdia had made on behalf of the Helsinki Union group, announcing that he would never allow the return of any ethnic Turk; indeed, he made clear his dream of inspiring the Georgian population to fight for the repatriation of ethnic Turks to Turkey. However, Stevens thinks that these statements contradict Gamsakhurdia's statements to the official press, statements in which he claimed that ethnic hatred was alien to Georgian people, stressing the devotion to the spirit of the Helsinki Agreement as a long time leader of the Helsinki Group in Georgia.

Gamsakhurdia answers that he does not see any contradictions in these statements, immediately bringing up his major theme – the victimization of Georgians in their own state – and labeling ethnic minorities as strangers (newcomers). He even names 35% of the ethnically non-Georgian population as “foreigners”. Therefore, it is not surprising that such statements (as a Chief of the Supreme Soviet of Georgia) in connection to

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94 Ibid.
ethnic minorities, most of whom had been living there not just for decades but for centuries, led to much insecurity among ethnic minorities. This fact also did not contribute to the unification of the nation. That is why Gamsakhurdia's final statement that “all the ethnic problems would get settled as soon as the interference from outside would stop”, did not seem very promising.95

It is clear that the question of the ethnic minorities was not an easy one, requiring much effort from the inside as well as considerable attention from the head of the state. Alone his referencing them as “foreigners” or “strangers” shows his insensitivity towards people who were supposed to enjoy equal treatment and respect as citizens of the country, assuming the country wishes to be seen as a democratic one. However, for Gamsakhurdia most of the ethnic minorities remained a threat requiring tough and, often, aggressive measures. The demographic factor became very important, bringing in some cases to shocking decisions taken on the governmental level. One of the first acts of legislation during Gamsakhurdia's presidency was lowering the marriage age for girls to 15 years old.96 Moreover, many dangerous statements on the necessity of controlling the birth rate of some of the 'fast-breeding' minorities (Azeris, Armenians, Kurds) were made, statements based on the fear of their future outnumbering of the Georgian population. One such example can be seen in the Georgian newspaper “Kommunisti”: “For a balanced propagation of separate nations living in Georgia, to keep to the limited

95 Ibid.
level of their simple reproduction (two children); and to those who wish extended
reproduction, to grant the right to leave for a place of residence outside the republic.”

Jones’s phrase – “sovereignty protecting nationalism” – could be seen as suitable
for Gamsakhurdia’s policies as a president. No matter how controversial and even
bizarre his policies may seem, there was a peculiar logic to his treatment of different
minorities. For example, Ossetians were considered ‘newcomers’ in the region, and in
relation to them the policies were often more aggressive and less compromising than with
Abkhazians, who were considered more indigenous to the region. Most of the radical
nationalists (and not just radical) could not forgive Gamsakhurdia for his compromise
regarding the representation of the Abkhazian population of the Abkhazian AO at the
expense of the representation of the Georgian population (which was a local majority).
Gamsakhurdia gave Abkhazians the opportunity to have 28 seats in the Parliament of the
Abkhazian AO, whereas Georgians were granted just 26 seats (other nationalities
received 11 seats), even though the Abkhazians constituted just 17% of the AO
population, Georgians 46%, and other nationalities 37%. Despite being aware of the
unpopularity of this decision, he still took it. Still, it was probably a calculated decision as
Gamsakhurdia wanted to avoid conflict in Abkhazia, knowing that it could be disastrous
due to the likelihood of their being supported militarily by Russia.

97 Svetlana Chervonnaya, Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow.

Studies, 1921-1928, 628.

99 Chervonnaya, p. 56.
There is yet another document showing the official standing of Gamsakhurdia’s policy towards Abkhazia – “Gamsakhurdia’s Address to Abkhazian People” – published in “Vestnik Gruzi” on 12th of March 1991:

Dear fellow countrymen,

The fraternity of Abkhaz and Georgians comes from time immemorial. Our common Colchis origins, the genetic kinship between our peoples and languages, and our common cultures oblige us to think deep about fate of our peoples. We have always lived on the same land, sharing together our sorrows and our happiness. During centuries we had the common Kingdom, we prayed in the same church and fought common enemies on the same battle field. …

Long live our historical fraternity, our unity and independence! Let the God of love and truth stay with us!

With love and respect,
Zviad Gamsakhurdia 100

This is only the part of Gamsakhurdia’s address to Abkhazian people. He also called for resisting the “Communist Empire” with its “divide and rule” policy aimed at maintaining its hegemony in the Caucasus. He also offered the argument that an independent Georgia would give Abkhazians much more the Soviet Empire, the main goals of which were the assimilation and russification of all smaller component nations. He also stressed the fact that the Georgians respected the national and cultural rights of Abkhazian people, including “their statehood, their language, their culture, Abkhazian school, Abkhazian theater, and promises to put all the efforts to solving disputes through negotiations”.101

However, despite assurances of the fraternity of the Georgian and Abkhazian peoples, there were also warnings in his address. The warnings were linked to the


101 Ibid.
separatist government of Abkhazia Vladislav Ardzinba’s leadership, whom Gamsakhurdia considered to be a “traitor to his own people” for his desire to separate Abkhazia from Georgia and transfer it to Soviet communist rule. Gamsakhurdia even gave a barely hidden caution to not have great hopes for the arrival of Soviet tanks and asked the Abkhazians to resist the intrigues of procommunist agents and provocateurs, whom he called “historical enemies.”

Still, regarding the Ossetians, Gamsakhurdia’s statements were always harsh. For instance, in a 1991 interview he complained that,

so-called South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast’ (region) is an illegitimate territorial formation which was created by Bolsheviks on the native Georgian land in 1922. During the years of the Soviet power there Georgians became a minority on their own land. Moreover, their rights were infringed and they were discriminated to the level which could be compared with the apartheid.

Of course, the urgency of the abolishment of the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast' on 11th December 1990 is still questionable in terms of its influence on the escalation of the conflict. It looked more like a reaction to the unexpected event (the South Ossetian separatists' decision to leave Georgia and join North Ossetia on 8th of December 1990) rather than a well thought out political action.

The fact that Gamsakhurdia was elected to be the first Georgian President with an overwhelming 87% in 1991, can be well explained by the political climate in the

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102 Ibid.


104 see the Law of the Republic of Georgia on Abolishment of the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast', State Documents, Parliamentary Library of Georgia.
country. According to Jones, the main factors which dominated the Georgians’ mood included “the threat of Georgian disintegration, the fear of Russian military power, and the perceived neglect of Georgian interests.” The growing wave of patriotism found its embodiment in this rebellious and highly patriotic national leader.

Gamsakurdia was also known for being very charismatic, a characteristic which had a certain romantic appeal to some, but certainly not all, Georgians. According to Elizabeth Fuller, “Central to Gamsakhurdia's entire political career is his messianism – his mystic belief that he was divinely appointed by God to lead the Georgian people, and by extension, that Georgia has a divine mission to be a moral example to the rest of the world.”

Gamsakhurdia's inauguration speech of May 26th 1991 is especially revealing:

Let everybody know that we were fighting and still are fighting for the revival of religious and national ideals of our ancestors, as God entrusted Georgia with a great mission. We are fighting with the eternal night of godlessness and injustice. The God protects us on this way and that is why we won. Georgian people will never go on the way of godlessness, crime and terror. The way of Georgian people - is the way of mercy, the way of courage, the way of love, the way of Christ... God is with us! Amen!

In general, Gamsakhurdia's speeches on meetings and demonstrations were considered by many to be very inspirational. He was not just a gifted orator but also a charismatic leader bringing thousands of people to such a level of emotional exaltation that they were ready to follow his every lead, chanting his name as a mantra: Zviadi!


106 Jones, p. 10.

107 Suny, p. 326.

Zviadi! There may be different outcomes of this old familiar phenomenon, to the comparison of a charismatic leader to a 'messiah'. In Georgia it led to the phenomenon called “Zviadism”. There were many people for whom Zviad Gamsakhurdia had not just a political dimension but a mythological one, too. For “zviadists” Gamsakhurdia did not have any weaknesses or faults. Moreover, he had a ‘nimbus’ of supernatural human being which could be put out of space and out of time”, which in the opinion of the prominent Georgian sociologist Jago Kakachishvili shows “the fact of inadequate perception of processes inside the society”. However, he stresses the fact that even without being the ideal president, Gamsakhurdia presented to Georgians hope combined with the romantic, if overstated, idea about ‘bettering’ ourselves in contrast to Shevardnadze’s time, which had brought mostly nihilism.

In the same newspaper we can find the attempts of Georgian contemporary politicians to evaluate the phenomenon of “Zviadism”. According to the member of Parliament and former dissident, Levan Berdzenishvili:

Zviadism is a specific Georgian phenomenon, which contains two hypostases: positive and negative. From the positive point of view, it is an enlightened Georgian nationalism combined with the fight against communism; also, it is an extreme patriotism directed to nation-building (including all the positive steps taken by Gamsakhurdia in that way). The negative side of ‘Zviadism’ is connected with the primitive ideology simply expressed as ‘all Georgians are good’ combined with blind fanaticism and cult of personality of Gamsakhurdia.

Prominent Georgian political scientist Paata Zakhareishvili tries to evaluate ‘Zviadism” as an idea, stating that: “Zviadism is a specific expression of the feudal

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110 Ibid.
111 Ibid.
thinking. Its main component was a provincial fascism, spread of religious and ethnic hatred. The essence of Zviadism is the attempt to make fetish from everything Georgian by turning it into cult using pseudo-mysticism.”

However, behind each idea (no matter how bizarre it seems) there are people who sincerely believe in it for their own reasons. Without these people, whom we might call supporters – or in more extreme cases, fanatics – there would not be such a phenomenon. To understand them better we need to understand their reasons and their realities.

The reasoning of one of them was published in the newspaper Svobdnaja Gruzia, May 13th, 1991, right before the presidential elections in the article “Bare Sword”. Nodar Tsuleiskiri compares Gamsakhurdia with the 'bare sword' of Georgia, which brings hope to friends and horror to enemies. Tsuleiskiri's logic is simple as the idea of Georgian freedom is for him of the utmost nobility and holiness. He believes that Gamsakhurdia has fought bravely and suffered for this idea. He sees not just a leader in Gamsakhurdia but the bravest of warriors, a saint. And he sees himself as a loyal servant of such a warrior, a part of Gamsakhurdia's holy army. Naturally, he does not see any alternative to Gamsakhurdia to be the President of Georgia, the leader of the nation. He is sure that “this is God's will and no free democrat, nor any democrat of any kind and not even any human being on earth can interfere with God's Providence.”

He had no understanding for those who saw those of his persuasion as ‘fanatics’ who, in his view, tried to prevent him and those of similar belief from loving their leader and being loyal to him in body and spirit. He is deeply sure that ”people who try to bring such obstacles cannot be called

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112 Ibid.

real democrats nor be free-thinking personalities, as through their distrust and hesitations (in their choice of the leader) they express their disloyalty to Gamsakhurdia.”

Such expression of devotion to Gamsakhurdia is impressive for its quite feudal manner of thinking. However, it should be emphasized that Gamsakhurdia encouraged this way of thinking, thereby gaining impressive number of followers. The issue of loyalty took a very serious turn during Gamsakhurdia's Presidency, when people with different political views began to be called “enemies of nation” or “agents of [THE] Kremlin.” Gamsakhurdia's aggressively uncompromising standing in politics as well as his demand of unconditional loyalty made the political climate of the country much less favorable to democratic processes.

More and more authoritarian tendencies began to appear during the later days of Gamsakhurdia's presidency. Opposition newspapers were closed, some members of the opposition were arrested (including Chanturia and Tsereteli), and television broadcasting was put under a strict control. Gamsakhurdia's paranoia and different phobias, developed during his dissident years, played an evil joke on him – it blinded him to reality and left him in self-imposed isolation. According to Shalva Amonashvili, the prominent Georgian educator, Gamsakhurdia was also a product of the Soviet System, and as a leader of the state he did not have any experience with the democratic policies. At the end, most Georgians could not forgive him the internal division and international isolation he brought to Georgia. Gamsakhurdia was very critical towards the Bush administration.

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114 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
often stating that “President Bush has a 'double standard' towards Moscow (the Center) and towards 'dissident' republics' as Georgia, questioning their democratic traditions and values.”\textsuperscript{117} Moreover, Gamsakhurdia's role in the escalation of the civil war was crucial. His return to Mingrelia (Westen Georgia) after his overthrow and organization of the center of the military resistance there not only had short-term results such as the escalation of the civil war but also long-term results such as the instability of that region\textsuperscript{118}.

However, his mysterious death gifted him anew with the image of a 'saint', as until his recent burial on the Georgian Pantheon, there were still people who, hoping for the miracle of resurrection, believed that he may appear again. This shows less the desire to see Gamsakurdia as a President but rather the desire of reconciliation with that turbulent and controversial part of the Georgian past.\textsuperscript{119} No matter how negative the evaluation of Gamsakhurdia's actions and behavior as a President might be, there is common agreement on the fact that he was the first democratically elected President of Georgia, a President who at that moment represented Georgian nation’s common hope for becoming an independent and democratic state, a fact at strife with the undemocratic and violent manner through which he was removed from his post.

Now that the personality and policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia have been thoroughly analyzed and explicated, we must return to the second part of the question regarding the preconditions for the negative evaluation of Georgia, widespread

\textsuperscript{117} “Obraschenie k narodu Ameriki, k Prezidentu Bushu, k senatoram I congressmenam”, \textit{Svobodnaja Gruzia}, 10 August 1991.

\textsuperscript{118} Cornell, p. 82.

\textsuperscript{119} “Natsionalnoe primirenie”, \textit{Kavkazski Akcent}, 26 May, 2005.
throughout the Western community in the 1990s, as a 'failed state'. Moreover, as a state torn by violent ethnic conflicts, it is necessary to explore this issue as it is directly connected with the negative perception of nationalism in the post-Soviet states.

In his article “Georgia: Nationalism from under the rubble”, Stephen Jones states that if there is a conflict between representatives of different ethnic group, it should not immediately imply that the violence is also ethnic. According to Jones, “Even if we establish that the violence is ‘ethnic’, the term is used too loosely and blurs the many sources and expressions of the conflict – whether they are employment, representation, participation, the environment or legislative changes that threaten to change the status of the national groups.”  

