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**OUR ICON IS THE HOMELAND  
- Georgian nation building before and after 2008**



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Our Icon is the Homeland – Georgian Nation Building  
Before and After 2008

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**Abstract**

*The Russian-Georgian war in 2008 was an event with a large impact to the opportunities of nation building for a country that has followed a difficult path to find its national identity. Due to its deep historical roots, its strong national movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its previous experience with sovereignty between 1918 and 1921, Georgia had a clearly defined national project before being incorporated into the Soviet Union. Even as elites' visions of nation building have changed several times during the tumultuous post-Soviet era, the national project has remained constant. Comprising an ambition of closer affiliation with Europe, a more distant relation with Russia and control over national minorities, the national project has met an obstacle after the 2008 war that challenges Georgia's further opportunities for nation building. Georgian ruling elites, especially since the Saakashvili period, have pursued the national project with determination. They have created a strong national identity, within which the war has been used to create myths and discourses. The problem they are facing in the aftermath of the war is how to continue pursuing this national project when premises have changed regarding relations to Russia and the minorities.*

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Kristian Krohg-Sørensen

*“Our icon is the homeland  
Trust in God is our creed,  
Enlightened land of plains and mounts,  
Blessed by God and holy heaven.  
The freedom path we’ve learnt to follow  
makes our future spirits stronger;  
the morning star will rise above us  
and lighten up the land between the two  
seas.  
Glory to long-cherished freedom,  
Glory liberty!”*

**The Georgian National Anthem**

Text by David Magradze

Music by Zakaria Paliashvili



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## 1 Introduction

The war of August 2008 between Georgia and the Russian federation was a remarkable event in the history of the Post-Soviet countries. Not only did Russian ground forces cross the territory of a sovereign state for the first time since the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan – it was also a low point in Russian-Western relations since the Cold War, and thus a conflict with a certain influence on the global order. On a regional level, it sent a clear message to former Soviet countries that Russia still demands leverage in its "near abroad". From a domestic Georgian perspective, the war set new premises for nation building within Georgia that will highly influence future possibilities for the Georgians. Representing both what can be seen as the final break in a centuries-old, stormy relationship with Russia as well as a truncation of the country's geographical territory, this conflict has shaped new premises and goals in Georgian nation building as a part of the elite normative that can be called the *Georgian national project*.

Since its proclamation of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Georgian elites have continuously sought a new, non-Soviet identity to build its nation upon. This ideological normative can be seen as a continuation of the nation building that led to the 1918-21 Georgian Democratic Republic, as it comprises many of the same political objectives: Establishment of a nation-state based on Georgian ideas of nationality, closer alignment with the Western world and a more independent position in the relationship to Russia, and integration of minorities into the Georgian political system. Different political methods have been used to achieve this normative, and different components of the normative have been given priority. It was only after the Rose Revolution in 2003, however, that the Georgian national project was followed continuously and a comprehensive nation building policy crystallised.

After the brief but devastating war, Georgia's opportunities seem to have changed: The goal of reintegrating with the secessionist states seems further away than ever, considering the fact that large Russian military contingents are still deployed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgian-Russian relations have not seen any significant improvement since the end of the war, despite the on-going negotiations in the Geneva talks. The Georgians fleeing the conflict areas, 35,000 of whom are living in Georgia proper as internally displaced people (IDPs), added to the IDPs from the previous conflict and represent a huge challenge for Georgian authorities. Relations

with the West are relatively good, but the ambitions of joining NATO and EU seem unrealistic at the moment. All these factors seem to gravely complicate the political goals of the Georgian governing elite. Is Georgia now becoming "stuck in the middle" of transition, unable to redefine this project? What opportunities remain to carry out and complete the national project?

In this thesis I will discuss to what extent the 2008 conflict changed the course of Georgian nation building, assuming that it altered the preconditions for elite perceptions of Georgia's future opportunities and its relations to the secessionist states and to Russia. These relations, I will argue, are closely linked to the nation building process and bear a crucial significance to how Georgia's national project is perceived and carried out by the political elite. I thus believe that the course of events has altered Georgia's *possibilities* for successful nation building.

### *1.1 Main research questions*

*The Georgian national project* is a term coined by Georgian scholar Ghia Nodia. He describes it as "a normative idea expressing the nature of the public order that state institutions are expected to define and protect", and reflecting "the ambitions of different people (or of the elites representing them), as well as the political values, ideologies, and orientations prevalent within a society or key parts of it."<sup>1</sup> In several of Nodia's articles, the national project is linked mainly to security issues and to issues of reintegration within the country. Furthermore, Nodia argues that the national project comprises four "major guidelines" which have been consistent since the Georgian Democratic Republic of 1918-21, as well as during the three presidencies after independence. These guidelines include the nation-state as the only acceptable political framework, Europe as a provider of identity, Russia as a desired neutral neighbour but an actual adversary, and an expectation that minorities are loyal and respect Georgia's abovementioned ambitions.<sup>2</sup>

If we agree to the consistency of the national project, we still have to acknowledge that it has faced some extremely difficult challenges, including seventy years of

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<sup>1</sup>Nodia, Ghia: "Georgia: Dimensions of Insecurity", in Coppieters, Bruno and Robert Legvold (eds): *Statehood and Security. Georgia after the Rose Revolution*. Michigan: MIT Press, 2005 p. 41

<sup>2</sup> Nodia, Ghia: "Components of the Georgian National Idea: An Outline" in *Identity Studies Vol.1*, pp. 84- 101. Ilya State University, 2009, pp. 94-95

Soviet occupation, then civil war followed by severe political and social problems. The three presidents that have ruled independent Georgia since 1991 may all have aimed for the same main goals, but have chosen vastly different political interpretations (or methods of nation building) to achieve them. The country has achieved much since independence, but the cost of pursuing the national project has also been great. A few questions therefore arise as to how important the four major guidelines are for the further nation building process:

How do Georgian elites today envisage Georgia as a complete nation-state without Abkhazia and South Ossetia? How will Georgian elites want to position Georgia vis-a-vis Russia - as a neutral neighbour *or* an actual adversary? Is Europe in all senses a provider of Georgian identity?

## *1.2 Hypothesis*

On the basis of these questions, then, my hypothesis is that the conflict of August 2008 has had serious impact on Georgia's preconditions for nation building for the two following reasons: reintegration as a central component of political sentiment, and the possibility of a protracted break with Russia. In the reintegration question, the war has not only changed the geopolitical rules of the game, but the attitude of Georgian elites towards ethnic minorities and Georgia's ability to solve the conflict with the breakaway territories. Regarding Russia, I argue that the war has clarified the future of a relationship which has been ambivalent since the fall of the Soviet Union, and which for the time being is perceived by elites as openly hostile. This arguably gives Georgian nation builders a stronger incentive to affiliate politically, economically and culturally with Europe and the United States. At the same time, however, it has had a negative effect on democratisation, as this hostility in elite discourse is often used to denounce the opposition as Russia-friendly.

### **1.2.1 Reintegration as a central component**

All political factions in Georgia have, since the internal conflicts of the late 1980s and early 1990s, been united by the desire to achieve one crucial unifying objective: Integration of the breakaway regions Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Ajaria. With the exception of the latter (Ajaria was successfully and bloodlessly reintegrated into Georgia in April 2004, shortly after Saakashvili's inauguration), the 2008 war has,

rendered the ambition of reintegration beyond hope for the foreseeable future, as the *de facto* governments of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia are now increasingly enjoying Russian military protection.<sup>3</sup> The conflict between Georgia and the breakaway territories has deep historical roots, and has remained unsolved since the conflicts erupted in the early 1990s. For all three Georgian presidents, inclusion of minorities into Georgia has been a main goal in which much political – and at times military – effort has been put. The eventual failure to reintegrate South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008, however, has led to a need for different priorities for future nation building. Arguably, after the war Georgian elites have put less emphasis on the importance of reintegration and at the same time changed their policy towards national minorities. Without the possibility of reintegration, the Georgian national project has lost one of its central components.