Jones also comments that Western scholars often hurry to put a country like Georgia in one ‘room’ with the Balkans countries, implying that “Georgia’s history is a conflict, and Georgians cannot shake their bloody past or inclination to violence.”

Such opinions often are created though a focus on ethnic conflicts that ignores other essential components of the culture and history. Moreover, it implies that Georgian nationalism did not change through history, as if the forces of modernization as well as the dramatic changes the country went through during the last century, and even the last decade, could not influence that medieval image. If we look back to the 18th and 19th centuries, however, we can see that Georgian Orthodox nationalism was focused mostly

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121 Ibid., p. 2.
on cultural issues, on education, and on the protection and promotion of the Georgian language, literature, religion and history.  

Jones demonstrates the typical Westerner’s understanding of the nature of nationalism in the post-Soviet (or post-communist) states with a 1998 statement made in Bucharest by the former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott:

“We can all say good riddance to Leninist-Marxist dictatorship, to the Iron Curtain and to the self-styled geniuses who ruled by brute force and primal fear. But the collapse of these modern evils has, in many parts of the post-Communist world, been accompanied by the eruption of medieval struggles over blood and culture. From Bosnia, Croatia, Albania, and Kosovo in the Balkans to Chechnya, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh in the Caucasus, more Europeans have died violently in the past five years than in the previous forty-five.”

Jones is absolutely correct that one of the common mistakes here is related to focusing on the words ‘medieval’ and ‘blood’. This narrow and overly simplistic view will never result in a sufficiently deep understanding of the quite complex nature of nationalism in this particular multicultural region (Caucasus). This approach can also lead to a misunderstanding of the nationalism developing during Soviet times. It was not frozen and had different trajectories of development mostly connected not with the distant past, but rather with the present, a present marked by Soviet policies.

To return to an earlier question, why should the notions of nationalism and violence go hand in hand, especially in the case of Georgia? In this regard, we must again defer to Jones: “Nationalism – talking more generally- is no more inherently violent than most other ideologies”. There may be different reasons for such Western

\[122\] Suny, p. 45
\[123\] Jones, p. 3
\[124\] Jones, p. 4
interpretations of nationalism in post-Communist countries. However, one of them could be a misunderstanding of the culture and traditions of the Caucasus, which for centuries was a ‘melting pot’ for different cultures coexisting peacefully.

We should not forget that the time of the ethnic conflicts in Georgia was a time of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of a new independent nation state – the Republic of Georgia. The fight for independence was a fight against one of the most strongest and most brutal ideologies of the 20th century – against communism – and against the totalitarian state representing this ideology – the Soviet Union. The instigation of violence was in the interest of the Communist Party hardliners, who did not want to give up that part of their empire. They tried to exploit fully the ethnic card to push public opinion to the point where the system would not be blamed for social injustice and economic crises, but the “immediate neighbors”\textsuperscript{125}. Furthermore, as Georgia was one of the first Soviet Republics (together with the Baltic Republics) to express its desire to leave the Soviet Union, it experienced very tough and brutal measures during the fight for independence.

One such measure directly responsible for ethnic conflicts and violence was very well explained by Svetlana Chervonnaya in her book on the origins of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. She gives as an example the creation of inter-fronts (International Fronts) by the KGB as an opposition to popular national movements in Georgia (also the Baltic Republics), using a reliable source for the explanation of such polices – the statement of the last head of the KGB, V. Bakatin:

\textsuperscript{125} Chervonnaya, p. 54.
The Security Committee was at the source of the formation of those international fronts in the Republics that displayed obstinacy in their relations with the Center. The vicious logic of divide and rule stimulated the splitting of these republics into two irreconcilable camps, leading to an intensification of social tension. The following scheme worked: If you don’t want to obey, then you will get an interfront instead, which will call for strikes, raise the question of the frontiers of the republic and the legitimacy of the government bodies elected there. Then the activity of these interfronts was presented by the Security Committee as the manifestation of the whole nation’s will.126

Georgia, as a multicultural state less ethnically homogeneous than Armenia or Azerbaijan yet with more longing for independence was a perfect ground (target) for this. The grievances of Armenians in Javakheti region, Azeries in Marneuli region, Adjarians in Ajarian AO, and Mingrels in Mingrelia were used in full. However, the most promising were Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In the case of Abkhazia, the protagonists of the Soviet rule wrote the infamous “Abkhazian Letter” (July 17th, 1988), the main idea of which was the separation from Georgia and moving towards the direct rule from the Moscow Communist Party authority. One of the main justifications was the resistance of the local Abkhazian authorities to Georgian desire of independence and anti-Soviet propaganda, emphasizing that all this (e.g., Georgian anti-sovietism, nationalism) is “against the political frame of mind of the Abkhazian population which is loyal to the ideas of October, Leninism and internationalism.”127

Chervonnaya is likely correct in her assessment that the support for Abkhazian separatists came directly from the Soviet high authorities as Abkhazia had the most favorable conditions for it: the presence of the military base of the Armed Forces of the

126 Ibid, p.53
127 Ibid., p.59
USSR, a direct border with Russia, and, very importantly, resort service clans of the Soviet Riviera (including large and fancy governmental sanatoria for the Party elite), which were formed mostly from the local population. According to Chervonnaya, "Thousands of people whose income and well-being were directly connected with the prosperity of the ‘communist paradise’ proved to be a reliable potential reserve."\textsuperscript{128} This is one more point in support of the argument that we need to look at different political and economical factors which played a role in the formation of the contemporary conflict, instead of focusing just on pure ethnic ‘blood and past driven’ feuds.

One more fact should be brought in support of the above-mentioned argument, a fact also connected with the next chapter’s issue of ‘uncivil society’ groups in Georgia. Interestingly, during the first stages of the development of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict in the middle of July 1989, after the first localized armed clashes in Sukhumi, the escalation of the conflict was stopped by local mafia, for whom the war in the middle of the summer vacation season was a real catastrophe. According to Chervonnaya, "The conflict was localized without much noise, but not in the rooms of party authorities, nor at the meetings of the leaders of unofficial unions of the opposing sides, but in a coffee shop near Sukhumi harbor – at the gathering of thieves on the 19\textsuperscript{th} of July 1989."\textsuperscript{129}

This is not to argue that there were no real national tensions in Abkhazia or South Ossetia. There were enough of them, often extant in the not-too-distant past, during the years of formation and consolidation of the Soviet Empire, through the conducting of unjustified and brutal policies towards different ethnic minorities, through the re-defining

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., p. 65

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid, p. 70
of the national borders of the Soviet Republics and Autonomies according to the principle ‘divide and rule’. It needs to be emphasized that it was quite easy to use it in the absence of the political culture, social culture of dialog, etc. with the particular goal – to escalate ethnic conflicts to keep the system – to keep the Soviet Empire (at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s).

Unfortunately, where the ideological war was failing, the Soviet military was brought in for help, leading to violence. April 9, 1989 was a breaking point from which it became clear that the Center (Moscow) had chosen the old style of military intervention against people of the rebellious Georgian republic through the brutal massacre of absolutely peaceful demonstrators who were holding slogans such as “USSR – prison of the people” and “Away with the Communist Regime.”\textsuperscript{130} And again, they were the Communist Party hardliners and military reactionaries, opponents of the perestroika, such as Yegor Ligachev (Second Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party), Viktor Chebrikov (Chief of KGB) and Marshal Dmitri Yazov (Defense Minister), who took that fatal decision.\textsuperscript{131} They were the same people who later supported and organized the August Putsch in Russia in 1991.

April’s Tragedy became also the turning point where it became clear that Georgia would fight for independence till the end. Moreover, it defined the radical character of the nationalist pro-independent movement in Georgia, which won elections just eight months later by openly proclaiming its main agenda of seceding from the USSR. Unfortunately, it also defined the future policy of first the Soviet and later the Russian authorities

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., p. 28.
towards Georgia – the instigation of the ethnic conflicts and war-like situations with the full military support and guidance from Russian military authorities.\textsuperscript{132} It was not the nationalism that brought the violence and bloodshed to this multicultural country, where for centuries people of different ethnicities and religions used to live in peace with each other; it was the last (but not the very last) convulsion of the dying totalitarian system which brought the seeds of war and conflict in its desire to preserve itself for any cost.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
The experiences of post-Soviet countries show the difficulties of achieving liberal democracy in post-totalitarian states. According to Carothers, different attitudes are usually held toward this process depending on the (post-Soviet) country, ranging from categorical denial – “democracy is not for us” (e.g., Belarus) – to hypocritical acceptance – “let’s pretend we have a democracy” in order to get foreign aid (e.g., Central Asia). Still, there are some countries where many people understand that deep changes are necessary if democracy is desired yet opt to set it as a long-term goal (e.g., Armenia and Azerbaijan). Whether they are closer to “feckless pluralism” or “dominant-power politics,” elites as well as the public agree that their regimes “are unstable and unconsolidated.” Carothers explains why it is difficult to describe such nations accurately: “[It] is much easier to label something that looks like a finished product than something that is in constant change.”

Perhaps we could call these cases “failing transitions,” but such transitions are often connected with the failing of structurally weak states. In some cases it is difficult to know if the failure of democracy or the failure of the state itself is of greater concern. Regarding such “gray zone” countries, Carothers argues that the democratization process should not merely focus on “how to defeat tyrants” or “how to introduce good

134 Ibid., p. 25
135 Ibid.
136 Ibid., p. 26
legislation,” but rather on “finding methods for dealing with structural weaknesses such as a failing state or the negative legacy of an undemocratic political culture.”\textsuperscript{137}

Regarding the precedent set by Western countries, Zakaria reminds us of the long process undergone by those countries during their development from liberal autocracies to liberal democracies. One main reason for their successful development was that by the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century most of these countries had adopted the main components of constitutional liberalism, such as the rule of law, private property rights, the separation of powers, and free speech. This difference leads him to conclude that constitutional liberalism led to democracy, not vice versa.\textsuperscript{138}

If Zakaria’s belief is correct, it is unsurprising that the most popular form of the Western promotion of democracy, or “democracy assistance,” initially failed in most post-Soviet countries. For instance, the first Western political consultants who came to post-Soviet Georgia saw the first task of democratization as being the development of proper political parties. According to local experts such as Nodia, however, “the failure of the attempt to build parties artificially, with almost nothing but outside help, was that it was like trying to build a house from the roof downward.”\textsuperscript{139} Based on her broad research on the development of civil society in Georgia, Hamilton points out that even though international donor organizations developed their best practices through work in other developing countries, in post-Soviet Georgia the situation was quite different. She argues that “there are also reasons why even applying ‘best practices’ from the development toolbox, in environments that are profoundly different to the various environments in

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., p. 26
\textsuperscript{138} Fareed Zakaria,” The rise of illiberal democracy”, \textit{Foreign Affairs}, (1997) #11.12, p. 108.
\textsuperscript{139} Ghia Nodia, \textit{The Process of Constitutional reform in Georgia} (Tbilisi: IDEA, 2005), 54.
which that toolbox was put together, would not produce the outcomes that are aspired to.”\textsuperscript{140} The logical consequence is that no outside help will be able to achieve sustainable success until local grassroots forces become actively involved in the democratization process.

Still, the existence of natural processes does not imply a smooth or painless transition. The development of civil society in Georgia underwent different, and dramatic, stages. Wheatley has defined the four main criteria that civil society must satisfy to represent citizens’ interests most effectively: “Organizational capacity, autonomy from the state, adherence to ‘civic’ values rather than private interests and wide public participation.”\textsuperscript{141} Wheatley insists that during the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s, Georgian society failed to meet most of these criteria.

The causes of this failure are rooted in the Soviet legacy, which had been marked by an intentionally ineffective civil society; as one observer wrote, “it was not in the Communist Party’s interest to have any social subsystems independent from public authority.”\textsuperscript{142} There were civil organizations such as different writers’ unions, composers’ unions, the Komsomol youth organization, and trade unions, but they were not truly voluntary, and in any case they depended completely on the state, serving as channels for the promoting and conducting of state and party policies. In short, civil


\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., p. 152
society failed because it was not truly ‘civil’. Rather, the main interests represented were those of privileged minorities and elites.

This failure led to the appearance of the first dissident groups, who were primarily interested in the protection of the respective national culture and language. It is telling that the most active such groups were in Soviet republics where national identity had been better established before communist rule, such as the Baltic States, Armenia, Ukraine, and Georgia. As discussed in Chapter One, many of these groups later played an important role during the disintegration of the USSR as well as during the escalation of the ethnic conflicts. However, in the case of Georgia, Nodia claims that “the dissident movement never became strong. Moreover, small groups that did emerge were mainly inspired by the idea of national independence, attaching lesser importance to the dissemination of liberal ideas.”

A further group playing a crucial role in Georgia both during and after the collapse of the USSR was the criminal underworld. This was mostly connected with the black market and the ‘shadow economy’, however, Wheatley has argued that this underworld had its own culture, ‘code of ethics’, and influence supported by its own financial resources. In Georgia this force ultimately played a fundamental role in the formation of the new state based on a variation of the historical concept of a lashkari, or “volunteer force,” dating back to medieval times, combined with the Soviet-era criminal underground known as vori v zakone (Russian) or kurdoba (Georgian). The final result

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144 Wheatley, p. 22.

145 Prior to Russian occupation in 1801, there had been no standing army, and Georgian kings relied on volunteer detachments in times of trouble (See Wheatley, p. 23).
of this combination was the infamous paramilitary grouping called *Mkhedrioni*, “the Horsemen” (or “Knights”), led by the former bank robber, playwright, and theater critic, Jaba Ioseliani. Most recruits were patriotic young men whose romantic view of the criminal underworld gave them direction in their rebelling against the Soviet system. The majority had no criminal records, but the organization was certainly financed by the criminal underground. Eventually, this formation played a significant role in the escalation of ethnic conflicts as well as in the civil war discussed in the previous chapter.