### **1.2.2 Protracted break with Russia**

The 2008 war started with Georgian artillery shelling targets in and around Tskhinvali, capital of the breakaway South Ossetia region. This happened after a long period of diplomatic tensions and military skirmishes involving Georgian, Russian, Abkhazian and South Ossetian participants. The Georgian attack was followed by an unexpectedly strong reaction from the Russian Federation. In the course of a week, Russian forces defeated Georgian troops within the South Ossetia region, bombed several targets within Georgia and even invaded Georgia proper, before pulling back and establishing a number of garrisons in the two breakaway regions. On 26 August 2008, ten days after a ceasefire agreement had been signed, Russia recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia as sovereign states.<sup>4</sup> With these actions, Russia not only once and for all took sides in a regional conflict to which it had increasingly related in Georgia's disfavour – also, a long-protracted regional dispute became a matter of international concern. The action has severely complicated the relations between Russia and Georgia, relations that have been uneven for more than 200 years. Thus,

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<sup>3</sup> In the early months of 2011, extensive military hardware was moved from the Russian Federation to South Ossetia, allegedly temporarily and for educational purposes. For a discussion of these movements, see for instance this article in Voice of America: <http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/georgia/NC-Tochka-U-2011-03-09-117666753.html> (Accessed 24.03.11) or this and related articles in RIA Novosti <http://en.rian.ru/news/20100808/160117634.html> (Accessed 24.03.11).

<sup>4</sup> This initial presentation of the conflict is based on the substantial report from the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia of September 2009. More detailed perspectives on the conflict and its prelude will be discussed in a later chapter.

the drastic Russian measures of 2008 excluded the alternative of Russian interference in the Georgian nation building process: Russia has, in the minds of Georgian nation-builders, gone from being an unstable partner to a direct adversary. The prospect of returning to a Russia-dominated sphere of influence, where some of the CIS countries linger to this day, is now non-existent as far as Georgian elites are concerned.

### *1.3 Rethinking the trajectory of nation building*

Georgia has a long history of nation building that has its origins in the national movements of the late nineteenth century, when the ideological normative of the national project was created. I will argue that this normative has been present in all stages of nation building attempts: both in the First Republic, or what was known as the Democratic Republic of Georgia (DRG), and later during the various presidencies of the Second Republic, which was formed after independence in 1991. The two republics have seen extremely difficult challenges: the First Republic was terminated after the Soviet occupation in 1921, the Second Republic saw bloody conflicts in the first three years of its existence, two out of three presidents have been toppled and a war with Russia has been fought. It is still safe to say that the national project has survived. The trajectory of nation building, however, has changed with the elites who have had the chance to set new goals for Georgia, and with the dramatic events the country has gone through.

In this context, my point is that *the national project* has remained the ideological normative of nation building since the emergence of the first national movements in the 1860s. The process of *nation building*, on the other hand, has taken different directions. The war in 2008 can be seen as a seminal event regarding the nation building trajectory: If elites realise that reintegration with Abkhazia and South Ossetia is out of the question in the foreseeable future, nation building must be rethought, and perhaps completely reshaped. At least, one should suppose that the events of 2008 must call for a "Plan B" – a Georgian territory no longer including the breakaway territories, and Georgia choosing a more distinct path of alignment with the Western world.

### *1.4 Methodology and thesis outline*

Working with a range of empirical material, I have chosen a qualitative approach in order to make discussions in the thesis as relevant as possible. The main empirical material is gathered from reliable sources in news media such as [civil.ge](http://civil.ge) and [rferl.org](http://rferl.org), independent channels that often refer to official statements by political elites, conduct interviews with political actors and critically assess political situations. I have also analysed several texts from the pages of the Georgian government, presented on the web pages of Georgian authorities.

Collecting empirical material, I have spent a month working in Tbilisi, conducting several elite interviews with politicians, officials and analysts. The main interviewees are representatives for the political elite, representatives for the opposition and experts on Georgian politics. The ones quoted in this thesis are Irakli Porchkidze, First Deputy State Minister for Reintegration in the Georgian government; Tata Khuntsaria, Deputy public defender (ombudsman); David Usupashvili, leader of the oppositional Republican Party; Alex Petriashvili, political secretary of the Free Democrats Party, professor Ghia Nodia at Ilya State University, and Irakli Menagarishvili, Georgian minister of Foreign Affairs from 1995 to 2003. In the case of all interviews, I prepared interview guides containing relevant questions to the persons involved. Their answers have given this thesis an important dimension in that they illuminate various sides of contemporary Georgian politics both from the governmental and oppositional side, from an analytical perspective and in retrospect. Their quotes are spread in different parts of the thesis in order to let them highlight discussions in the relevant chapters.

Furthermore, collecting statistical material has been important to analyse the correlation between elite nation building measures and the response of Georgian citizens. Although this thesis is written mainly with the elite perspective in mind, a view on how the public relate to on-going challenges in Georgian political life is valuable to how the government makes its decisions.

The work on this thesis started as an effort to combine theories of nation and nationalism with the case study of Georgia. The result has become a discussion exceeding the theoretical labels, but knowledge of the most common theories is necessary in order to comprehend what is being discussed. Chapter two clarifies

terms often used in the discussion, as many of these terms are understood differently and themselves subject of scholarly debate.

In the third chapter, a historical overview illuminates the birth of Georgian national awareness and the development of the national project from the 1850s until the Rose Revolution in 2004. Chapter four scrutinises the political landscape in the Saakashvili era, and discusses differences in policy before and after the war. In chapter five, analysis of elite sentiment shows how the three presidents after independence from the Soviet Union have pursued the national project in different ways, but nevertheless stuck to the same major guidelines of the national project. In chapter six, the use of symbols, heroes and traditions is analysed – and a discussion of Georgia’s relationship with Russia shows how Russia fits into the Georgian elite conceptualisation of “the other”. Chapter seven points to how the Georgian public has reacted to the 2008 war, their perceptions of the elites and what political problems they deem as the most crucial.

## 2. CLARIFYING THE TERMS

### 2.1 Introduction

Clarifications seem to be needed when touching upon topics of this kind. Since all expressions containing the word *nation* contain a variety of meanings of both intellectual and emotional manner, I find it necessary to define my usage of central expressions like nation, nationalism, nation state and nation building. I will also give my own interpretation of Georgian scholar Ghia Nodia's expression *national project*, an expression that I find highly useful in this context.

### 2.2 Nation

#### 2.2.1. What and when is nation?

Starting with a foundational academic debate in the 1980s, several scholars have discussed the concept of nation and how it should be defined. What has come out of this discussion as existing paradigms is that nation is a relatively modern concept, connected to our modern conceptualisation of the state. The former *primordialist* beliefs that a nation can be traced back to ancient history have been replaced by the approach that nations first emerged in the modern Western European states, and then spread eastward. There are several theories about how and why this happened – the debate has seen many approaches that have turned into various schools of interpretation. Among the most influential are Ernest Gellner's theory of modernity, explaining the emergence of the nation as a result of the industrial revolution and its alteration of social patterns. Anthony Smith, for his part, has argued that there must have been communities resembling nations in pre-modern times – he calls these communities *ethnie*, entities sharing certain *identity markers* such as language, history and ethnic origin before modernity.<sup>5</sup>

There are also discussions concerning the objectivity of nation, and to what extent the concept is an elite construction or something people would share regardless of elite efforts to create national awareness.

The Czech scholar Miroslav Hroch has a definition of nation as being

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<sup>5</sup> Discussions on these topics are found in Smith, Anthony D.: *Nationalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press 2001 and Gellner, Ernest: *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell 1992.



a social group integrated by a combination of [...] objective relationships (economic, political, linguistic, cultural, religious, geographical, historical), and their subjective reflection in collective consciousness. Many of these ties could be mutually substitutable - some playing a particularly important role in one nation building process, and no more than a subsidiary part in others. But among them, three stand out as irreplaceable: (1) a 'memory' of some common past, treated as a 'destiny' of the group - or at least of its core constituents; (2) a density of linguistic or cultural ties enabling a higher degree of social communication within the group than beyond it; (3) a conception of the equality of all members of the group organized as a civil society."<sup>6</sup>

For the purpose of this account, I shall stick to Hroch's definition, as I find it to cover many of the gaps left by other scholars: recognising the pre-national identity markers, it also approaches the factor of subjectivity and leaves room for the constructivist approach.

### 2.2.3 The Georgian context

The word *nation* is troubled in a Georgian context – the country's relatively small population is so diverse in terms of language, culture, history and other national identity markers that definitions seem fluctuant. The core of the Georgian conflicts can be found in this diversity, and in the fact that the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia do not identify with the "Georgian nation". So what actually defines a nation in this sense?

The languages spoken belong to different branches of the Kartvelian or South Caucasian language family (Georgian, Migrelian, Svan and Laz). As Georgia has its own branch of the Orthodox Church, religion can be seen as a unifying factor. Then again, Ossetians and Abkhazians share religious faith with Georgians, whereas Ajaria, which was reintegrated with Georgia in 2004, has a larger Muslim representation.<sup>7</sup>

Religion is not, at least from the elite perspective, a problematic dividing issue in defining the Georgian identity, and despite some groups' attempts to present religion as the main identity marker, the question of "Georgianness" has until recently been

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<sup>6</sup> Hroch, Miroslav: "From National Movement to the Fully-formed Nation: The Nation building Process in Europe," in Balakrishnan, Gopal (ed): *Mapping the Nation*. New York and London: Verso, 1996: pp. 78-97. See especially p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> Toft, Monica Duffy: *The Geography of Ethnic Violence. Identity, Interests, and the Indivisibility of Territory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2003, p. 109. Based on the 1989 census, Toft estimates 34-42 per cent of the population of Ajaria to be (Muslim) Ajarians.

linked closer to ethnicity and language than to religion.<sup>8</sup> As I will discuss in a later chapter, however, the Georgian Orthodox church, with its large influence in Georgian discourse, has expressed reluctance against the elites' acquisition of Western values, and increasingly stresses the importance of Orthodoxy as a marker of national identity.

In any case, Hroch's conceptualisation of *nation* is useful because it offers a perspective combining the objective and the subjective: People can share or not share a range of objective factors like language, religious belief and geographical position, but it is the subjective experience of belonging as an equal member of the group that eventually ties people together. Within this subjective experience, shared history is shaped into national myths, and identities are made based on imagined likeness with other members of the group and differences with the non-members. Whether such identities are created by elites or shaped "from below" by groups or communities, they can be utilised as tools to include or exclude and to create a feeling of belonging.

In the Post-Soviet context, the word *nation* carries a complicated connotation. When establishing the Soviet Union in the 1920s, the Soviet elite, mainly centralised in the Russian urban centres, created a meticulous hierarchy of republics and sub-republics with various degrees of autonomy. The basis for these republics was determined mostly by Soviet interpretations of ethnic communities and loosely on a historical foundation.<sup>9</sup> The Soviet Republic of Georgia, emerging from the short-lived Transcaucasian Soviet Republic, had no previous history of being a nation-state. Nevertheless, as Ronald Grigor Suny argues, "Georgia, like its neighbour Armenia, had existed as a state (actually as a number of states) long before the first Russian state had been formed".<sup>10</sup> Following Anthony Smith's definition of pre-modern *ethnie*, Suny points to the fact that Georgia and Armenia, unlike most other Soviet Republics, were "historically independent states" with recognisable identities consisting of distinctive lingual, religious and territorial features. Moreover, he agrees

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<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, as suggested by Ghia Nodia, such sentiments exist, particularly among non-muslim Georgians in Ajaria, and "could generate frictions". Nodia, Ghia: "Georgia: Dimensions of Insecurity", in Coppieters, Bruno and Robert Legvold (eds): *Statehood and Security. Georgia after the Rose Revolution*. Michigan: MIT Press, 2005 p. 56-57

<sup>9</sup> Brubaker, Rogers: *Rethinking Nationhood: Nation as Institutionalized Form, Practical Category, Contingent Event*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Suny, Ronald Grigor: *The Revenge of the Past. Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1993, p. 58

with Smith that such *ethnie*, despite sharing identity markers of both objective and subjective character, must be distinguished from the modern *nation*:

Though premodern ethnies shared a collective name, a myth of descent, a history, and a distinctive culture, though they associated themselves with a specific territory and felt a sense of solidarity, they were not as politicized, mobilized, and “territorialized” [identified with clear-cut territorial units] as nations in the modern sense are.<sup>11</sup>

When Georgian nationalist intellectuals started their campaigns for autonomy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the distinct Georgian identity markers were easy to recognise and share. Although the elites of the First Republic never had the time to consolidate the Georgian nation-state in the short and tumultuous time of their independence, they followed the same ideological narrative, or national project, that was pursued in the latter days of the Soviet Union.

As nationalist sentiment arose in both the republic and its sub-units in the late 1980s, nationality needed reaffirmation and historical legitimacy. Who deserved complete independence? Which parameters were to be used to answer that question – Soviet ethnofederalism, imperial administration, or various interpretations of ancient history?

### 2.3 *Nationalism or national movement*

The word nationalism is in itself problematic as it could easily be loaded with normative political content. Scholars disagree not only on what this expression should mean – for many, nationalism represents an ideology, yet others see it as a movement. Anthony Smith has defined nationalism as “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential ‘nation’”.<sup>12</sup> The most common use of the word is within this category – nationalism seems to be defined as an ideology, a social or political movement, or in the nation building sense. Hroch, going against the grain in this case, limits the use of nationalism to what he calls its “original” sense: a collective mentality “that gives priority to the interests and values of one’s own nation

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<sup>11</sup> Suny 1993, p.59

<sup>12</sup> Smith, p.9

over all other interests and values”.<sup>13</sup> Hence he interprets the word in a negative way, as a term indicating national chauvinism. For the purpose of this thesis, since terms will often be discussed in the analysis of several scholars, I will not limit the term nationalism to Hroch’s strict use. Still, Hroch’s nation forming theory will be presented in this sub-chapter rather than in the one about nation building, because this early process is more about national movements and national awareness – essentially, nationalism – than nation building, which I consider a process that is initiated within the independent nation-state.

Miroslav Hroch has divided the formation of modern nations into processes, the first being the “early modern” *state-nation* (France, the Netherlands, Sweden), where ruling elites set the premises for nationality – and the second among the ‘smaller nations’, beginning “under conditions of a non-dominant ethnic group, i.e. a group which formed an ethnic community and whose members possessed a greater or lesser degree of ethnic identity”.<sup>14</sup> This category, he argues, shared a lack of a ruling class, statehood and a continuous literary tradition, but did contain a group of intellectuals who started seeing their community as belonging to the category of *nation*. These intellectuals started *national movements* which with the aim of waking up the ‘unconscious’ nation – that is, the non-dominant ethnic group that was perceived as having a right to become an independent nation-state. Regarding the use of terms, Hroch argues that “the term ‘national movement’ has a significant advantage over ‘nationalism’ in that it refers to empirically observable activity by concrete individuals”, and proceeds to explain how these movements shaped their discourse and influenced their communities during three phases of their work:

At the beginning of the national movements there was activity which was above all devoted to scholarly inquiry into and propagation of an awareness of the linguistic, cultural, social, economic and historical attributes of the non-dominant ethnic group (Phase A). In the ensuing period, Phase B, a new range of activists emerged, who now sought to win over as many of their ethnic group as possible to the project of creating a modern nation, by patriotic agitation.

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<sup>13</sup> Hroch, Miroslav: “Nationalism and National Movements: Comparing the Past and the Present of Central and Eastern Europe”, in *Nations and Nationalisms 2 (1)*, 1996, p. 36

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

Once the major part of the population came to set special store by their national identity, a mass movement emerged – Phase C.<sup>15</sup>

Although the theory is meant to apply to national communities within multinational empires in Eastern Europe, Hroch does not mention Georgia in particular. However, the similarities between the periodisation described above and the social and political development in Georgia in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century should be clearly visible. Suny also supports this view:

Without an unnecessarily rigid application of Hroch’s model, it is possible in a discussion of the formation of the Georgian intelligentsia to trace a similar evolution - from the initial revival of the Georgian past and attention to the language in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries through the journalistic activity of the 1860s and 1870s to the active political nationalism of the turn of the century.<sup>16</sup>

Hroch stresses the importance of distinguishing *national identity*, created by agitation in Phase B, and *ethnic identity*, a simpler form of identity that could exist within a multinational empire without agitation or mobilisation. National identity, according to Hroch, is more complex: an identity that possesses a social composition including national elites, and a community of citizens enjoying equal rights. It also “acknowledges a body of ‘higher culture’ in the national language” and has a subjective feature in that it combines “an awareness of a common origin with an awareness of common destiny, to create a historical ‘personalised’ collectivity”.<sup>17</sup>

Hroch’s way of analysing the emergence of national movements in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century has been recognised by other influential students of nationalism, especially those of the constructivist school, who stress the “invention of tradition” perspective and the active role played by intellectual elites in national movements. Scholars like Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm have also pointed out that the term nationalism “is a principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent”.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Hroch, Miroslav: “The Nature of the Nation”, in Hall, John A. (ed): *The State of the Nation. Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 94-95

<sup>16</sup> Suny, Ronald Grigor: *The Making of the Georgian Nation*. London: IB Tauris 1989, p. 119.

<sup>17</sup> Hroch 1998, p. 96

<sup>18</sup> Gellner, p. 1, and Hobsbawm, Eric J.: *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme. Myth. Reality*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 9-11. Hobsbawm stresses that although he agrees with Gellner in that nationalism derives from modernisation and thus is constructed ‘from above’, he criticises Gellner for not paying ‘adequate attention to the view from below’.