The question complex that remains to be addressed is as follows: Was Georgia’s securing of independence in the beginning of the 1990s a revolutionary change or rather just an inevitable result of the final apocalyptic years of the Soviet Union? Did it happen "from above" (the replacement of the political elites) or "from the bottom up" (the restructuring of the entire social structure)? One perspective is offered by Hanf and Nodia, who argue that "the change was prepared not by the strengthening of one elite group (or class) at the expense of another, but by general loss of the legitimacy by the political regime, the process generated by the ruling nomenklatura itself."\(^{146}\) This loss of legitimacy led to a social transformation in which the old people were replaced with new people.

As can be seen from the previous discussion, the underground elements of society such as dissidents and criminal groups surfaced from the social and political chaos. Still, many of these ‘new people’ alluded to by Hanf and Nodia hailed from elite subgroups rather than from true grassroots movements. Many were from the capital, often belonging

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to the liberal 'intelligentsia' who earlier had enjoyed the privileges of their position in Soviet times as well. Let us take as an example the first President of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdi. His father, Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, was the most famous Georgian writer of the 20th century, an academic and member of the Union of Georgian Writers. He and his family had access to a level of privilege certainly unfamiliar to most Georgians. Zviad Gamsakhurdi, too, had a distinguished academic career. Despite his dissident activities, his family connections and prestige enabled him to avoid to an extent the serious punishments inflicted upon others during the Soviet era.

Hanf and Nodia trace the social transformation in Georgia to the mutation of Communist ideology’s goal of creating a classless society.\textsuperscript{147} There was no special social structure, but there were “elements that later transformed into specific divisions according to their relationship with the power in general and the Party in particular.”\textsuperscript{148} Thus, it was natural that the social groupings capable of representing and promoting their interests were closer to power, forming a kind of Soviet elite known as the \textit{nomenklatura}, while the remainder of the supposedly egalitarian society was a powerless mass. As a result, the whole idea of the ruling status of the working class proved to be illusory.

Hanf and Nodia also offer the remarkable argument that under Stalin, “the hierarchically layered bureaucratic elite that actually ran the country was in constant flux owing to purges.”\textsuperscript{149} In other words, this elite class did not have the time to be transformed into a real elite with the hereditary transfer of privileges, property, wealth, and security. However, they also claim that after de-Stalinization the elite became more

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{147} Ibid., p. 45
\item \textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{149} Ibid, p. 46
\end{itemize}
stable and hereditary, leading it to flourish during the time of Brezhnev (1964-1982). Furthermore, they argue that “the overcentralization of recruitment to the elite encouraged clientelism and patrimonialism, thus encouraging types of social relations closer to traditional rather than modern society.”¹⁵⁰ This is especially evident in Georgia’s case as a small country often located on the periphery of the great empires (the Persian-, Ottoman-, and Russian Empires as well as the Soviet Union). Another difference may be attributable to traditions in Georgian society; kinship and blood bonds combined with ethnicity and religion proved much stronger than in her Slavic neighbors (e.g., Russia and the Ukraine). According to Rondeli, Georgian values were the values of traditional rural communities with family-type networks based on bonds of mutual trust, honor, and obligation. The concept of honor was especially important, forming a “fusion of work life and public life.”¹⁵¹ When such mutual obligation is made in the ‘patron-client’ relationships, it is dishonorable to break it. Moreover, the consequences of dishonorable behavior have traditionally been very harsh, ranging from vendetta to social rejection.

In such societies there is often a strong resistance to ideologies imposed from the outside; this is especially true in Georgia regarding those posing potential threats to the country during the Soviet era, yet this is in seeming conflict with the fact that in 1982, 826 out of every 10,000 Georgians were members of the Communist Party, compared with 774 Russians, only 316 Moldavians and a mere 268 Tadjiks.¹⁵² There is no conflict, however, as this was not due to a special Georgian predisposition to communism but

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 50
¹⁵² Theodor Hanf, Gia Nodia, Georgia Lurching to Democracy. (Baden Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2001), 46.
rather because the structure of the nomenklatura fit Georgian cultural norms and
traditions, which also made the Georgian Communist Party one of the most corrupt in the
USSR. The longevity of Shevardnadze’s rule offers excellent evidence for this
assertion.\textsuperscript{153} Two years after the Soviet Union collapsed, the system officially changed to
a new, democratic (in theory) system, but the country was still run in the ‘best traditions’
of the old communist rule, relying on old cadres (or even children of these old cadres).\textsuperscript{154}
Even the underground criminal world was closely connected with Party elites, co-existing
with mutual benefits in that ‘kingdom of distorting mirrors’.

Despite the complete chaos, violence, and instability in the beginning of the 1990s,
the period of national mobilization was a period not just of national awakening but also
of the awakening and transforming of civil society. Riding this wave of national
liberation, the people awoke, and the passive gray mass of Soviet times turned into a
barely manageable, proactive force for social change. Sociologists gave different names
to this phenomenon, including “national hysteria” and “mass psychosis,” but the fact was
that people had begun to believe that dreams could come true and that they could achieve
goals such as the long-awaited freedom from Soviet rule (or the Russian Empire). If
several people gathered in front of any governmental institution with any agenda and
loudly proclaimed their statements, a crowd would quickly gather to discuss the issues at

\textsuperscript{153} Eduard Shevardnadze: 1972-1985 was the First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, 1985 -1991
– Minister of the Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union, 1992 – 1995 - the Chair of the Georgian

\textsuperscript{154} For instance, Nino Burjanadze, former Chairperson of the Parliament of Georgia, (2001-2008), a
daughter of the rich businessmen, Anzor Burjanadze, who made his fortune during Soviet times.
length. As Hanf and Nodia put it, “pluralism revealed itself finally in its most primeval form.”¹⁵⁵

Many foreign experts question whether Georgian pluralism is indeed democratic. Wheatley makes the compelling argument that pluralism in Georgia was unintentional, given the “cacophony of actors entering the political arena in the early 1990s.”¹⁵⁶ It is notable, however, that even during pre-independence elections for Georgia’s Republican Supreme Soviet in 1990, it became evident that a dramatic shift from the previously completely controlled elections to more free elections was underway. The number of parties in Parliamentary elections in 1991 was striking: Forty-seven parties stood for election. There was “a high degree [of] party fragmentation, indicating a lack of a social base for most of these parties, many of which were consequently relegated to little more than clubs of intellectuals, narrow groups united around one or several individuals”.¹⁵⁷ This trend could be demonstrated best by the character of Gamsakhurdia’s rule and continued to an extent during Shevardnadze’s time in office, albeit with some ‘modifications’. At the same time, this phenomenon became one of the key elements making Georgia a weak state. Way calls this version of pluralism “pluralism by default”, defining it as the “inability of incumbents to concentrate political control by maintaining elite unity, controlling the media and/or using force against opponents.”¹⁵⁸

It may seem less strange, then, that during the national mobilization in the 1990s, after all governmental institutions had failed, the criminal paramilitary groups took

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 61
¹⁵⁶ Wheatley, p. 40
¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 135
¹⁵⁸ Lucan Way, Pluralism by default : challenges of authoritarian state-building in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine (Glasgow : Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, 2003), 54.
charge of the country. It should be stressed that the romantic attitude among the younger generation toward the criminal world developed in stark contrast to the cynicism of the Komsomol youth organization, to which most of the young people applying had done so merely to achieve a better position in government. Many saw it as more honest and noble to follow the unwritten, but fairer, laws of the criminal world, and it was both risky and very appealing to the younger generations.\textsuperscript{159} Criminal- and paramilitary groups increased in strength as the state structures grew weaker in post-Soviet Georgia. Finally, at least for a while, the old elite structures were replaced by these new organizations. The effects were mostly tragic for the country’s development, including civil war, ethnic violence and a dangerous symbiosis of coercive governmental ministries (e.g., Interior, Security, Defense) and criminal structures.

As Tevzadze writes,

Corrupt attitudes and criminal practices arise from, and flourish in, a culture in which corruption is normalized and honesty is marginalized. This set of beliefs and practices – rooted in pre-Soviet habits, entrenched during 70 years of Soviet rule, and reinforced during the post-Soviet collapse and power struggle – has undermined Georgians’ efforts to build a vibrant democracy, a strong economy, and a free society.\textsuperscript{160}

When Tevzadze refers to pre-Soviet habits, he mentions the \textit{abreks}, who were legendary figures in the history of the Caucasus. These were most often men who had committed some type of serious crime and had run to the mountains to escape a vendetta. Abreks usually gave an oath to avoid any civilized life, breaking any connections with

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., p. 51

their relatives and friends to conduct the life of a lonely fighter. In the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries (the period of Russian expansion in the Caucasus), abreks became fighters for the motherland and defenders of the oppressed local population.\textsuperscript{161} Tevzadze presents the description of abreks by historian John F. Baddeley (1908) compiled during his travels in the Caucasus in the 1890s: “Cattle lifting, highway robbery and murder were, in this strange code, counted deeds of honor; … these, together with fighting against any foe, but especially the hated Russians, were the only pursuits deemed worthy of a grown man.”\textsuperscript{162}

The idea of criminals as resistance heroes became imbedded in Georgian culture, and such men were seen as paragons of honor, bravery and manhood. Later, during Soviet times, the notion of such heroes changed into the “thief-in-law” (\textit{Kurdoba} in Georgian, or \textit{vori v zakone} in Russian). However, these figures were far removed from ‘Robin Hood’ imagery; they were very important criminal leaders following a specific honor code: “Never associate with State authorities, never work, always support your fellow thieves, [and] support the thief treasury.”\textsuperscript{163}

Tevzadze argues that Soviet propaganda helped to idealize the myth of the “noble fighter” to reach dissident networks (which were much more dangerous for the system) and use these connections in the criminal world for diverse purposes. The prominent Georgian criminologist Georgi Glonti believes that the “thieves-in-law” tradition has its

\textsuperscript{161} Abreks are often mentioned in Lermontov’s novel “Hero of our time”, in Lev Tolstoy’s novel “Hadji Murat”, etc.

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., p. 11.

roots in the years of Stalin’s camps. The Georgians who returned from the camps spread this tradition in Georgia. Glonti points out that,

For the young people of Georgia the “thief” tradition became a symbol of freedom and independence, and the “thieves-in-law” a symbol of secret authority. The thieves in law were mediators in arguments and conflicts, they were advisors and many law-abiding citizens looked to them for protection. The “thieves’” income was made up of their dues, as well as other criminal methods, although the “thieves” themselves did not work.164

The Georgian part of the “thieves-in-law” immediately appreciated the possibilities of the free market economy following the perestroika of the 1980s, which is unsurprising as the Georgian “shadow economy” was one of the strongest and most developed in the former Soviet Union. They came to the conclusion that their ‘laws’ also needed to be changed. According to Glonti, the main pro-reform person in Georgia was the most famous “thief-in-law,” Jaba Ioseliani, who was active in “taking control of the shadow business and establishing corrupt connections with government authorities, preferring to adapt the American (Western) model of organized crime.”165 The idea was adapted to his needs and even became popular beyond Georgian borders (former Soviet Union). Glonti notes that “according to the statistics at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in 1990 the USSR had 750 “thieves-in–law,” 33% of which were Russian, 31% Georgian, and 36% other nationalities.”166

As mentioned in the previous chapter, it was Jaba Ioseliani who created the Mkhedrioni organization in 1989 with around 5000 members. The ritual of admission

164 Ibid, p. 74.
165 Ibid, p. 75.
166 Ibid.
into this organization is in some ways reminiscent of the initiation into a medieval order, as its members had to swear oaths under an icon of St. George to protect the motherland, the Georgian people and the Georgian Church from enemies. The religious facet is less surprising considering that the organization took its name after a famous Georgian guerilla group that had fought Persian and Ottoman intruders.167

The idea of being a noble defender of the country brought even more young people to the Mkhedrioni after Georgia’s independence. The Mkhedrioni endowed their leader with significant political power, as from 1991-1995 Ioseliani was a Deputy in the Georgian Parliament and an advisor to Shevardnadze (until his arrest in 1995 for the attempt on the President’s life). Thus, Ioseliani’s earlier plan was quickly implemented, and what Glonti calls “the indoctrination of professional criminals into all spheres of life: political, business and executive” took place.

As the Georgian political agenda in 1991 had also come to fruition through Georgia’s independence, the "political criminal societies” – so named by Glonti – became widespread in Georgia. For greater clarity we must turn to Glonti for his description of such societies:

Direct crime activities towards the government with the aim of taking over or weakening political power and obtaining control over the more profitable economic areas. These organizations take part in terrorist acts, contract killings, intimidation, blackmail, organize mass disorder, contraband and trade weapons and drugs… Usually these groups are ideological and aim to widen their influence.168


168 Ibid, p. 69.
Even though the first Georgian President (Gamsakhurdia) had relatively strong support from the populace, it was not enough. The old Soviet state institutions – for lack of a better word – collapsed, and the new had not yet been created or were ineffective. Furthermore, arriving on the wave of nationalism were many groups that in normal situations would likely lack credibility in the eyes of society. In that particular situation and under an ominous cloud of perceived threats from Russia and ethnic minorities, such formations found their way relatively easily into the state structures. This explains why the weakness of the re-born state – which did not even have its own professional army – allowed such political-criminal societies to be involved in the state structures. Between 1990 and 1995 paramilitary groups such as the Mkhedrioni led by the “thief-in-law” Ioseliani and the National Guard led by Tengiz Kitovani took power into their own hands. They played a major role in the overthrow of Zviad Gamsakhurdia in 1991 in what was called the “Christmas coup.” Glonti presents the list of the diversions and terrorist acts committed by these political-crime societies:

Organized military groups in South Ossetia and Abkhazia committed crimes such as rape and theft in these and other areas; 1993 saw armed revolt in Mingrelia under the leadership of Lota Kobaliya; 1994 was marked by mass disorder and the capture of a television center; in 1993-95 electricity lines were diverted; they controlled all profitable aspects of economic export and distribution of oil products; they organized a series of political killings (G. Chanturia, S. Khabeishvili, G. Gulua) and an attempt of President Shevardnadze’s life in 1995; and they organized a large number of kidnappings.  