The emergence of new nation-states in Eastern Europe in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was the result of national movements creating national awareness among ethnic communities. In Hroch's argumentation, national movements in countries of the old Eastern empires gained momentum as a result of such mobilisation processes, where a demand for national independence coincided with class or centre/periphery struggles.<sup>19</sup> The first phase of the Georgian national project, as described above, fits well into the description offered by Miroslav Hroch of national movements in Eastern European countries in the 19th century. Here, national mobilisation followed a three-phased development starting with intellectuals acquiring an interest in native languages and historical myths, gaining momentum as national awareness became politicised and ended with nation-wide mobilisation. As one of the crucial preconditions for successful mobilisation Hroch described the emergence of a *nationally relevant conflict*, a social tension that mobilises not only intellectuals demanding language rights, but also workers against manufacturers and peasants against landlords representing an elite outside the national group. National movements thus mobilised people from "several classes and groups". Therefore, according to Hroch, this mobilisation cannot be reduced to a class struggle: it was this combination of national agitation and popular mobilisation in phase C that led to successful nation forming in many countries.<sup>20</sup> Regarding Georgia, however, it might seem that this final stage of mass mobilisation required more than national awareness. Suny argues that during this final stage, the emergence of Marxist and socialist movements inspired by the Russian populists, was the reason for this mobilisation by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

### 2.3.1 National movements after the Soviet Union

In the case of Georgia, a relatively strong national sentiment remained in educated circles during Soviet times. Therefore, as I will argue, there is a clear continuity between the national project that Georgian intellectuals embarked upon in the late

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<sup>19</sup> Hroch, Miroslav: "An Unwelcome National Identity, or What to do About "Nationalism" in the Post-Communist Countries?" in Hroch: *Comparative Studies in Modern European History. Nation, Nationalism, Social Change*. Aldershot: Varorium 2006, IX pp. 269-70.

<sup>20</sup> Hroch, Miroslav: "From National Movement to the Fully-formed Nation". *New Left Review* no.198 1993, p. 12

<sup>21</sup> Suny 1989, pp. 179-181

nineteenth century and the sentiments that drove the circles around Zviad Gamsakhurdia to power in the late 1980s.

Hroch argues that there are similarities between the national movements emerging in the nineteenth century and those coming out of the Soviet republics in the 1980s.<sup>22</sup> Both movements occurred in times of crisis where there was a need for a new group identity defined by a ‘personalised’ nation, an ethnic homogeneity within ‘historical’ borders where those not sharing lingual, religious and ethnic similarities are considered outsiders. Especially in the post-Soviet space, language became a strong marker of national identity, defining the ‘nation’ within the borders of the former republics.<sup>23</sup> There are, however, differences which explain the outcome of the post-Soviet national movements and the ensuing conflicts: in the times around the collapse of the Soviet Union, national movements did not have to create a new national entity, but could restore the previous one created before Soviet rule. Moreover, the social structures have changed – where 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals from non-dominant ethnic groups had to keep with the value system they were a part of, post-Soviet elites took advantage of the power vacuum that ensued after the collapse without obligation to answer to any existing norms or traditions.

Hroch also highlights a change in the nationally relevant conflicts: whereas these conflicts during the pre-Soviet era were linked to industrialisation and economic growth, the post-Soviet conflicts were a response to “short-term depression and decline”, providing a different psychological effect which made it easier for agitators to blame ‘the others’. Most importantly, the increasing availability and intensity of social communication and the role of mass media have accelerated communication processes and facilitated proliferation of information to the masses, so that new elites can “manipulate populations, to distort or intensify [how] they portray conflicts of interests where they do not exist, that is, to promote or diminish the danger of aggressive nationalism”.<sup>24</sup>

In those post-Soviet areas where armed clashes erupted, tensions concerning national identity were at the core of conflict. As new elites grasped power, historical myths

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<sup>22</sup> Hroch 1996, p. 39

<sup>23</sup> Hroch 1996, p. 40

<sup>24</sup> Hroch 1996, pp. 41-42

and other national markers were re-constructed with a greater intensity than before, sharply defining out-groups and ‘enemies’. As Russian scholar Valery Tishkov points out,

the constructivist approach pays special attention to mentalities and language as key symbols around which a perception of ethnic distinctiveness crystalizes. For example, written texts and speeches contain historical reconstructions which are used to justify the authenticity and the continuity of one or another ethnic identity [...] Political and heavily ideological archaeology and ethnography have flourished for decades in the academies – central and peripheral – of the former Soviet Union. What is new is that unprecedented battles to ‘reconcile the past’ with new political agendas are taking place with far greater ferocity and insulting language than during times of censorship and limited publishing opportunities.<sup>25</sup>

I will argue that this was particularly true during Gamsakhurdia’s rule: Gamsakhurdia himself was a scholar who used academic arguments to reconstruct Georgian history and create a polarised identity.

#### *2.4 Nation-state*

What has been discussed in the previous sub-chapter is the subjective aspect of nation, which makes people feel united with common identities. Another aspect is that of state-society relations, or how elites structuralise the nation into what Anthony Giddens defines as “the pre-eminent power-container of the modern era”: The nation-state.<sup>26</sup> As various students of nation and nationalism have pointed out, the concept of the state, defined by Weberian features such as monopoly on legitimate violence – in addition to a bureaucracy, division of labour and civic participation, has to coincide with an idea of a geographically limited area where markers of national identity (such as language, ethnicity, religion and history) are shared by the group of people living there. This contrasts with the multinational state: the empires that crumbled in the early twentieth century, and that comprised several non-dominant ethnic groups or nationalities ruled by one dominant group.

Studies of nations and nationalism are to a great extent focused on finding the congruence between the concepts of state and those of nation. The prominent scholars

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<sup>25</sup> Tishkov, Valery: *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and After the Soviet Union. The Mind Aflame*. London: Sage publications, 1997. p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> Giddens, Anthony: *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism, ii: The Nation-State and Violence*. Cambridge: Polity Press 1985, p. 119.



on the topic disagree as to when and how these concepts converged, but there is a consensus that the term nation in the meaning nation-state is a modern phenomenon that emerged with The French Revolution.<sup>27</sup> As previously mentioned, most scholars agree that there is a correlation between the concepts of state and nation, and that a criterion for a nation is at least to have state aspirations. I will not take part in these general discussions, but rather illuminate some points about the Georgian case: using Smith's language, Georgia has a strong *ethnie* identity, sharing pre-national attributes such as the Georgian-Orthodox church, a history of statehood and relatively defined borders, and a literary language. When national movements started spreading in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a national movement emerged boasting pre-national attributes and defining the concept of a Georgian nation-state. National movements in the late 1980s picked up this concept again. The concept of a Georgian nation-state is a central guideline of the Georgian national project, which is pursued to this day.

### 2.5 National project

In his article *Components of the Georgian National Idea: an Outline*, Georgian scholar Ghia Nodia offers a highly interesting account on Georgian attitudes towards nation building. He describes the subjective and objective ideas of nation as 'platonic' and non-platonic', meaning that the 'platonic' ones are impossible to construct or deconstruct – they are there, but can be reconstructed or reinterpreted by elites. Among the key 'platonic' ideas of nation, he mentions *markers of identity* (language, history, religion, traditions); *the political project* (the task of preserving or expressing national identity); *the image of the other* or the *out-group* (In Georgia's case, detachment from the imperial master); *role models* (other nations who have already completed their nation building) and *the internal other* (minorities).<sup>28</sup>

Nodia then goes on to define the normative idea he calls the national project, defined by the following elements:

- 1) The Georgian nation-state is the only acceptable political framework for the development of the Georgian nation;

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<sup>27</sup> For extensive discussions of these topics, see accounts by Smith, Gellner and Hall (ed).

<sup>28</sup> Nodia 2009, pp. 86-88

2) Europe or the West in general (these two terms are not conceptually divided) serves as the provider of a larger (framework) identity, as the role model, and the presumed ally. This means that:

- (a) By its essence, Georgia is part of Europe, it should be recognized as such and be part of main institutions of the West such as NATO and the European Union;
- (b) the West serves as a blueprint for the construction of the Georgian state - that is, it is only legitimate as a *democratic* state. If it does not fully conform to this normative framework yet, it is on the way to doing so;
- (c) the West is Georgia's main friend, ally, and protector.

It is interesting that Nodia highlights how 'the West' is a term applied to both USA and Europe – it suggests that to Georgian elites, the concept of the West is a stereotype of modernisation, economic efficiency and protection from the Russian threat. The remaining two points, describing Georgia's relation to Russia and national minorities, read as follows:

3) Russia should be just another neighboring country with whom Georgia should have friendly though not preferential relations. In fact, however, it is the main adversary, as it tries to undermine the Georgian state through direct intervention or through exacerbating internal Georgian problems (see the next point).

4) Georgia is a tolerant country that accepts and recognizes culturally distinct ethnic minorities on its territory but demands from them loyalty to the Georgian national project as defined above. Granting them territorial autonomy is undesirable but acceptable if necessary. The presence of minorities may become a challenge to it (as it is the case for any country) but Georgia is fully capable of handling this unless outside actors (in practice - Russia) deliberately infuse tensions.<sup>29</sup>

Nodia describes the national project as unfulfilled, and says that these guidelines have been invariable since the start – “despite all the differences between the first Georgian republic of 1918-21 and the post-Soviet period as well as important differences among the political regimes of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili”.<sup>30</sup>

This model is helpful because it depicts a normative idea which has been followed for a long while, and which has been reproduced to become a normative ideology for all Georgia's elites. However, it seems that this national project has been more clearly defined during Saakashvili's presidency – he has explicitly followed the guidelines of the national project, and even used the term “Georgian project” to describe his ideological framework.<sup>31</sup> Slightly simplified, it could be said that Gamsakhurdia pursued nation building exclusively, Shevardnadze concentrated on state building – and Saakashvili has managed to do both.

<sup>29</sup> Nodia 2009, p. 94

<sup>30</sup> Nodia 2009, p. 95

<sup>31</sup> The President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili's speech delivered at the ceremony dedicated to Russia-Georgian war anniversary”, from the official site of Georgia's Presidential Administration, 12 Feb 2009. [http://www.president.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=228&info\\_id=4134](http://www.president.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=228&info_id=4134). Accessed 22 June 2011.

## 2.6 Nation building and the role of elites

Just like nation and nationalism, nation building is an expression with a range of different meanings. It is common to see nation building as opposed to state building – two processes that may be closely linked, but may differ in many ways. American scholar Francis Fukuyama means that both expressions comprise the building of state institutions and framework, but whereas state building is a project owned by the state's own elite, nation building is a project carried out by an outside power, such as American military and political involvement in contemporary Afghanistan.<sup>32</sup>

More commonly, however, scholars tend to describe state building as the formal, institutional and administrative construction within a state, while nation building is a process in which national identity is consolidated.<sup>33</sup> I find this a reasonable separation of two on-going processes because it also says something about relations between state and society: Whereas state building is a matter of how elites construct and formalise a state, nation building can be a more inclusive process – or at least a process in which participation of non-state groups and individuals take place. Nation building is primarily undertaken by elites, however – theirs is the privilege to construct, re-invent, highlight or downplay identities connected to the nation. Language, religion, cultural traditions, unifying symbols and historical myths are used to make the individual citizen feel close to the national community.<sup>34</sup> This is more than true in the Georgian case: for the casual visitor as well as for the scholarly observer, a strong national identity is clearly visible in the way old literature is cherished, in the way traditions of music and food are preserved also in modern times, in the large devotion to the Georgian-Orthodox church and in the way historical myths are manifested in popular discourse.

For the purposes of this account, I define nation building as the *political consolidation* of the national project. Therefore, I will use *national project* as the overarching idea or concept that was established with the first national movements in the 1860 and has remained more or less unchanged to this day, and nation building as the term for how

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<sup>32</sup> Fukuyama, Francis: *State Building. Governance and State Order in the 21st century*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2004, pp. 50-52 and 131-40.

<sup>33</sup> Kolstø offers a substantial discussion of this matter in Kolstø, Pål: "Strategies of Symbolic nation building in new states: successes and failures" (essay 2009)

<sup>34</sup> Coakley, John: "Mobilizing the Past: Nationalist images of History" in *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 10:4, 2004, pp. 535-539

this project has been concretely pursued by elites at different times of modern Georgian history. I will argue that nation building was started, but aborted in the short period of independence in 1918-1921, that it was picked up again in 1991 and then lost priority in the mid-1990s, and finally that it was pursued successfully after the Rose Revolution in 2003. The discussion as to how the 2008 war has affected the possibilities of nation building, then, will be related to how essential Russia and the breakaway states are to this process.

### 3. A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

#### 3.1 Introduction

Georgia's statehood in modern terms is quite young. However, the roots of Georgia's origins can be traced back to the kingdoms of Colchis and Iberia in late antiquity, and to the renaissance under David the Builder and Queen Tamar in the 12th and 13th century. Since these historic "golden ages" are easy to define and place within a geographical area, and since a strong tradition for a unique alphabet and literary language was already in place, Georgian national movements never faced difficulties finding grounds for national awareness and playing on nationalist sentiment in the 19th century.<sup>35</sup> With a heritage of language and historical myths already established, the Georgian way to nation building was closely interlinked with memories of the past.<sup>36</sup> Georgia lost its pre-national statehood at the outset of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: its incorporation in the Russian empire in 1801 could be seen as a trade-off where national identity was traded not only for security, but also for contact with European culture. After the integration into the Russian Empire in 1801, Georgia was presented to modernity by Russian soldiers, intellectuals and civil servants. While influencing Russian culture and becoming an important part of Russian national identity, people from the Caucasus were still seen as "wild" and often romanticised in Orientalist fashions, displayed in literature and official sentiment as different and more primitive than ethnic Russians.<sup>37</sup>

In this chapter I seek to highlight events in modern Georgian history that illustrate the troubled road of nation building. A meaningful discussion of Georgia's contemporary national project requires a review of the longer lines of history, because Georgia seems to have gone through previous phases of the national project, or three processes of nation building: The first, starting in the 19th century and following the trajectory

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<sup>35</sup> Nodia, 2009, p. 86

<sup>36</sup> King, Charles: *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*. Oxford: University Press, 2008 p. 179

<sup>37</sup> For a good account on this orientalist description, see King, pp. 106-118: Here, Semyon Boronevskii, Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov and Leo Tolstoy are named as the authors describing "the unruly south" during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (p. 108)

of several other Eastern European states at the time, culminated in the formation of the Democratic Republic of Georgia in 1918, only to be aborted by Red Army occupation in 1921. The second, starting in the late 1980s and facing a violent end in 1993, had to be downplayed in trade for stability later in the 1990s. It came back with the Rose Revolution in 2003, only to fail with the defeat in the 2008 war. The defeat and its consequences will be discussed more thoroughly in later chapters.

### *3.2 Integration into the Russian Empire*

The story of Georgian-Russian relations starts with the Treaty of Georgievsk in 1783. Signed by Empress Catherine the Great of Russia and King Irakli II of Kartli-Kakheti<sup>38</sup>, the treaty offered much-needed military protection to a vulnerable kingdom squeezed between three mighty great powers. Identifying more with Orthodox Russia than with the Muslim Persian and Ottoman empires, Irakli felt it natural to seek Russian protection and was willing to make his kingdom a protectorate of the Russian empire. However, when tensions with the Ottomans requested Russian troops elsewhere, the Russian garrison in Irakli's capital Tiflis (called Tbilisi after 1936) was withdrawn. In 1795, encouraged by the absence of Russian troops and eager to punish their unstable Western neighbours, the Persians under Agha Mohammed Khan sacked Tiflis. This led to Irakli's successor, Giorgi, pleading that Kartli-Kakheti be incorporated into the Russian empire. Catherine's successor Paul I saw this as an opportunity of expansion, and in January 1801 annexed the territories, "ignoring pleas for continued rule by the Georgian dynastic line".<sup>39</sup>

Thus, the relationship between the two countries began with military neglect and forced annexation. At the same time, the Russian presence brought modernity to the Caucasian territories, and exported romanticised perceptions of Caucasian culture back to the courts of St. Petersburg and Moscow. Under the reign of viceroy Mikhail Vorontsov (1845-1854) Tbilisi was rebuilt and expanded, and the relationship between the viceroy and the Georgian gentry was cordial.<sup>40</sup> The social relationships of the time were still complicated: the gentry were economically poor, and had fewer resources than the class of Armenian bourgeoisie, who were strongly represented in

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<sup>38</sup> The two kingdoms of Kartli and Kakheti were united by Irakli in 1762, and became a relatively strong state in the Eastern part of modern-day Georgia.