The leaders of these paramilitary formations knew that they did not have enough legitimacy in people’s eyes to have claims to be the official leaders of the Georgian state, especially after the violent overthrow of the first democratically elected Georgian

169 Ibid, p. 70
President. Therefore, they invited Eduard Shevardnadze to fulfill the role of state leader (1992). Shevardnadze was probably the best option for many reasons. First, he was a perfect fit in terms of his reputation as a progressive democratic political figure (the former hero of perestroika), as the very unreasonable moves of the former president, Gamsakhurdia, had damaged Georgia’s reputation in the international arena. In the near future Shevardnadze’s international connections, gained during perestroika, had positive results, bringing Georgia to the attention of Western governments and international aid agencies. Second, inside the country, which was exhausted by the economic and political crises, people yearned for the calm, if stagnant, times of the 1970s-1980s, when Shevardnadze had been the First Secretary of the Georgian Communist party and Georgia had one of the highest standards of living in the Soviet Union.

In March of 1992, Shevardnadze became the Chairman of the state council of provisional government.\textsuperscript{170} His position was by no means secure, depending heavily on the support of Ioseliani and Kitovani. Kitovani was even appointed the Minister of Defense in 1992.\textsuperscript{171} Each of these sides tried to dominate the other, and the situation climaxed in August 1992, when Kitovani moved troops to Abkhazia without Shevardnadze’s approval. His initial goal was to free government officials kept hostage in Western Georgia by Gamsakhurdia’s supporters.\textsuperscript{172} However, the agenda changed quickly: The new goal became the seizure of Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia. Shevardnadze commanded the troops to withdraw, but his orders were ignored, leading to

\textsuperscript{170} Nodia, p. 37

\textsuperscript{171} Wheatly, p. 31

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid, p. 32
the biggest failure of Georgian policy yet to unfold: The war resulting in the loss of Abkhazia.

This resulted in Georgia being sundered by the civil war between the Gamsakhurdia loyalists in western Georgia and by ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; Shevardnadze had to turn to Russia for help. Even after this dramatic failure and its resulting losses for Georgia, Shevardnadze was not able to dismiss Kitovani as a Defense Minister. Shevardnadze knew that he needed to remove these independent powers to consolidate his own. Through complex and drastic measures he managed to decrease the power of these groups. It was easier to reduce the power of the Mkhedrioni as they had increased their terrorizing of the Georgian population. Besides, the measures used by the Mkhedrioni in their fight against Gamsakhurdia’s supporters in Western Georgia were highly criticized by human rights organizations. In 1995, an attempt on Shevardnadze’s life led to the arrest and imprisonment of Ioseliani and the dismissal of the Mkhedrioni.173 In May 1993 Shevardnadze finally dismissed Kitovani from the post of Defense Minister. Kitovani organized a National Front for the liberation of Abkhazia, and in the winter of 1995 he made his last attempt to march on Abkhazia (with around 800 armed men). He was stopped by police, brought back to Tbilisi, and sent to prison for eight years for organizing an armed revolt.174

Shevardnadze did ultimately consolidate his power (he was elected president in 1995 with 70% of the vote) by gradually reducing the power of the paramilitary groups (especially in the outlying regions), by bringing back the former allies from old

173 Ibid, p. 33
174 Ibid, p. 34
and by giving almost unrestricted powers to influential ministries (the Ministries of the Interior and of State Security) – this implied the regaining of authority over the state (a stronger state). This proved to be an illusion. According to Stefes, “Shevardnadze relied on the same strategy he had already employed during the 1970s: building informal networks and counterbalancing the dominant groups – instead of strengthening the formal state institutions.”¹⁷⁵ It is thus unsurprising that this strategy failed completely. It became clear in the early 2000s that Shevardnadze simply could not control these different groups due to the overall weakness of the state authority; at the same time, he lost influence in the eyes of the population as well as in the eyes of the international community, which dramatically decreased the amount of international financial aid being sent to Georgia.

Shevardnadze made attempts to expand the bureaucratic structures, but a larger bureaucratic state apparatus does not always mean a stronger one; there was neither enough financial and social support nor 'check and balances'. According to Stefes, “The weakness of political authority in Georgia caused a vicious circle of weak leadership over formal structures and decentralization of the system of corruption. The disintegration of the Georgian system of corruption into competing clans prevented Shevardnadze to establish unswerving sway over the formal state institutions.”¹⁷⁶

The corruption in the state apparatus became widespread and closely connected to the criminal world. According to Glonti, the bureaucratic structures took part in the


¹⁷⁶ Glonti, p.65
following criminal activities: “Plundering humanitarian aid and credit of foreign countries and international organizations; fraud in the area of privatization; monopolizing banks; participation in oil production and smuggling cigarettes and alcohol; and tax evasion.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 71} The World Bank reported that “three-fourth of the national budget – US $1.5 billion in tax revenue- was lost in 2001 alone to nonpayment of taxes, and the price of avoiding these taxes involved direct payments of between US$75 and US$ 105 million to state officials.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 79}

Corruption became an increasingly corrosive force among Georgian police in the 1990s. The Georgian populace even invented differentiating characteristics and terminology for the corrupted. There were the so-called “grass-eaters”, road police on the hunt for drivers; the stopped drivers were pressured for bribes in the range of 10-100 Georgian Lari (GEL), or $7-$70 USD. Some would wring relatively small amounts of money from Bazroba, or “street market shopkeepers,” or just closed their eyes to the daily racketeering in the markets to be paid later by the racketeers themselves. According to Tevdoradze, a member of parliament, “thieves-in-law pay about US $ 2,000 per month to neighborhood police for the right to operate freely in their territory.”\footnote{Ibid, p.24} There were also the more dangerous corrupt lawmen called “meat-eaters,” who profited from drug trafficking, human trafficking, and gambling. According to Tevzadze, the extent of organized police corruption in Georgia became evident on 18 June 2002, when a British Banker, Peter Show, was kidnapped:

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{Ibid., p. 71}
\footnote{Ibid., p. 79}
\footnote{Ibid, p.24}
\end{footnotesize}
Masked abductors dressed in police and military uniforms seized Peter Shaw, a banker who was working as a consultant for the European Union at the time of his kidnapping, on June 18 in central Tbilisi. Several police officers allegedly witnessed the abduction but took no action to intervene, according to a report on Georgian television June 27. The kidnapping touched off recrimination within the Georgian government. State Security Minister Valeri Khaburdzania went so far as to issue a June 25 statement alleging that unnamed Interior Ministry officials were involved in the abduction. State Minister Avtandil Jorbenadze reached a similar conclusion, saying the evidence points to "collusion between the criminal underworld and representatives of official structures."\textsuperscript{180}

The government efforts to find Shaw initially failed. It would ultimately require the efforts of EU officials to show results, as they threatened to stop the €45 million aid program to Georgia until Shaw was found. Finally, Shaw was freed by a special armed release operation conducted in Pankisi Gorge, where Shaw had been kept chained underground in early November.\textsuperscript{181}

Unfortunately, the pattern of kidnapping was similar to several other kidnappings of foreign businessmen in Georgia in the 1990s and 2000s, which led many to conclude that the police had been involved from the start. The Georgian criminologist Glonti commented on the situation: “Shevardnadze has enough control of the police to stay in power, but not enough to really fight against crime.”\textsuperscript{182} A further, even more shocking situation demonstrates that the government of Georgia really did not have enough power to fight the criminal world. In the summer of 2003, four UN observers participating in the monitoring of the truce between Georgia and Abkhazia in the Kodori Gorge were


\textsuperscript{181} Pankisi Gorge is located in the mountainous northeastern region of Georgia and bordering with Chechnya, was one of the most dangerous regions in Georgia out of the government control. was a base for drug, arms and human trafficking, where Chechen rebels were hiding using their connections with the local population of Kists (ethnically close to Chechens).

\textsuperscript{182} Ibid, p.8.
kidnapped. Surprisingly, they were released during the next several days without any payment. Even more surprisingly, the next day Ezmar Kvitsiani, the president’s representative in the Kodori Gorge, gave an interview on national television in which he “praised Tariel Oniani – one of the most influential criminals in Georgia, for his help in the resolving the kidnapping.”

The population of Georgia grew so accustomed to this abuse of police power and widespread corruption of the state bureaucracy that fatalist attitudes became widespread. According to a Georgian Opinion Research national survey released in June 2002, “70 percent of the public is ready to give up basic moral values and to give or take bribes to solve their problems,” showing a high level of moral deterioration in the society and the level of growth in the “culture of illegality,” which led people to take corruption and criminal activity for granted.

The informal economy in Georgia reached almost 70% in 2002. Poverty grew. The highest standards of living were enjoyed by corrupt government officials or criminal leaders. It was already a well known fact that the misappropriation of international credits and foreign aid was a very popular practice. For instance, according to Niko Oniani, (Head of the Georgian Anti-Corruption Center), “the higher officials at the Ministry for Fuel and Energy embezzled about 380 million USD that were earmarked for the

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184 Ibid, p. 10
185 Ibid.
reconstruction of the Georgian energy sector, amounting to about half of all the foreign aid given for the reconstruction of Georgia’s energy sector.\textsuperscript{186}

The systematic corruption in Georgia had a very negative influence on the transition to a democratic system. Not only did it undermine the state and governmental authority, it also threatened the development of the civil society. According to Stefes, “in Georgia the corrupt system has arguably buried the formal channels of interest representation.”\textsuperscript{187} The phenomenon of corruption and the activity of criminal, even mafia-style networks can also be traced to the vacuum between society and state.\textsuperscript{188} Joseph LaPalombara's writings regarding Italian democracy are also relevant to Georgia: “The patron-client relations are used as key channels through which ordinary citizens can make their needs and demands felt and can actually resist bureaucratic power.”\textsuperscript{189} During Soviet times, these ‘channels’ were the only mechanisms through which ordinary citizens could articulate their discontent. Moreover, Hamilton explains that for those with access, corruption during the Soviet era in Georgia “was used publicly as a way of buying a certain amount of private freedom.”\textsuperscript{190} In sum, corruption in Georgia served to improve communications and relieve societal pressures during the Soviet area.

Still, such channels held dangers for an emerging democracy during the state-building process. Hamilton argues that the nurturing and maintaining of such corrupt and

\textsuperscript{186} Stefes, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid, p. 122.
\textsuperscript{190} Kate Hamilton, “Constructing an NGO Sector in Transitional Contexts: The Reach of NGO-Donor ‘Partnerships’ in Post-Soviet Georgia”, \textit{IDS Bulletin, (Vol. 31, No 3, 2000) 51.}
'special' connections with governmental institutions and agencies naturally raised doubts concerning the legitimacy of the new government (e.g., how does it differ from the previous one). Perhaps even worse, this “limits and erodes the possibilities of political participation,” essential for the democratic state as well as for the development of civil society.\textsuperscript{191} For instance, Tevzadze discovered that “in 2002 several teachers in Tbilisi high school reported that their students had held an election to choose their representatives to the local criminal organization, which indicated that students largely accepted organized crime and saw it as compatible with democracy.” \textsuperscript{192}

One of the worst examples of the threat of corrupting practices for emerging democracies is that of fraudulent elections. In 1995 Georgians had had only one choice for president - Shevardnadze. While in 1995 this had caused little concern as many had high hopes for his presidency, by 2000 it had become clear that Shevardnadze had not justified their hopes. Fearing defeat, Shevardnadze used a trick well-known in ‘illiberal democracies’ (or “liberal autocracies”) – fraudulent elections. His supporters used all possible measures, from bribery to intimidation. For instance, “during the 2000 presidential elections senior police officers told their subordinates that they had to gather at least 25 votes for Shevardnadze or lose their jobs.”\textsuperscript{193}

In more rural areas, especially where minorities lived, “bribes in [sic] form of flour, fertilizes, medical assistance, or simply cash (usually, around 10-15 USD per vote) buy election outcomes, especially in

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., p. 70

\textsuperscript{192} Ibid, p. 110.

\textsuperscript{193} Stefes, p. 131
rural areas where dependency on patrons is stronger than in the cities.” 194 Election officials were also paid off to falsify election results. Such open undermining of the democratic principles led to condemnation by local and international experts. A turning point came when reformers such as Saakashvili and Zhvania broke with the government and moved into opposition, followed by other civil activists and pro-reform leaders. Furthermore, many international aid agencies operating in Georgia at that moment saw more sense in supporting these leaders and investing in civil society organizations, which at this time were mostly represented by NGOs.

This strategy bore fruit. Shevardnadze saw the potential danger in the new opposition, but he was unable to control the situation. In a last attempt to consolidate his power, he tried to commit fraud during the Parliamentary elections in November 2003. This time, his old tactics did not work, and the repercussions led to the Rose Revolution in November 2003. Shevardnadze was forced to resign, and Saakashvili was elected the new president of Georgia with an astounding 95% of the vote.

Which forces pushed people to remobilize and fight for their interests in the first decade of the new century? What were these mechanisms finally allowing people’s voices to be heard and convincing people to believe that their needs and aspirations could be met under the new government? Most experts (local and international) agree that it was the development of the civil society, of the NGO sector.195 According to Jones, “the political parties, which theoretically had to play a role in changing the government, were

194 Ibid, p. 129
too elitist to mobilize society, and NGOs activists helped to build this bridge between different groups as well as to mobilize people.”\textsuperscript{196} The next section will trace the peculiarities of civil society development in Georgia and the role of NGOs in this development.

**NGOs and civil society development**

The term ‘civil society’ is often connected to NGOs, but Nodia asserts that this is an overly narrow understanding of the term. In a broader sense, he relates the term ‘civil society’ “to those forms of social relations and activities outside the spheres of family, business, and the State”, even if one should not overlook “the significant overlap between the State and Business domains (not family).”\textsuperscript{197} He also claims that one of the most important components of civil society are values, pointing out that sometimes “people may unite voluntarily around completely non-liberal goals and values,” which is sometimes termed the ‘uncivil society’.\textsuperscript{198} In this regard, he argues persuasively that it may be difficult to discern the boundary between the two.

Despite these caveats, Nodia believes in more inclusive definitions regarding the organization of civil society, asserting that as long as “it does not pose a clear and present danger to the environment of liberal pluralism, it should not be seen as a terrorist organization; instead, it should be understood to represent the interests of a segment of


\textsuperscript{197} Ibid, p.6.