<sup>39</sup> Jones, Stephen F.: *Socialism in Georgian Colors. The European Road to Social Democracy 1883-1917*. Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 2005. p. 140

<sup>40</sup> Suny 1989, p. 73.

the cities as manufacturers and merchants. With the gradual coming of industrialisation, Georgian peasants started moving to the cities throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, making out the poorest societal segment. This was the backdrop upon which the young, Russian-educated Georgian intellectuals started longing for a cultural language of their own and incorporating elements of romanticism into their literary texts.

### *3.3 The first phase of the national project*

The ambivalence in the Russian-Georgian relationship played an important role in the formation of modern Georgian society. As Georgian young nobles were introduced to modern education and European political ideas in Russia from the early nineteenth century, sentiments about Georgian national identity started occurring with the intellectual movement called *Tergdaleulni*, “those who have tasted the waters of the river Terek”. The name indicated that these scholars had tasted the waters of the Terek, the river that runs between Georgia and Russia. Taking their inspiration mostly from Russian oppositional movements, the emerging national movement was exposed to different ideas on how to conduct the national project. By the 1870s, currents of nostalgic, language-based nationalism competed with more politicised ideas of reformism and liberalism, in addition to socialism and Russian-inspired populism.<sup>41</sup> As we shall see, these currents in turn created a mass mobilisation opposing Russian rule as well as the Armenian middle class, resulting in a nationally relevant conflict that saw Georgians united for different reasons. The mobilisation was complex, driven by a range of different factors and impulses, comprising agitators from various strata. It started out, however, as a typical example of Hroch’s phase A, with a group scholars developing an “awareness of the linguistic, cultural, social and sometimes historical attributes of the non-dominant group”.<sup>42</sup>

#### 3.3.1. The three waves from the Terek

Georgia’s national awakening in the late 19th century can be compared to that of several Eastern European countries in the sense that Georgian language, literature and history issues were part of a collective memory and pride. The close interaction with

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<sup>41</sup> Suny 1989, p. 132

<sup>42</sup> Hroch 1996, p. 7

Russia had not deprived Georgians of their national myths, and when Georgian intellectuals started creating sentiments about national awareness in the 1850s, this stirred feelings among the educated gentry.

Since Georgian elites were incorporated into the Russian elite network, not all of them had the urge for national freedom. Georgian gentry could often be partners of the further Russian expansion in the Caucasus, and Georgians took part in the political and societal life in the Russian capitals.<sup>43</sup> It was not until concerns were raised about the status of Georgian language that intellectuals in the country – also a part of the “russified” upper classes – started protesting. Writers and activists such as Ilia Chavchavadze and Akaki Tsereteli were among the most important men behind the national movement emerging in the 1860s: They were both noblemen with the Russian title of *Knyaz*’ (prince) attached to their names, and they both received their higher education at the University of St. Petersburg. Their publications, however, ranging from essays and satirical short stories to epic poems and historical texts, strongly propagated Georgian independence and the use of Georgian language in literature. Chavchavadze, having been inspired by Giuseppe Garibaldi and other European nationalists that he had heard about in St. Petersburg, became an activist upon his return to Georgia in 1861. He also became a leading figure of the first wave, in Georgian *pirveli dasi*, of the national movement. During the 1870s, a second wave, *meore dasi*, emerged: intellectuals like Niko Nikoladze and Giorgi Tsereteli broke with Chavchavadze’s nostalgic and romanticised nationalism, and worked more actively to maintain Georgians in prominent societal positions.<sup>44</sup>

The works and agitation of the two movements hit an emotional string within the Georgian gentry. Soon a broader movement of intellectuals started combining interest in their ancient history and language with European ideas of national identity and independence. Known as the *Tergdaleulni*, the members of the first and second waves of Georgian nationalist intellectuals had all got their education and knowledge of the modern world from Russia. Although many of them visited Europe, their intellectual heritage was Russian. Their viewpoints were coloured by Russian interpretations of liberalism since they saw Russia as a gateway to Europe. At the same time, their relationship to Russia was ambivalent – the national awakening did stem from the fear

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<sup>43</sup> King, p. 148

<sup>44</sup> Suny 1989, p. 132



that Russian rule and western ideas would undermine Georgian culture. As Suny puts it:

“[...] contact with Russia and the West worked to awaken consciousness of Georgia’s unique culture and fears that Georgia would be overwhelmed by foreign values, by Russian political practice and by the alien economic operations of Armenian middlemen. This ambivalence toward “Europeanization” and Russian rule was a constant feature of Georgian intellectual life through the nineteenth century into the twentieth”.<sup>45</sup>

The *mesame dasi* or third wave of the national movement was even more politically distinct, and acquired more response outside the salons of Tbilisi. Younger Georgian intellectuals, born and raised in the countryside and inspired by Russian populists and by foreign thinkers like Victor Hugo and Karl Marx, started publishing material where demands for national autonomy were linked to agitation for peasants’ rights and protection of the growing urban proletariat. In the early 1890s, writers Egnate Ninoshvili and Mikheil Tskhakaya formed this third wave, a literary group with socialist affiliations, which soon metamorphosed into a radical political organisation.<sup>46</sup> The combination of this interest in political modernisation and the steadily-growing demand for linguistic and national independence proved fertile, and unlike movements in *western* parts of Europe where the groups supporting class struggle and nationalist sentiment were opposed to each other, these groups – at least for a short while – successfully overlapped in fin-de-siècle Georgia, as they did in other parts of *Eastern* Europe, particularly with nations belonging to multinational empires.<sup>47</sup>

### 3.3.2 The three waves in a theoretical perspective

From Chavchavadze’s earliest works in the 1860s until the end of the nineteenth century, Georgia’s national mobilisation can be described as a textbook example of Hroch’s theories and stands comparable to the development of several other Eastern European national movements. However, the development of the strong Menshevik movement in the early twentieth century, and its strongly socialist discourse, was an unexpected turnout.

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<sup>45</sup> Suny 1989, pp. 125-128

<sup>46</sup> Suny 1989, p. 141

<sup>47</sup> Hroch 1996, p. 5

There were particular reasons for Georgian socialists to combine class struggle with a national project. Although Georgian revolutionaries were connected to the Russian Social Democratic party, Georgian socialism had a much stronger nationalist component than its Russian counterpart. Inspired by the *Tergdaleulni* and by European Marxist thinkers such as Otto Bauer, Georgian Social Democrats were concerned about the national question and much more aware of questions concerning the peasantry.

In his book *Socialism in Georgian Colors*, English/American scholar Stephen F. Jones argues that Georgia's path to socialism was marked by a higher degree of nationalist struggle and anti-colonialism, and therefore enjoyed a much more unified support than did the socialists in Russia.<sup>48</sup> Joined not only by the urban workers who often toiled in Armenian-owned factories, but also by the peasants and many of the impoverished nobles, Georgian socialism developed into a movement closer to Russia's Menshevik faction than to the Leninist Bolsheviks.

German scholar Christoph Zürcher, on the other hand, finds the class and national identity struggles to be incompatible, and illustrates this by describing the relationship between Georgian labourers and Armenian industry owners. Pointing out that "the Armenians constituted the middle class, and [...] the Georgian nobility had long been integrated in the Russian service nobility", he proceeds to conclude that "the Georgian national movement lacked a social basis because the workers and the rural population were drawn toward social democratic ideas more than toward national projects".<sup>49</sup> Zürcher here fails to recognise that Social Democracy in this period was still closely associated with national independence movements in many countries. Austro-Marxism had since the late 19th century combined Marxist ideals with alternative perceptions of nation and nationality, and in other multinational empires, social democratic ideas indeed had close links to national projects. This coincides with Hroch's nationally relevant conflicts to the extent that Georgia's struggle for national autonomy acquired support from the masses in a struggle of centre vs. periphery, peasants vs. landowners, workers vs. manufacturers. As the nineteenth century drew

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<sup>48</sup> Jones, p. 43

<sup>49</sup> Zürcher, p. Christoph: *The Post-Soviet Wars. Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict and Nationhood in the Caucasus*. New York: University Press, 19

to a close, Georgia's national project was freezing into its forms: a combination of national and class awareness.

### 3.3.3 Political violence, war and revolution

From the turn of the century, and especially in the aftermath of the first Russian Revolution in 1905, political movements in Georgia became increasingly radicalised. Bad harvests and growing industrialism forced a steadily growing amount of peasants to leave the countryside and settle down in the cities, leading to explosive urban population increases.<sup>50</sup> The new urban workers proved to be a trustworthy base of recruitment for the Georgian branch of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party, an Empire-wide organisation established in 1898.<sup>51</sup> The unrest of those years bears close similarities to the political violence seen in other parts of the Empire: Terrorist actions against the regime followed by acts of repression, radicalised but also increasingly factionalised Marxist movements, and violence among the various oppositional factions. Chavchavadze, who was elected representative of the first Russian Duma in 1907, was assassinated near Mtskheta after the first Duma session, allegedly in a joint operation by Bolshevik and Menshevik activists including Sergo Orjonikidze, who was later to become a Soviet Politburo member.<sup>52</sup> The murder of the popular nationalist led to Bolsheviks losing support, whereas Mensheviks, who supported a Russian Duma, were not placed under the same suspicion.

The dominating elements of the revolutionary movement maintained nationalist elements in their agitation. The few Georgian revolutionaries who opposed inclusion of the bourgeoisie in the revolutionary planning and discredited national autonomy would have to find their credentials elsewhere.<sup>53</sup> This was very much the case for Iosef Djugashvili (Stalin), who left Georgia in 1907 and lost touch with the Georgian revolutionary movement. Later to occupy a central position in the Russian Bolshevik movement, both he and Orjonikidze would prove pivotal in determining the formation of the Georgian SSR after 1921.

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<sup>50</sup> Anchabadze, I.D. and N.G. Volkova: *Staryi Tbilisi: Gorod i gorozhane v XIX veke*. Moscow: Nauka, 1990, p. 98-99. According to this source, the city population grew from 234 000 in 1886 to 666 000 in 1913.

<sup>51</sup> King, p. 149.

<sup>52</sup> Sebag Montefiore, Simon: *Young Stalin*. London: Weidenfield & Nicholson p. 154n. Although the author claims 'some evidence' to blame Orjonikidze for the murder, this still remains an unsolved case.

<sup>53</sup> Jones, p. 227 and 271.

### 3.5 *The first Georgian Republic, 1918 - 1921*

On 26 May 1918, as civil war raged in post-revolutionary Russia, the Democratic Republic of Georgia (DRG) became a reality. Led by Menshevik politician and activist Noe Jordania, the Republic was under control of a movement with more popular support than what was the case in Bolshevik Russia. Largely spared the havoc of the Great War, Georgia now embarked on the completion of its first national project.

The foundations for the republic had been laid already the previous year. After the February revolution, the Imperial Viceroy Nikolay Nikolaevich left Tiflis, and a special Transcaucasian committee (*Osobyi Zakavkazskii Komitet, Ozakom*) was established on behalf of the interim government. This committee had little leverage, and just like governmental institutions in Russia, it was subject to immense pressure from the more radical opposition. Meeting none of the national demands made by Georgian parties, the Ozakom was undermined and rendered ineffective.<sup>54</sup> In the meantime, the Georgian-Orthodox church resurrected its autocephaly, and Georgian intellectuals came back from their European exiles to start the cultural revival of the country.<sup>55</sup>

Despite its strong internal support, the republic was threatened from all sides. Initially receiving German support, Jordania's government must have regretted the capitulation of Germany in November 1918. British troops dispatched to the Caucasus to oversee the Ottoman keeping of the armistice also deployed in Georgia, but withdrew in 1919 once oil and transportation links were secured.<sup>56</sup> Jordania's government faced attacks from the Bolshevik underground movements in the countryside, and blockade from White Army units controlling the North Caucasus regions. Nevertheless, a functioning state was created and institutions rapidly installed to meet the challenges. Military expenditures were sky-high, and diplomats worked tirelessly at the Paris peace conference to obtain recognition. This was in fact achieved: Moscow and Tbilisi signed a treaty granting Georgia *de facto* recognition in January 1920 and *de jure* the subsequent year. There was no time for celebration, however: In February 1921, Red Army units flushed into Georgia from the North,

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<sup>54</sup> Jones, p. 256-257

<sup>55</sup> Jones, p. 260

<sup>56</sup> King, p. 170

East, and South. Just like their neighbouring states Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia was forcibly denied national independence.

The invasion was not only a defeat for Georgian sovereignty, but also a setback for moderate socialists in Europe who disagreed with the brutal conduct displayed by the Red Army. The German Marxist and anti-Bolshevik Karl Kautsky, who had travelled through Georgia in the summer of 1920 to "study an interesting and important social experiment", condemned the invasion. In a book published shortly after the invasion, he described the Democratic Republic of Georgia as well functioning despite the country "being more backwards than Russia", and lamented that the process of building the republic was "brutally interrupted by the Russian neighbour and competitor".<sup>57</sup>

It should be pointed out that during the civil war, clashes erupted between the DRG and opposition in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, who disapproved of the lack of autonomy they were given in the new state. Feeling a stronger affiliation with the Russian Bolsheviks than the Georgian Mensheviks, Abkhazians and Ossetians did not take part in the Georgian national project. True, Georgian garrisons in Abkhazia fought against the Red Army invasion in 1921, but Ossetian Bolsheviks, feeling ethnically and politically repressed, also rioted regularly against the Menshevik government in the time of the Republic.<sup>58</sup> When Gamsakhurdia declared the restoration of DRG in 1991, this triggered negative feelings within the Abkhaz and Ajarian ASSR and the Ossetian AO.

### 3.6 Soviet ethnofederalism

The concept of Soviet ethnofederalism is closely linked with the recent conflicts in Post-Soviet Caucasus. Described by some observers as a system deliberately designed to establish a centralised regime of *divide and rule*, the argument has been that ethnofederalism was a means to organise territorial authority, legitimise this authority by granting the nations some *de jure* rights while taming the nationalist forces awakened by revolution.<sup>59</sup> This view, however, is disputed and lacks dimension. Other scholars have described ethnofederalism as an institutional accommodation

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<sup>57</sup> Kautsky, Karl: Georgien. *Eine sozialdemokratische Bauernpolitik. Eindrücke und Beobachtungen*. Vienna: Vorwärts, 1921, p.8.

<sup>58</sup> Zürcher, p. 124

<sup>59</sup> For a good example on this description of Soviet ethnofederalism, see Zürcher, pp. 24-32.

applied in the early days of the Soviet Union, as a temporary measure that only gradually made nationality an official component of the citizens' personal status.<sup>60</sup> In the ethnic patchworks of the new Soviet territories, defining and consolidating nationality became a pivotal instrument in order to create functioning political entities. The Soviet authorities adopted the concept of nationality (*natsional'nost'*) both as an ethno-cultural/lingual community and as a political entity belonging to a defined territory. Even when subordinated to the supranational idea of a Soviet identity, national identity was always clearly defined by the Soviets, most visibly through the ascription of every citizen's nationality in personal passports. Thus, instead of containing a deliberate divide and rule policy, ethnofederalism made possible a type of national identity that, with the arrival of *glasnost'* and larger opportunities of political action, created strong sentiments and demands for national independence. This, in turn, caused the breaking-up of the Soviet Union into 15 new nation-states, whose borders had already been drawn by the early Soviet ethnofederalists.<sup>61</sup>

### 3.7 *The construction of the Georgian SSR*

Constructed as an asymmetrical federation, the USSR was a hierarchy of federal units with different status: Soviet Socialist Republics (*Sovetskie Sotsialisticheskie Respubliki* - SSR) were the highest in the hierarchy. The 1936 constitution not only granted such status to the Armenians, the Azerbaijanis and the Georgians, who had been forced together in a Transcaucasian SSR since 1922 – it also underscored that their sovereign rights would be protected by the USSR.<sup>62</sup> Although these rights were rather limited by a list of decision powers vested in the higher organs of the Soviet Union, the SSRs had some sovereign rights, and would for instance consist of sub-units like autonomous republics (*Avtonomnye sovetskie sotsialisticheskie respubliki* - ASSR) and autonomous regions or *oblasts* (*avtonomnye oblasti* - AO). The ASSR was subordinated to the SSR, and contained smaller ethnic groups. In Georgia,

<sup>60</sup> A good account on this view is Brubaker, Rogers, *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge: University Press, 2000.

<sup>61</sup> Brubaker, pp. 24-32.

<sup>62</sup> *Konstitutsiya (osnovoy zakon) Soyuza Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublikh. Utverzhdena Chervyichaynym VIII s'ezdom Sovetov Soyuz SSR 5 dekabrya 1936 goda*. Article 15 confirms sovereignty of the SSRs, limited to the 24 points in article 14. From the pages of Mosow State University: <http://www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Text/cnst1936.htm#6>. Accessed 2 March 2011.