\textsuperscript{198} Nodia, p. 7.
society and thus be considered part of civil society, whatever values it espouses.”199 He is
convinced that “it is the diversity of civil society that serves as the foundation of a
democratic political system.”200

The overall success of the development of civil society organizations in Georgia
is not only due to the impressive growth in their numbers. One of the most vivid
indicators of the success of this development, especially for Western observers, is
symbolized by the Rose Revolution, for the new government had close connections to the
civil society organizations so essential in increasing public support for the agenda of
liberal democratic values – in contrast to the ‘corrupt’ values of the old Shevardnadze
government. It is noteworthy that the civil society organizations were mostly connected
with the political organizations starting from the moment known as “the rebirth of civil
society”.

Nodia has traced the beginning of the ‘rebirth of civil society’ to the time of
perestroika and glasnost at the end of the 1980s. The new independence movements
focused on nationalist ideas and were supported by anti-communist slogans; naturally,
such movements could spill over into public protests. One good example of such a protest
was connected to a place of symbolic historical importance – the 6th century monastery
called David Gareji. For Georgians this monastery is not just a tourist location; rather, it
was and is a place of pilgrimage connected with past glories of the country, with
Georgia’s religious and educational flourishing. During Soviet times it had been closed.
Worse yet, the Soviet military had used the area for artillery training, resulting in damage

199 Ibid.
200 Ibid.
to the ancient frescos. The protests against the treatment of this national treasure reached their zenith in 1988, when students went on a hunger strike near the direct vicinity of the monastery; an additional 10,000 Georgians in the capital also demonstrated in support of this protest.  

All similar demonstrations around this time were connected with anti-communist protests, and most focused on national independence as a goal. On the other hand, very few of the contemporaneous civil organizations drew a line between political and non-political goals, or, for that matter, between the means of resistance. An example of this is the previously discussed legendary military formation known as the Mkhedrioni. Nodia points out that this is a perfect illustration of the term ‘ambivalence’: “The Mkhedrioni started as a patriotic movement driven by idealistic motives, but this movement quickly became criminalized, and extortion at gunpoint became its main method of ‘fundraising’.  

There were many such groups at the time, most of whom enjoyed government support, implying that not everyone in Georgia was focused on attaining liberal, ‘civil society’ values.

Despite such inconsistencies, independence was declared on 9 April 1991, and the new government – led by the radical nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia – came to power on 26 May 1991. Unfortunately for the ‘civil society’, the new President chose the classic divisive approach: Those not with us are against us. This further divided the already fragmented society into two classes – ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’. The highly personalized

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nature of Georgian political life intensified the animosity, and the escalation of ethnic conflicts contributed to the increase presence and power of paramilitary formations in Georgia, ultimately resulting in the military coup d’etat on 22 December 1991. On 6 January 1992 Gamsakhurdia had to flee the country, only to return in September 1993 at the beginning of the civil war between his supporters and those of the new government.

Although the civil war was ‘won’ by a new government, which would be led by Shevardnadze, it is difficult to view it as a ‘victory’, for the country, exhausted by the turbulent events and long-lasting crises, was a ‘failed state’ in the eyes of the international community. Fortunately for Georgia, at this time many international humanitarian organizations and foreign donors chose to help Georgia. It was a watershed moment when the international community, and in particular the United States, began to invest in the development of Georgian civil society. This can be in part attributed to the strategy of the new Georgian government led by Shevardnadze, who was well known for his role in the end of the USSR. It was he who convinced his Western colleagues that Georgia was determined to build democracy based on liberal democratic values. Later, that process was called the “NGO-ization of the civil society, as for several years, between 1992-1995, the number of NGOs in Georgia reached several thousand,” ample proof that civil society organizations were not a result of ‘grassroots’ initiatives; rather, they were usually initiated from above, which explains why the relations with the government have been a very important part of the civil society organizations’ daily life in Georgia.²⁰³

Nodia has demarcated four periods in the relationship dynamics between the government and civil society organizations since independence.


The first non-governmental organizations of a new kind are set up. The state has no clear attitude towards them: Their existence does not disturb the government, serving at the same time as an illustration of Georgia’s liberal policies. They are mostly considered as a way to use donor assistance to create employment opportunities for the educated part of society.\(^{204}\)

The 1992 report of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) implies that NGOs were not yet present in Georgia. Over the next five years, there was a dramatic increase in NGO numbers, as an NDI report from 1997 found approximately 3000 NGOs in Georgia (and 5000 in the year 2000).\(^{205}\) The fields of activities of these civil society organizations were diverse, but the following can be described as the most popular: Human rights protection, promotion of democracy and civil society, environmental protection, gender issues, children’s and teenagers’ problems, youth problems, public health, promotion of state reforms, conflict resolution, peace building, support of local self-governance, and refugee problems. In terms of the number of NGOs per capita, Georgia was rated alongside Ukraine and ahead of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova in 1999\(^{206}\).


By this time NGOs have gradually developed an identity as a unified ‘sector’. They have learned how to protect their corporate interests as a collective. The sector started to be perceived as an actor capable of influencing public developments. Certain rules of relations with the government were shaped that involved elements of both cooperation and confrontation. On the one hand, the NGOs saw non-democratic features in the political regime in Georgia and

\(^{204}\) Ibid, p. 31
\(^{205}\) NDI report, 1997, p. 22
\(^{206}\) Ibid, p.23
expressed a critical attitude towards it. On the other hand, since there appeared to be no acceptable realistic alternative to the Shevardnadze government, criticism of it was relatively mild. Moreover, the activist part of the civil sector found allies within the “reformers’ wing” of the government and tried to lobby for liberal legislation through this alliance.  

This period was more characterized by cooperation than confrontation; Shevardnadze was willing to play the ‘democrat’ for the benefit of the international community, the source of a huge proportion of the aid to Georgia. Nodia makes clear that “the reformers’ wing” led by Zurab Zhvania saw the tremendous future opportunities made possible by active cooperation with the “third sector” (NGOs). Moreover, during the later Rose Revolution, Zhvania’s approach justified itself, for the “reformers” who later opposed Shevardnadze received an impressive level of support from the society. Zhvania helped create a positive image of cooperation between the government and NGOs through extensive PR work, media exposure and, most importantly, the creation of favorable legislation for NGOs. As a result, in 1991 “the Parliament of Georgia adopted a bill setting up a state fund supporting the civil sector. Moreover, an advisory NGO council was set up at the president’s chancellery.”


After the large-scale fraud in the 1999 elections, the severe criticism of Shevardnadze’s government increased. After the leaders of the reformist wing of the government (Saakashvili, Zhvania) moved to the opposition, some NGOs started cooperating with them. At this time, the government tried to establish a dialog with the NGOs so that their critical approach might become at least more muted, while on the other hand it encouraged an “alternative civil society” – anti-

\[207\] Ibid, p. 31

\[208\] Nodia, p. 32.
liberal groups, GONGOs and some media to discredit them. Several legislative initiatives aimed at weakening the financial base of CSOs were also introduced\textsuperscript{209}.

According to the UN Association of Georgia, “GONGO (government-supported NGOs) organizations have provided the government and politicians with a veneer of civil society support and have corrupted the NGOs sector as a whole. Moreover, since the GONGOs were sometimes used to divert fungible international assistance into the pockets of corrupt officials, the activities are corrupting the civil sector and discrediting civil society in the eyes of the general public.”\textsuperscript{210}

Broers writes that negative propaganda towards NGOs was implemented by the government as soon as the first positive influence of social activism became evident. The authorities made some efforts to present NGOs as “anti-state institutions, receiving foreign funds in exchange for disseminating anti-national, ‘foreign’ values, applying such words as \textit{grantichamia}, or “grant-gobbling”.\textsuperscript{211} The issue came to a head when in the winter of 2003 the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Security elaborated new policies stipulating government interference in NGOs financial management. Nonetheless, Shevardnadze’s government reacted too late, as strong resistance from representatives of different social groups pushed back. One good example presented by Nodia is the active

\[\text{source citations}\]

\textsuperscript{209} Ibid, p.33.

\textsuperscript{210} Ibid.

role of NGOs in the organizing of mass protests against the government attempt to close TV company Rustavi-2, which eventually even “led to the resignation of government”.\textsuperscript{212}

4) “Back to cooperation and confrontation” (After the Rose Revolution):

The civil sector ushered in the Rose Revolution, thus helping the new government to come to power. Moreover, there was a significant transfer of many NGOs activists into the government. However, by the time of the first anniversary of the revolution it had become apparent that the relationship between the sector and the government had generally gone back to the combined framework of cooperation and confrontation, characteristic of the second half of the 1990s… Still, there are differences. The level of cooperation is higher than it used to be in the Shevardnadze period. At the same time, some NGOs that voiced negative views about the Rose Revolution were reproved and expelled from collaborative projects.\textsuperscript{213}

Evident examples of such dynamics can include the “Open Letter to President Saakashvili” of 18 October 2004, which was signed by a group of civil society leaders and published in leading Georgian newspapers as well as on the web page of a major civil society online source (www.civil.ge). In this letter the civil activists (highly respected in the Georgian society and by international donors community) expressed their deep concern towards the decline of the civil liberties in Georgia, such as freedom of speech, political pluralism, and human rights protection:

Alarming developments in Georgian politics have forced us to send this appeal to you, the President of the country and unilateral leader of the ruling party [National Movement]. Intolerance towards people with different opinions is being planted in Georgian politics and in other spheres of social life (business, education, science, culture, sport etc.). Leaders of the ruling party constantly use the labels introduced at the dawn of the establishment of Georgian democracy… such as “the enemy of the nation, traitor, the fifth column, etc… The disease that split Georgian society 15 years ago and led the country to a civil war has resurfaced. We are extremely concerned, particularly over the fact that in your

\textsuperscript{212} Ibid, p. 342.

\textsuperscript{213} www.civil.ge, 18 October 2004.
recent public speeches there are more and more humiliating and insulting statements towards the opponents. 214

The President reacted to the letter by meeting with the leaders of the civil society to discuss the issues. However, few desirable changes were implemented immediately, which led to quite dramatic and negative consequences in November 2007. 215

Besides the relationship between the government and NGOs, there was one other very important factor for the development of civil society in Georgia: The relationships with the donors. One of the main donor tasks was to support democratization in Georgia through the developing of civil society. According to Hamilton, even though donors understood that developing civil society and developing the NGO sector are different, they admitted that “stimulating NGOs growth has been the main strategy through which civil society development has been pursued.” 216 This is one of the main reasons why the terms ‘civil society’ and ‘NGOs’ are used nearly synonymously in discussions on Georgian democracy. Considering the often short-term nature of the financial assistance of the donors combined with their more concrete goals, Hamilton is likely correct in her analysis that NGOs have played two roles, “a functional role as performers of development projects and a symbolic role as elements of civil society.” 217


217 Ibid., p. 42.
Of similar import is the time when NGOs began to appear in Georgia. The beginning of the 1990s was marked by the civil war, by the failure of political institutions and government to perform their functions, and by severe economic crises. In short, Georgia was perceived to be a ‘failed state’. It was then that international donors decided to enter the region to create NGOs in order to effect positive changes in Georgian society. In this ‘failed state’ the role of the NGOs acquired great significance, for most of them represented international donors, whose view of the situation inevitably informed their goal-setting in Georgia. Perhaps just as important to Georgians, NGOs also had a positive effect on the economy as they brought jobs into a region where the level of unemployment was 5.5% of the labor force in 1991. Georgia's per capita income was $1634 in 1991, placing it among the poorest republics of the former Soviet Union (FSU).\(^{218}\) Around 55% percent of the population lived under the poverty line, and according to World Bank research “by 1994 up to 85 percent of the population had become poor as a result of economic collapse.”\(^{219}\)

A further benefit of the NGOs was that they offered an alternative path to public participation. Within that highly fragmented and politicized society, more and more people were trying to find “non-political forms of public action.”\(^{220}\) As might be expected, there were financial incentives for those NGO organizers, but there were also non-financial incentives in terms of learning new skills and practices. For others it was a


\(^{220}\) Hamilton, p. 50.
chance to be perceived as an individual person in a society where most of the previous social structures and social contracts had collapsed.

Of course, there were the inevitable setbacks. In the beginning, as there was neither a clear direction nor continuity regarding most of the international donors’ projects, the donors’ agenda tended to prevail despite their superficial understanding of local conditions. Funding was often cut off as soon as a particular project was finished. As a result, it was quite normal for NGOs to slow down, decrease their payroll and, not uncommonly, let go people who had invested considerable amounts of time and energy into a project, at least until the next donor arrived and cash flow resumed.

However, through the time the situation has changed. According to my interview with Konstantin Zhgenti, the Head of the local NGO “ABCO Georgia” (Association of Business Consulting Organizations of Georgia) in the beginning of their activity in 2001 they had the problem of the drain of the staff. Zhgenti states that during the breaks between the projects, there was not enough funding to keep the experienced people, whose skills the organization helped to develop. Usually, such people found much better stable positions in the private sector, especially in the banks. Eventually, the donors realized this problem and try to keep the qualified skilled workers and invest more in quality than quantity.\(^{221}\)

The NGO sector became a “cultural world of its own shaped by [the] rules, norms and values of the donor community.”\(^{222}\) Many of these rules, norms, and values were often accepted without question by the local community of NGOs, practically achieving

\(^{221}\) Interview with Zhgenti (recorded)

\(^{222}\) Ibid.
the level of ‘ritual’, as the end goal is nearly always to receive grants and finish the project fast enough to get another grant in order to survive in this ‘world of projects’.

Hamilton links this process of ritualization to what she terms “acculturation:”

Acculturation is an ongoing process, experienced throughout the day-to-day business of being an NGO. It is also loaded with values. Donors represent NGOs as bearers of civility, repositories of good and democratic practice, and beacons of progress towards development and democracy. Participants in NGOs absorb these values and ‘new way’ of acting, appropriate to the positive directions in which NGO-led development is taking them, and construction of a peaceful, democratic and ‘developed’ future.\(^{223}\)

This process does have many positive effects too. Some NGO workers have reported that the values and skills they developed from working with donors have helped them overcome the main social problems rooted deeply in the Soviet (and post-Soviet) society – indifference, passivity and irresponsibility. Local NGO staff grew accustomed to the idea that the initiative and attitude of the individual directly correlate to success in the NGO workplace. Even the low salaries offered to entry-level employees were no obstacle for those determined to develop skills and, ultimately, empowerment through their new abilities and chances for self-expression.\(^ {224}\)

It was not a world for everyone, and gatekeepers abounded. For instance, only people speaking excellent English had access to that special world of NGOs. In addition, there were representatives of the elite intelligentsia (usually from the capital, Tbilisi) or the children of former nomenklatura who had had the opportunity to graduate from Western (e.g. British or American) universities – in short, access was mostly limited to people familiar with Western values and ways.

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\(^ {223}\) Ibid.

\(^ {224}\) Gia Khashia, interview held through Skype (Athens, OH – Zugdidi, Georgia), August 2010
This led to a phenomenon threatening to isolate further this NGO world from the society it was supposed to develop, as the donors were more oriented to their own values and norms than the values or norms of the society in which they operated. Still, this isolation seemingly did not hinder further increases in the numbers of NGOs in Georgia. The number of NGOs grew rapidly throughout the 1990s, which was reflected with irony in Georgia’s nickname: the “NGOs’ heaven of the Caucasus”.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many Georgians felt that they were being asked to change or modify their values and norms, which were quite dissimilar to the classic western counterparts, too quickly. Hamilton attributes this to her observation that “local NGO actors press existing social norms and relations into service to support their work and use their NGOs as vehicles for their own social projects.” One of these norms is the (locally) famous Georgian hospitality. Hamilton offers a popular example, the Georgian supra, which for those unfamiliar with the term is a “formal meal that involves an elaborate ritual of drinking toasts to all present and to higher values, such as collaboration and enduring friendship, which generate feelings of mutual commitment and trust between host and guests.” This centuries-old Georgian tradition was used to strengthen the connections and contribute to the success of the projects. Many foreign donors had to go through this ritual of initiation into Georgian society, accompanied by toasts such as Sakartvelos Gaumarjos!, “To Georgia,” (and carrying the special meaning of gaumarjos, ”to victory”). Regardless of how they have judged this practice according

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225 Hamilton, p. 32.

226 Ibid., p. 52.

227 Ibid., p. 53.
to their Western values, they do it to ensure their access to social networks in Georgia, networks on which Georgian social life is based (and has been for centuries), beginning with kinship, moving on to friendship, and ending with professional connections. Despite the negative connotations labeling such practices (e.g., nepotism or cronyism), connotations further promulgated by the organizational management books imported to train the NGO workers, there is an indisputable reality, a tradition, a norm. Georgians did not just resist the cultural changes pushed on them by NGOs and their donors; they affected the way NGOs operated in Georgia, for the NGOs also acculturated.

This conjunction of norms – on the one hand those of the NGOs, on the other hand those from Georgian culture – created a dangerous phenomenon. After NGOs had become very powerful networks in their own right, political elite groups from Georgia began to use these new and powerful organizations (at that time they had more solid material and a better social base than many governmental organizations) for their own purposes, sowing the seeds of corruption in the NGO sector. Not a lot of people agree to discuss these negative practices, which were widespread in the beginning of the 1990s. However, the anonymous source shed the light on such practices:

As a matter of fact, NGO sector in Georgia tried to find it niche in struggling extremely high corruption that was widely spread in a public sector. However, NGO sector itself could not avoid some corrupted and unethical dealings:

1) Procurement procedure violations – grants issued in the basis of personal preferences, e.g. grants issued to friends and relatives;
2) Unethical arrangements and lobbying - NGO employees taking some commissions (in early 90s all payments were done by cash) from the service suppliers for lobbing their services;
3) In early 90s no internal policies applied (procurement, HR) which led to violations committed not only by locals but also by expats; in some cases, staff hiring done on the basis of personal preferences (nepotisms & cronyism);
4) Lack of transparency in the projects’ implementation – possibility for ‘under the table’ arrangements based on the mutual favoritism.
5) Financial violations – purchasing done without receipts (as far as in early 90s mostly organizations/companies could not issue any receipts, or it was just a paper without an official stamp, as far as majority of the companies were operating in shadow) or, in some cases, the “receipts” submitted overvalued the real cost of the goods.228

A further problem is that of the marginalized groups’ access to NGO resources. Considering that one of the main goals of NGOs as civil society actors is to raise the problems of often-marginalized groups and to help these people be heard and helped, a lack of access to many NGOs reduced their effectiveness, often preventing them from building a positive image in public opinion. As Hamilton cogently argues, in Georgia “the theoretical virtues of the NGO sector as a component of civil society are compromised as it is not a sector which all citizens can access and participate in.”229

While NGOs became a part of daily life for Tbilisi elite circles and young undergrads as well as the intelligentsia, it was a different situation regarding people from the outer provinces (the majority of Georgians). Even if they had heard about NGOs, they usually did not have a clear understanding of what they really represented.230 Naturally, some people made comparisons with something already experienced in their Soviet past, so more often than not the image of NGOs was connected with the various Soviet-era public unions (like trade unions and a number of different workers organizations) which were created to conduct and support the party policies as unofficial government enterprises. Such comparisons have been very damaging to the image of NGOs. However, the NGOs should share a portion of the blame as well, for too often it is ‘the

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228 Anonymous source, interview held through Skype (Athens, OH –Tbilisi, Georgia), August 2010
229 Ibid, p. 52.
230 Gia Khasia, interview held through Skype (Athens, OH – Zugdidi, Georgia), August 2010.
man (or men) from the capital’ coming to the region and telling people what they should do according to the specific project, usually not spending enough time to explain why and not asking people if the NGO’s approach, designed by the donor and often based on the Western experience or experience in other third-world countries, really matches their needs. According to Hamilton, in the best-case scenario “public perceptions will be translated into language acceptable and compelling within the world of projects”, but in the worst-case scenario “they may be excluded altogether because they are simply not coherent with that world’s values.” Furthermore, the project deadlines do not allow the spending of sufficient time on such research.

Again, the situation had changed since the beginning of 2000s. In her interview, the former Program Coordinator from the international NGO “Save the Children” (Georgian Branch), Marina Ushveridze, gives her perspective, based on her extensive work there since 2003 till 2009:

Common practice of proposal development for implementing agencies includes baseline needs assessment, which is instrumental in identifying the real needs of the target groups. In the NGO world I operate in, this is a standard practice, and all key activities in the proposals are usually based on the results of the needs assessments – be these face to face interviews with target group representatives in the regions, and/or involvement of the local counterparts, such as regional NGOs and local government officials. But proposals are usually based on RFAs (requests for proposals), which donor agencies issue. RFAs generally are based on the 4-5 year strategies of the donor organizations, which, in my opinion, usually are developed based on the real needs of the country and in consultation with Government, as well as other stakeholders, such as implementing agencies.

Another question is whether implementing agencies really keep the finger on the pulse of development, as in many cases they indeed serve as the primary source of information for donor organizations. I would say, that in many cases – yes. To large extent understanding of the local context and needs from the side of the implementing agency depends on whether this organization maintains close contact to the field or just limits its work with reading the reports sent by the regional NGOs. If an implementing agency serves only as

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231 Ibid, p. 53
mediator between the donors and regional NGOs, and does not itself get involved in the fieldwork and its close monitoring, in such cases there may indeed be a danger of losing information about the real needs of the field and loosing the contact with the real world. Although, in my personal opinion, this can happen only in some specific cases, and generally, such approach is not a common practice for many implementing agencies in Georgia.232

Eventually most NGOs came to this realization and began to make great efforts to inform people about their ideas, their work, their goals and even more importantly – their results. As previously mentioned, PR work undertaken by NGOs was (and is) conducted at the very highest level in Georgia through TV programs, magazines, newspapers; the NGOs became very active in the media, which had positive results. The successful incorporation of media in the NGO sector agenda is perfectly exemplified by the Horizinti Foundation’s 2002 Annual Report. It describes how in 2001, with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy (US), the Horizonti Foundation implemented a one-year project in Telavi and Akhaltsikhe districts. The project, which was entitled “Active Society and Media: Dialogue with the Government”, included several cycles of TV programs233. The purpose of the project was to demonstrate effectively the guiding principles underlying the roles of the non-governmental sector as the strongest institution of democracy, which uses the media as an effective tool for building civil society and greater citizen participation. The overall target was to effectively involve the districts’ population, mass media and governmental authorities in an active and mutually beneficial dialogue. This initiative had several important outcomes in terms of influencing the

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232 Marina Ushveridze, interview held through Skype (Athens, OH – Tbilisi, Georgia), August 2010

usually passive attitude of people in the provinces.\textsuperscript{234} The people in the provinces used to think that all the decisions were coming from the “center” (as was true during the Soviet times) and that the opinion of local people was ignored. Local authorities' attitudes, in turn, had been based on a perspective that their arbitrariness was well justified by their rank. Thus, the development of social dialogue and awareness was started in the outer regions by NGOs (see later, Story of “Atinati”).

Their connections within the Georgian government also helped NGOs improve their position in the Georgian society, bringing us again to the main machinery of Georgian society – social/personal networks. Hamilton reports that “some NGO actors are part of social networks that include powerful actors at the heart of government: in particular the sophisticated clique at the heart of the Tbilisi NGO scene is well-connected with individuals including the Chair of Parliament, Zurab Zhvania (1999).”\textsuperscript{235}

Since the Rose Revolution the cooperation of government and NGOs has significantly increased. Here the good example of such developments can be the opinion of Marina Ushveridze, former Program Coordinator (2003-2009) of the international NGO “Save the Children” (Georgian Branch). According to Ushveridze,

In the past years, precedents of cooperation between the Government and local or international NGOs is on rise. This helps to achieve greater sustainability of the projects in the long run. Donors have also facilitated this process by putting a lot of stress on the need for sustainability plans for upcoming projects. Many international and national NGOs visit the Governmental agencies, such as different ministries, before they develop the proposals for the new projects, to agree on the needs, activity plans and future collaboration prospects. Once these proposals are developed with the feedback of appropriate ministries incorporated, project activities are in line with the country’s strategy in that definite field. Therefore,

\textsuperscript{234} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid, p. 53.
more real avenues are created for mutual cooperation between the Government and implementing Non-Governmental agencies.

For instance, when I was a Director of Save the Children’s renowned – “Children’s Tolerance Education Program”, we managed to establish a very productive partnership with the National Curriculum and Assessment Center of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia. As a result of this cooperation, Save the Children and the National Curriculum and Assessment Center have developed a Curriculum of Peace and Tolerance for primary classes. This curriculum was selected for the 2009 Compendium of Good Practices in Human Rights Education, published by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Council of Europe and UNESCO.236

There is a further factor for NGOs’ strong position in Georgia – the strong dependency of the Georgian government on the international aid system and donors. But this dependency does not always translate into acceptance. According to Hamilton:

The state is obliged to take seriously donor’s projects, not least the quest for good governance and the role for civil society to maintain the nation’s development progress and the legitimacy of the government…While NGOs increasingly see themselves as experts and potential partners for the state, able to help the state make the transition into the ‘new way’ of addressing popular needs, the state as a whole has yet to demonstrate that this vision is a shared one.237

The phrase ‘obliged’ is paradoxical in the case of these NGO and government relationships. Under ideal conditions the effective cooperation between the state structures and NGOs would be an essential element of the developed civil society. But when NGOs have access to greater financing than the state sector, the relationship is less clear. The issues of authority and power are very sensitive, and by the early 1990s NGOs had assumed a powerful position (helped by a strong lobbying system supported by foreign funds) in the vacuum created by the collapse of nearly all structures in Georgia, which threatened the state itself at the end of the 1990s.

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236 Marina Ushveridze, interview held through Skype (Athens, OH –Tbilisi, Georgia), August 2010

237 Ibid, p. 54.
One of the aforementioned weaknesses of NGOs – that they depend on foreign funding – became a strength. According to Tudoroiu, between 1995 and 2000 Georgia received over $700 million of American direct aid. From 2002-2003 it was the fourth largest per capita recipient of US Agency for International Development funds. USAID spent $200 dollars per person in Georgia (compared with $1.25 per person in Russia), and European Union aid totaled 420 million Euros between 1992 and 2004, with “most of [this] aid targeted [to] democracy, governance and development of NGOs.”

Furthermore, George Soros’ Open Society Institute provided the funds for different educational and training programs for civil society development, investing significantly in Georgian youth. Consequently, the most intelligent and best educated of the young generation were competing for jobs in the NGO sector and USAID programs, for such employment gave them the best opportunities in terms of salaries and growth. Furthermore, many of these NGO workers became socially active through their heightened skills and awareness of the needs in their country.

To develop the NGO sector to the level where NGOs could become the ‘channels’ for the needs and aspirations of civil society, stronger and more active indigenous NGOs need to form and develop.

Quite remarkable for its achievements in this direction is the “Horizonti Foundation”, which has been working very actively on the creation and development of local NGOs since 1997. During the first five years of its existence, this organization

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239 Ibid, p. 324.
managed to distribute around $1 million of grant funding among different local NGOs.\textsuperscript{240}

Further activities included work on various programs fomenting cooperation between NGOs and the government, as well as between NGOs and business organizations. It also held various educational and informational trainings with the aim of creating awareness and understanding of the role of this ‘third sector’.\textsuperscript{241}

Different publications in newspapers and journals, special programs on TV and radio, and direct access through mailings, e-mails, the special television program “NGO news,” and PR campaigns effectively created a constantly positive image of NGOs. Through different surveys and constant support for the initiatives of the people, NGOs showed not only active interest in peoples’ needs and aspirations but also real actions aimed at their realization and implementation. For the majority of the population, which by the middle of the 1990s had given up their hopes for the government in terms of providing public goods and showing real interest in people’s everyday troubles, this work was highly appreciated. In fact, by the late 1990s NGOs had greatly expanded their activities geographically, ensuring that they could affect their popular perception on a wider scale.\textsuperscript{242}

Despite having many differing agendas, NGOs had one thing in common: They worked on different projects regarding developmental, humanitarian and social issues as well as with the most marginalized groups of society such as internally displaced persons, minorities and pensioners. This led the government to remove the tax on humanitarian aid

\textsuperscript{240} Website \url{http://horizonti.org}

\textsuperscript{241} Website \url{www.eurasianet.org/resource/georgia/links/ngo56.html}

\textsuperscript{242} Nelly Dolidze, Interview held though Skype (Athens, OH-Tbilisi, Georgia), August 2010
in 1996. NGOs also had some larger economic and political influence. According to Jones,

NGOs’ overall program – the restructuring of civil society, the institutionalization of good (that is, “neutral” and accountable) governance, and the development of social programs to protect vulnerable groups in Georgia’s new market economy – are an important counterbalance to the economically and culturally “coercive” policies of the IMF, which, without the employment, aid relief, and developmental work provided by NGOs… would likely founder on a combination of popular protest, economic desperation, and apathy. ²⁴³

This “apathy” mentioned by Jones was mainly due to economic difficulties, as the majority of the population was living in poverty and just trying to survive under the growing inequality in their society. According to the United Nations Development program (UNDP) year 2000 report, about 40 percent of the population were living under the poverty line, and unemployment was around 25%, if one takes into consideration that even people who had jobs (especially in the public sector and pensioners) were not paid for months.²⁴⁴

It was natural that the initial reaction of the general population (especially in the provinces) to these organizations was sometimes distrust and apathy.²⁴⁵ It can be argued that any kind of governmental initiative was regarded with suspicion due to the Soviet Union's legacy. Initially the government was strongly interested in international funding and grants, leading it to help promote the NGO sector, yet the initiatives and practices which these western-based NGOs were trying to promote very seldom coincided, at least at the beginning of their work, with normal people’s everyday needs. This is perhaps

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 58.
²⁴⁵ Ibid.
unsurprising as the people most actively involved in the first NGOs projects were younger representatives of elite circles fluent in English and educated abroad. In contrast, ordinary people at the beginning of the 1990s were busy with more immediate issues – surviving in a country in deep economic decline, trying to feed their families on an average salary of 120 Lari/month (around $60) and not freezing to death during wintertime stoppages of electricity and gas. Moreover, data published relating to the relatively large amounts of foreign aid granted and distributed through NGOs for different public projects led to a generalized (jealous) mistrust toward these organizations, and many questioned how these monies were spent.

It is clear that a more dominant role belongs to the foreign-based NGOs, for local NGOs do not have sufficient funding to compete. Are local NGOs sustainable? According to my interview with Konstantin Jghenti from “ABCO Georgia”, there are some good perspectives for it. His organization helped to organize Business/Technical Centers in several rural areas of Georgia (Marneuli, Kakheti, Gardabani), which finally grew to be self-sustainable. ABCO centers provide technical and economic assistance to Georgian farmers, who after having found out about the effectiveness of the new modern equipment and the free trainings, prefer to use “ABCO”’s services in their work.246

For those concerned with the future of the NGO sector in Georgia – especially due to its post-Soviet legacy, Hamilton does offer the following positive insight:

If apparent public passivity can be explained by outsiders’ beliefs about (ex-) Soviet people, why bother to question whether the problem lies more with the models for action they are being offered than with a learned incapacity for self-help action? If popular aspirations about social services can be interpreted easily as unrealistic expectations based on unsustainable Soviet economic management,

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246 Konstantin Jghenti, interview held through Skype (Athens, OH- Tbilisi, Georgia) August 2010.
why ask whether they in fact encapsulate genuine and meaningful priorities for the way in which society is sustained and valued? If Georgians seem helpfully quick to pick up and run with the idea of forming NGOs, why investigate whether this in fact represents more a lack of other opportunities than a genuine adoption of the values donors attach to them?247

Posing such questions and searching for answers to them are more useful strategies for the development of the civil society in Georgia than the attempts to fit Georgian society into templates developed elsewhere. The question should be related to Georgia as it is with all its peculiarities, the goal being to help develop the Georgian grassroots civil society organizations, community based organizations that help channel the needs and aspirations of this particular nation with its particular cultural values and traditions. The nation has already had quite negative experiences with ‘acculturation’ (e.g., Russification, Sovietization,), which have made Georgia and her people even more resistant to such practices.

Still, at the end of the day, the heavy investment by foreign NGOs into the 'human capital', into the most perceptive, active and progressive layers of Georgian society, through numerous programs and extensive trainings, has accomplished long-term results by making Georgian civil society more vibrant and strong than would otherwise have been the case.

The extended story of one NGO – “Atinati” – serves as an example of the successful activity of the local NGOs in Georgia. Rather than just inserting the excerpts from this extended (three hour) interview with its Director, Gia Khasia, the story should be told in its entirety as it gives clear examples of all the above-mentioned challenges for

the local Georgian NGOs. Moreover, as the NGO was established in 1995, the reader can trace how the events of the turbulent Georgian history of those days influenced the development of the civil society in Georgia.

**The Story of “Atinati”**

The NGO “Atinati” was established in 1995 in Zugdidi (Mingrelia, Western Georgia). According to Gia Khasia (the head of the NGO), “It was a most difficult political and social situation in Georgia. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the conflict in Abkhazia, huge immolation and material damage – this is how this period can described. But despite this, life was still very demanding. The NGO sector was finding its place in the society. The civil society development process needed the improvement of intellectual resources, psychological rehabilitation of IDPs [internally displaced persons], and economic support for local and IDP populations in the Region.”

Part of the source of the difficulties in Mingrelia came from the region’s geographic position. It borders with Abkhazia, the site of the ethnic conflict, so they had experienced an influx of a large number of IDPs. However, there is one more very significant factor – Mingrelia (or Samegrelo) was the center of the supporters of the former Georgian President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. For several years that place was famous in non-official resistance to the official power. Paramilitary groups were involved in anti-governmental and criminal activities, including the case of holding governmental officials as hostages (described before) and kidnapping of UN mission representatives in the area.
In this interview, Gia stressed that it was an extremely difficult situation in 1995. There were severe economic and political crises: no jobs, no income, no electricity, nothing. The population was basically trapped in this distant and war-torn corner of Georgia, under conditions of economic, political and informational blockade. At that time several individuals decided to find a solution to that hopeless situation, not just for themselves but for others, too. Even the name of the NGO “Atinati” means “a beam of light,” which must have seemed so necessary during those dark times.

They decided to create an educational center for children to study the English language and computers. Usually, such centers were concentrated in the capital, Tbilisi, and absent from the provinces. Gia, together with other volunteers, decided to rent two classrooms in the local school; they brought their furniture and other supplies from their homes and bought the first textbooks with their own money. Neighbors made jokes: “During Soviet times we usually took things from the organization to bring hope, and now you are taking things from home to bring to the organization.” They had no computers. However, they believed that the children in this distant and troubled province also needed to have access to the same opportunities as their peers in the capital. While resources were few, the overall literacy rate in Georgia was traditionally quite high; education was always an important issue around which the community could rally.

Gia and his peers knew that to develop they needed to grow as an organization. However, at that time in Mengralia nobody knew what NGOs really did nor how to register them. The first law on NGOs was passed in 1994; however, as Gia states, it was not well planned. When Gia went to the local authorities to ask for permission to register a new NGO, he was met with suspicion, as they could not understand his reasons and
goals. One of the officials even made a joke, comparing NGOs with NLOs (NLO means UFO in Russian). Gia did not give up, subsequently taking a trip to the capitol to bring all the necessary documents for registration. However, there were still a lot of questions for which he had to call Tbilisi from the local post-office, sometimes waiting in line for two hours as the local telephone lines had ceased functioning.

The organization developed gradually. The initial price for English lessons was almost symbolic – $2.50 US per month per pupil. Hence, in the class of 10 pupils they could pay the teacher $25 US. However, for the jobless majority of the region this was already something. During his trips to Tbilisi, Gia and his wife Rusicko found out about the international organizations willing to fund grassroots NGOs. They kept applying until they received their first grant of $9,000 US from the Georgia Soros Foundation, which was immediately invested in the project’s infrastructure: in computers and new textbooks as well as in salaries for teachers and administrators. Moreover, they were able to expand into a bigger and better space. Gradually, their prestige grew, and they grew to earn the respect and trust of the local people of Zugdidi.

Soon, other people became interested in the creation of their own NGOs; across the Samegrelo region, they began asking questions about how to organize NGOs. As “Atinati” had the longest history, they were able to give good advice, which later led them to create the Consulting-Informative Center, for which they hired initial consultants and a lawyer who was able to render help on proper registration of NGOs (again, personnel were hired from the IDP population). Sadly, these actions drew suspicion from the local authorities. When asked about the origins of this suspicion, he pointed out that they were mostly connected with the lack of knowledge about NGOs in general and the
fear the local authorities had of a power struggle. At this point, according to Gia, they did not expect any help or cooperation from the governmental authorities. The only hope he had was the following: “We just wanted them not to hinder our activity”.

One of the next important projects of Atinati became the center providing psychological help for IDPs and aid for IDPs’ integration into the local community. As already mentioned, there were many IDPs in this region bordering with Abkhazia. However, the situation in 1998 made the IDPs’ situation even more unbearable. In the summer of 1998 refuges from Gali (where Mingralians were traditionally a majority before the Georgia-Abkhazian conflict) decided to return to their homes. Abkhazian separatists launched an attack on them, which led an additional 30,000-40,000 Georgian refugees to flee.

As it was the second time in their lifetime when the same IDPs had experienced the horrors of war and ethnic cleansing, the situation was very traumatic. Many refugees were placed into the buildings of the temporarily free schools and kindergartens. However, it was not clear what would be next. The IDPs were ready to accept food and other help from international humanitarian organizations such as the International Rescue Committee and the UN. However, in terms of psychological help, initially there was a refusal from the IDPs to accept it. According to Gia, here it was necessary to understand the Georgian culture regarding help. First, counseling services had never been popular in Georgia, for usually one would be expected to go and talk to close friends and relatives. Second, even the world “psychological help” was viewed with hostility by IDPs. According to Gia, the usual answer was: “I do not need it, I’m not crazy.” The feelings of hurt national pride and human dignity did not make this process easier.
As Gia and his co-workers, a lot of whom were volunteers who wanted to render this help to IDPs, were also Mingrelians; they knew what approach to take to facilitate the acceptance of psychological help, which was desperately needed by many people (people who had lost their homes, their families, friends, everything). Moreover, by this time (1998), after three years of successful work, Atinati was a well-respected organization with a developed trust from the local population. Step-by-step they helped IDPs realize (often through personal meetings) that this psychological assistance is a normal and really helpful practice. Atinati hired several psychologists and neurologists for this work. The staff even went through special trainings provided by International Rescue Committee specific to trauma suffered by IDPs.

Eventually, people began to come. According to Gia, “later people greatly appreciated this help and even told us that they do not need clothes or food, they need psychological counseling, as there were almost no other specialists in the area.” Now the Center of Psychological Help and Integration of IDPs has roughly 20 regular staff and several volunteers. This successful experience led to the next project – creation of the “Crises Center for Women and Children”. One of the grant providers was UNICEF. Again, the traditional values of Georgian families, especially in the very rural places, were taken into consideration. There was a long-standing need for such a center, as Georgian culture (especially in rural areas) is traditionally male-dominated, and there are many gender problems currently connected with the growing modernization of society.

An additional remarkable project is the local radio broadcasting project, Radio ATINATI (FM 105.9), which was started in 1998. Its broadcasting area consists now of
the Samegrelo, Adjara, Imereti, and Guria regions as well as Abkhazia. Their web site,  
www.atinati.org, reports that

“Radio has more than 1.6 million potential listeners. The mission of the radio is to deepen the trust between different levels of the society. It broadcasts 24 hours a day having informational and musical programs. Radio prepares talk-shows on ongoing political and social events, which allows listeners to participate by phone. Radio ATINATI is highly rated among the regional population. In September 2006, radio conducted public opinion survey. Among 650 interviewees, 67% listens to the radio “ATINATI”, 14% listens to other radios and 19% is not a radio listener at all. This high rating enables ATINATI to sell business advertisements and air time, also to make business representatives to sponsor radio programs.”

This sounds quite impressive. However, according to Gia, not everything was so smooth in the beginning. The idea of radio also came also as one of the ways to break the informational and social blockade to which people in Western Georgia were subjected. Constant electricity blackouts made the population give up on TVs. Gia (who is an electrical engineer by training) and a few volunteers decided to make the antenna and radio-transmitter by themselves. First, broadcasting was very simple (music and local news – mostly through volunteers) and covered just Zugdidi and its suburbs. The idea was to make the radio broadcasting more interactive, to discuss acute problems of the community, to develop a culture of interaction, etc.

This project brought a lot of positive changes into the mobilization of the community. As the project proved to be very effective, they won a $1,000 US grant from the UNDP in 2000. This allowed them to increase the broadcast range as well as to hire journalists. Gia was quite proud of his idea to make a radio program directed toward the improvement of the relations between Abkhazians and Georgians, an idea ultimately supported by several international organizations like IREX, UNV, NRC, NED, and WAR CHILD.
Today, ATINATI is a member organization of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict regulatory net. However, the first reaction of the Abkhazians was suspicion. Abkhazians based their opinions on the one-sided coverage by Georgian media of the Abkhazians, which had taught them of the Georgian media bias against them. Gia tried to convince them that as their real neighbors, they were interested in building communication and cooperation, and that they did not have a political agenda. The Abkhazians were still very cautious and asked that the station send them questions from listeners rather than answering them on the air. Later, the Abkhazians developed trust, and they began jointly to hold interactive programs, where Georgians and Abkhazians could discuss important issues and feel less isolated from each other. This brings some hope for the reduction, or even elimination, of hostilities and regulation of the conflict. Significantly, this project also ended up being self-sustained, as they receive money from local advertisers.

More and more international organizations became involved in the region, giving grants to Atinati to implement different projects in Western Georgia (in Samegrelo, Imereti, Svaneti, Poti). These were varied, beginning from the “Save the Children” projects organizing Youth Centers and Children’s Parks and ending with the organizations like ABCO focused on development of local small businesses (through Business and Technical Service Centers) and elimination of unemployment in the region.

If one compares their first grant in 1995 - $ 9,000 US, to their last grant in 2009, which was $120,000 (for two years), the difference is obvious. The staff of ATINATI now consists of 72 full- and part-time employees. Among them are qualified teachers, psychologists, journalists, trainers and information technology experts. One current
project Atinati is working on is sponsored by the European Union, and includes partners from other Georgian NGOs on Community Mobilization; its funding is set at €284,000.

This is not to paint an idealized picture; they certainly have persistent challenges and problems. Sometimes a donor’s vision and their vision of a project are different, and they have spoken of several projects that they have declined, as their vision was different and the donors did not want to listen to them. One of the examples was a project directed to fight drug abuse, when the donor organization wanted to use them mostly for the distribution of the sterile (new) syringes among the population. Gia stated that this could not work without a broad educational campaign explaining the rationale for the program. Without it there was great risk that people would misunderstand this as a promotion of drug use. Unfortunately, the donor organization was in a hurry to do the action and Gia just refused to participate, for he wanted to keep the trust of the local population and the good reputation of Atinati. However, he insists that such cases are very rare, as usually (especially during the last 10 years) decent research work is done by the international donors before the beginning of a big project; international donors have discovered from experience that they should trust local NGOs with this work.

In terms of the relations of NGOs with the government, Gia also sees a lot of improvements in comparison with the 1990s. Today, the different ministries are working on creating favorable conditions for the development of NGOs. Even local authorities are happy to be a part of projects capable of improving the infrastructure of the town or serving educational purposes. In recent years there have been projects where the government even gave buildings or land. The government, which had been unhelpful or
even hostile in the 1990s, has even donated funding for partnerships, for instance in Poti, where the government donated 30,000 Lari, and in Zugdidi, where it donated 25,000 Lari for the development of Youth Centers and Educational Centers.

Another problem pointed out by Gia is the drain of qualified staff. During the years they (Atinati) helped to get free training for many of their volunteers, who have since become quite experienced working in the projects. However, there was often a lack of financial resources to keep these people on between the projects, and many of them (especially youth) moved to the capital to find good jobs.

This segues into the problem that Gia considers the main one – financial sustainability. It is still difficult to develop big projects without constant donor help and grant searching. There are not enough opportunities to keep the projects self-sustainable after the donor’s departure, mostly due to the general economic difficulties in the country, plus the instability in this particular region. However, he sees a big potential for the NGO sector in Georgia. He states that volunteer work is deeply connected with the traditional cultural values of the Georgian nation. In this country, which for centuries resisted the dominant and changing powers and empires of the region, community mobilization helped Georgians survive all the times of trouble. Even today in Georgia, if there is a wedding in a rural place, all the community helps to cook, to entertain the guests, etc. If somebody dies, it is a community that helps with everything, from arranging the funeral and to the actual burial. Furthermore, the church has remained quite strong in these rural places, and doing voluntary work for the church is very important for many Georgians. Gia mentioned that the next morning after our conversation, the children from the local
school were going to a distant church in the mountains to help there. Even in schools, after-class voluntary activity is very popular among students, as they feel pride and joy in helping other people of their community.

The story of “Atinati” is inspiring. While the people from Tbilisi spoke of their work in the language of the “project world”, Gia not only represents the perfect example of a grassroots NGO, he also shown with pride and hope for his country’s future. Equally inspiring are those people who in such turbulent times tried to do their best to help the schools, the educational centers, and the most insecure members of the community (such as lonely elderly people or people with disabilities) survive. Some of them were able to do this in a more organized way, but many did not know how to do this in the beginning of the 1990s. Later, after a much clearer law on NGOs was passed in 1998 and more information became more readily accessible, projects became much more transparent, and the policy environment for NGOS became more coherent and clearer. With this in place, the prerequisites for NGOs’ growth and development had been met and their successful development in Georgia could influence the development of civil society and democratic values.  

248 Gia Khasia and Rusiko Khasia, interview held through Skype (Athens, OH- Zugdidi, Georgia), August 2010.
Conclusion

Georgian democracy has evolved in the crucible of interaction, synthesizing the Soviet legacy and Western democratic values while still maintaining its own culture and history. As previously discussed, this work intended to show the danger of labels; political scientists have seemed to be impatient and have been eager to pigeonhole the post-Soviet transitions as “failed transitions” or as “success stories.” Rather, all the peculiarities of transitions – in this case, the transition in Georgia – should be considered.

Georgia is not one of the political scientists’ “failed democratic transitions,” as the failure of the state caused most of the troubles in the beginning of the 1990s. The old Soviet structures collapsed, while new ones had not yet been created. During this chaotic process there was no particular ‘plan’ besides the main goal, national independence, which even by itself would have been challenging to attain despite its official declaration in 1991. This challenge was complicated further by the old system, which was still ‘alive and kicking’ in a dangerous conjunction with Russia’s determination to keep Georgia.

The comparison of Georgian nationalism and politics in 1918 and 1991 shows two important versions of the Georgian approach to building an independent and democratic Georgia. In both cases independence was a consequence of the destruction of the previous structure, i.e., the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, respectively. These massive changes confronted the country with the possibility of building of an independent state. There were even similar threats in both cases in terms of Russian dominance and ethnic tensions. But there were also differences; the Georgian intellectual

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250 Ibid. p. 25.
elites were fascinated with social democracy in 1918, whereas in 1991 they were inspired by radical nationalism as a consequence of their experiences as part of the Soviet Empire.

Gamsakhurdia was able to mobilize society under the national independence agenda, but he and his government built neither viable state institutions nor a stable society due to his personalized approach to politics. Instead of changing the structure, positions were filled with new, often inexperienced, unprofessional people whose only qualification was their loyalty to Gamsakhurdia. Instead of unifying the country, his divisive policies led to a rift in the country and later to the civil war and ethnic conflicts. While many experts blame the failure of Georgian democracy on Georgian nationalism, this thesis has shown that the correlation between nationalism and democracy is complex (see Chapter One).

Georgia is a good example of Nodia’s observations regarding nationalism in democratic transitions (see Chapter One): 1) euphoric freedom directly after independence; 2) a chauvinistic turn (i.e., under Gumsakhurdia's presidency, which ended in ethnic conflicts and internal divisions); 3) shaky stability (i.e., during Shevardnadze's rule, which coincided with the standstill in nationalism and the strengthening of Russia's role in the region; and 4) the renewal of the nationalist agenda during the Rose Revolution and Saakashvili's presidency, which coincided with the strengthening of pro-Western orientation.\textsuperscript{251} Thus, while nationalism may have been necessary at the beginning of democratization as a mobilizing factor, due to the absence of the necessary preconditions for its sustainability (e.g., strong democratic institutions and a developed

\textsuperscript{251} Nodia, p. 10.
civil society) there is no guarantee that liberal democracy would be a consistent item on
the agenda.

Nodia’s belief in the value of necessary preconditions cannot be ignored. One of
the biggest problems facing the building of a strong and democratic Georgia was the lack
of democratic values, democratic culture and undeveloped civil society, mostly due to the
Soviet legacy, as shown in Chapter Two. A citizen’s position in society was often defined
by their distance to power, which is dangerous for ‘traditional societies” like Georgia.

Jones describes the ultimate consequence of such power dissemination:

A reaction against Soviet discipline combined with Georgian’s own reliance on
‘egocentric networks,’ expressed as a rejection of formal collective power in favor of
a system of clients and patrons, has led to ineffective and undisciplined parties
without grass roots support among the population. The collapse of Soviet power has
increased the patronage powers of pseudo-clans and regional bosses, undermining the
organizational effectiveness of Georgian parties and embryonic civic institutions.252

The origins of this widespread corruption are complex. Local observers such as
Darchiashvili and Nodia argue that “In Georgian reality, clans are patron-client networks
which consolidate around a powerful leader and change with the ups and downs of that
leader’s power and economic position. Such clans are closed structures, united and driven
by the desire to avoid open legal space and to derive group benefit (usually by illegal
means) from state institutions.”253 Thus, it is logical that Georgians stole from state
institutions when they considered these institutions to be forced on them by a third
(hostile) power – Soviet Russia.

252 Jones, p. 233.

University Press, 1997), 523.
Seventy years is a long habit, and the habit did not disappear in the course of the 1990s; corruption became an institution in Georgia. The habit, known simply as corruption, became a scourge for the newborn state. Two staff members of USAID, Keti Bakradze and Lado Gorgadze, offer remarkable insight regarding the culture of corruption in Georgia: “This is so rooted into our mentality. If you are well off by Georgian values you must use it to help your relatives – otherwise you’re a bad person and perceived to be ‘wasting’ your position.”\textsuperscript{254} The culture of ‘illegality’ developed also as a consequence of the over-militarized 1990s (1991-1995).\textsuperscript{255}

Regarding the role of national leadership, Shevardnadze did bring some stability and international aid to Georgia in the middle of the 1990s. Georgia was on the radar of the West due to Shevardnadze’s international reputation as an experienced and pro-democratic leader. The goal of developing a viable democratic state was also pushed by his administration and led to positive results by the end of the 1990s. The impressive amounts of the foreign aid flow to Georgia was accompanied by an impressive array of international NGOs and international aid agencies (see Chapter Two). An impressive amount of democracy development projects were introduced, including the development of political parties, governmental institutions, economic institutions, educational institutions, and civil society development.

The Georgian intellectual elites attained access to these programs and gained tremendous experience under the guidance of international experts. The best of the best


\textsuperscript{255} Nasmyth Peter, \textit{Georgia: In the Mountains of Poetry}, (England: Curzon Press, 2001), 203.
were chosen to go abroad to get the Western education and were very soon incorporated into the governmental structures. However, a ‘generation gap’ arose, for “Shevardnadze relied on the same strategy he had already employed during the 1970s: building informal networks and counterbalancing the dominant groups – instead of strengthening the formal state institutions.”

Seeing his own inability to control these groups, he could not afford to lose their support, even though the leaders of such groups had already had a reputation for corruption dating back to Soviet times. Thus, even though young reformers like Saakhasvili and Zhvania were pushing the agenda of the anti-corruption fight, the power of the old Soviet school cadres in the Shevardnadze’s government was stronger at that moment (1998-2002).

The development of the local NGOs helped spread civic education and an understanding of the importance of democratic values for building a viable democratic state. The push was made by civic activists from the capital (here: intellectual elites) and was gradually exported to the regions (by the local activists). The incompatibility between the proclaimed state policy on democratization and corrupt practices became ever more overt and disturbing, bringing to mind the sad joke of calling Shevardnadze’s government a “democracy without democrats”. However, the younger generation’s values were much more progressive and democratic, similar to those of their Western supporters. The forged elections in 2000 (Presidential) and 2003 (Parliamentary) played a role in mobilizing society against the corrupted practices of Shevardnadze’s government, and the opposition of the younger reformers discovered that a peaceful revolution is the

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256 Ibid, p. 113.
only choice.\textsuperscript{258} This contrast led to the Rose Revolution, which succeeded because the agenda of the young progressive elite coincided with the agenda of the society at large and was supported by the Western democratic community and institutions.

According to Fairbanks, only extraordinary reasons could inspire hundreds of thousands of people to leave their jobs, homes, schools, and families to confront heavily armed police and spend nights outside in the bitter cold: “Such boldness can only be fueled by strong, heart-felt motivations.”\textsuperscript{259} However, he also stresses the dangers of euphoria and the need to avoid illusions after the revolution. After such events people’s expectations are often too high as they have a strong belief in the promises of the new government; therefore, it is very important for this new, ‘young’ government to meet these expectations. Otherwise, perhaps, a new revolution may come, as the last decade has accustomed Georgians to regime changes not occurring according to the constitution but rather through revolt or revolution. During the last fifteen years three regimes have been changed in Georgia – not one of them by proper elections. The elections were conducted only post-factum to legitimize already accepted power.\textsuperscript{260} The losing political power never remained in politics, and each government had a charismatic leader and one ruling party strongly resistant to any cooperation with the opposition.\textsuperscript{261}

What does the future hold for democracy in Georgia? Tudoroiu looks at the scale and depth of the changes to understand the main differences of the present government

\textsuperscript{258} Valerie Bunce, Wolchik, “Youth and Electoral Revolutions in Slovakia, Serbia, and Georgia”, \textit{SAIS Review} 2006, 26.2.


from the past government. In terms of economic development, the first big achievement under Saakashvili was a $295 million contract with the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation for successful emerging democracies. The positive results were shown in tax collections and provision of public goods. Serious improvements in the system of education and health care were conducted to make them more transparent and effective. The fight with corruption was also very active, but it could take dangerous turns: Sometimes it seemed as if the efforts to build a stronger state came at the expense of human rights and civil liberties. What was perceived in the beginning as policies in a 'revolutionary mode' later began to take on some authoritative overtones. Saakashvili has usually presented these changes as necessary for the creating of a stronger state.

However, how does this make the state stronger? Areshidze argues that,

Saakashvili's actions created a regime that moved away from institutional development and became fully dependent on one person. But without institutional development, the state may not actually be getting stronger, but rather, seem stronger because the person at the top has a great deal of power and energy.

Soon, many of the advantages of which Georgia was proud, at least in comparison with Russia, some Central Asian states, and the neighboring South Caucasus republics (freedom of speech, of assembly), showed some decline. The result of the growing discontent with the situation finally expressed itself in peaceful public demonstrations in November 2007, which were violently dispersed by governmental forces.

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263 Civic education textbook 2010, incepts (translated by me from Georgian).

264 Ibid, p. 196.

As Laurance Broers points out, if Shevardnadze’s regime was often called “democracy without democrats”, why is Saakashvili’s regime sometimes called “democrats without democracy”? 266 This thesis has shown the peculiarities of the democratic transition in Georgia, which has resulted in what might be called a democracy peculiar to Georgia. However, a paper of this nature often raises as many questions as it answers. Future research may well wish to focus on the following questions: How long will the shadow of the Soviet legacy influence the Georgian transition to democracy? What kind of state is Saakashvili’s Georgia? How does Saakashvili’s Georgia differ from previous iterations? Where is Georgian democracy on the path to Western democracy? The answers to these questions will help historians, political scientists, and policy makers better understand the process of post-Soviet transition states to modern liberal democracies.

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Appendix A: Map of Georgia

[Image: Map of Georgia]

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