Abkhazia and Ajaria were granted ASSR status. South Ossetia was proclaimed an AO.<sup>63</sup>

Josef Stalin, himself a Georgian, can be dubbed the founding father of Soviet ethnofederalism: He served as a People's Commissar of nationalities' affairs between 1917 and 1922, and it was indeed he who signed the 1936 constitution. Georgians were well represented in the Soviet *nomenklaturas* both centrally in the USSR and within Georgia: Sergo Ordzhonikidze and Lavrenty Beria were both close allies of Stalin. More recently, Eduard Shevardnadze, the country's second post-Soviet president from 1995 to 2003, had risen from a long-standing post as First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party to Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union before entering the political stage of Post-Soviet Georgian conflict.

Still, Russian-Georgian relations, also in Soviet times, contained an element of perpetual antagonism. The breakaway regions, on the other hand, enjoyed better connections with Kremlin: Abkhazia, a rich region regularly visited by Soviet political profiles and officers, felt closer to Moscow than to Tbilisi, and the Abkhaz supreme soviet as well as protesters and leading intellectuals on several occasions pleaded Moscow to restore the autonomous status they possessed between 1921 and 1931. For Ossetians, a reunification with North Ossetia was always a desired outcome.<sup>64</sup>

### *3.8 Fighting and secessions – the eruption and freezing of conflicts*

In spite of its modest size and population, Georgia was a notable Soviet republic known for its rich soil, opportunities of tourism, and for a vibrant cultural and intellectual life. Popular riots in Tbilisi on two occasions showed that there was a limit to what Georgians would accept within the Soviet framework. Khrushchev's 1956 denunciation of Stalin led to massive riots in Tbilisi, leaving 15 dead and hundreds wounded. Moreover, in April 1978, when the Georgian Supreme Soviet decided to change the constitutional status of Georgian language in the draft of a new constitution, new riots erupted. Then-party boss Eduard Shevardnadze finally

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<sup>63</sup> *ibid.* Article 25 of the 1936 Constitution determines the status of territories in the Georgian SSR.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Goltz: "The Paradox of Living in Paradise: Georgia's Descent Into Chaos", in Cornell, Svante and S. Frederick Starr (eds): *The Guns of August 2008. Russia's War in Georgia*. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2009, p. 26

discarded the draft, siding with the protesters and recognising the power of language as an identity marker and “the potency of Georgian nationalism”.<sup>65</sup>

When *glasnost* in the mid-1980s allowed national movements to re-emerge, it was no surprise that these gained support in Georgia. The ensuing violence, however, was hard to predict. The period between 1989 and 1993 saw three internal wars: One over the breakaway AO of South Ossetia (1989-92), one over political power in Georgia proper (1991-93) and one over the former ASSR of Abkhazia (1992-93). The cost of the wars was devastating: Up to 13 000 people were killed, and more than 200 000 fled their homes and ended up in protracted displacement.<sup>66</sup> How could this happen in a country which, contrary to many of the other post-Soviet states, had actual experience with nation building and modern statehood?

### 3.8.1 The Growth of Georgian Nationalism

In 1988, following trends from Armenia and the Baltic republics after Glasnost’, national movements started to appear within the Georgian intelligentsia. Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Merab Kostava, two dissidents from Georgian intellectual circles who had been imprisoned by Soviet authorities, formed the Society of St. Ilia the Righteous, named after national hero Ilia Chavchavadze who had been canonised the year before. Other movements, like the National Independence Party and the National Democratic Party, were also founded as nationalist sentiment gained momentum and demands for secession and autonomy grew louder.<sup>67</sup> Their goal was to create a nation-state for the Georgian people free from Russian rule, and thus re-establish the Democratic Republic of Georgia. Gamsakhurdia’s nationalism targeted Soviet authorities and national minorities alike, and was voiced through slogans like “Georgia for the Georgians”, a truly absurd polemic in a country with a highly differentiated population and with a long history emerging from two divided kingdoms.<sup>68</sup> The movements facilitated the organisation of mass demonstrations and protest rallies. Unlike the movements leading to the Democratic Republic of Georgia,

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<sup>65</sup> Suny 1989, p. 309. Interestingly, The day of 14 April has since 1990 been marked in Georgia as the Day of the Mother Language, where both the language itself and the resistance against the 1978 constitution draft are celebrated.

<sup>66</sup> Zürcher, 116

<sup>67</sup> Zürcher, p 118-20

<sup>68</sup> Goltz, p. 15.



the nationalist groups now congregated against socialist rule. This nationalism was not affiliated with any specific political ideology, but was primarily focused on promoting Georgian sovereignty.<sup>69</sup> Socialism at this stage was seen as a political ideology connected with Soviet rule. The Georgian communist party, still the leading political institution, was quickly undermined by Gamsakhurdia's movement, losing trust and popularity as nationalist sentiment rose. As the communist party's legitimacy dwindled, the minorities in Ossetia and Abkhazia started fearing they would be excluded from the political process.<sup>70</sup>

One incident was a turning point in stripping the communist party of legitimacy, and in radicalising the Georgian nationalist cause: The 9 April tragedy in 1989. On request from Georgian party authorities, Soviet troops were dispatched in Tbilisi to disperse a massive demonstration against increased Abkhaz autonomy. The ensuing tumults left 19 young demonstrators dead and hundreds wounded.<sup>71</sup>

Gamsakhurdia's popularity grew when he used harsh language against Soviet leaders, Communist Party *apparatchiki* and ethnic separatists. Meanwhile, hostilities also grew between the various ethnic groups of Georgia. This polarisation of discourse arguably made leaders in the regions feel further disconnected from the Georgian national project and closer to Soviet authorities. The leaders of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Ajaria saw relations with the Soviet Union as a bulwark against Georgian hostility, and as a provider of stability in an increasingly destabilised Georgia. Not only were Gamsakhurdia's rhetorics becoming more aggressive, but it also became clear that he was not in control of the nationalist movements emerging. Especially threatening was the Mkhedrioni, an irregular paramilitary group led by Jaba Ioseliani, a former bank robber and playwright. With a weakening state under pressure from an increasingly militant and powerful national movement, the stage was set for a series of conflicts that would completely disrupt the elites' plans for successful nation building.

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<sup>69</sup> Zürcher, p. 119

<sup>70</sup> Toft, p. 96

<sup>71</sup> Circumstances around the deaths are unclear. In the aftermath, it was rumoured that the 19 victims, all women, were killed with sharpened shovels and toxic gas. Goltz (p. 16) supports the allegations that the victims were "(beaten) to death with shovels". Zürcher (p. 122) claims there are "good reasons to doubt" these allegations, and suggests that they instead were "trampled to death in the mass panic that emerged when the poorly trained, poorly equipped army units started to clear the square". Russian State deputy Anatoly Sobchak, who investigated the case, wrote in his report that "violating instructions, the use of rubber sticks, toxic substances and infantry shovels to disperse demonstrations led to a brutal massacre on Soviet people" (Quoted in article "Tbilisi-89: *Noch sap'yornykh lopatok*". [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/russian/russia/newsid\\_7977000/7977116.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/russian/russia/newsid_7977000/7977116.stm). Accessed 01 April 11)

### 3.8.2 War with Ossetia

Ossetians are an Iranian-speaking people that settled on the Northern and Southern side of the Caucasus Mountains between the 11th and 15th century. Since the Russians annexed the northern part of Ossetia as early as 1774, it came to be seen as a part of Russia proper. The southern part, incorporated along with Kartli-Kakheti in 1801 and separated from the north by the Caucasus Mountains, was considered Georgian territory. Over the years, the Ossetians established better relations with Russia than with the Georgians. These relations led to the establishment of an Ossetian AO in the Soviet constitution.<sup>72</sup> Once the Soviet Union started crumbling, disagreements between the Georgian Soviet Republic and the Ossetian AO gained momentum. Following Georgian struggles for independence in 1989, a war of laws deteriorated into violent conflict.

It started with the Georgian Supreme Soviet passing a law that made Georgian the only official language in Georgia. The Ossetian Regional Soviet answered by passing a law declaring Ossetian the only official language in the Ossetian AO. They also pleaded with Moscow to raise their status to ASSR. This prompted Gamsakhurdia, who now had more influence on the Georgian masses than the Georgian authorities, to direct a group of 30,000 demonstrators to Tskhinvali, where they clashed with Soviet security forces. Having been denied by the Georgian Supreme Soviet to take part in the parliamentary elections in 1990 – under a newly passed law saying that regional parties could not participate – Ossetian politicians claimed the region a Democratic Soviet Republic. The Georgian government, which after the parliamentary elections contained a majority from Gamsakhurdia's party, responded with a blockade of South Ossetia. In addition, Gamsakhurdia deployed his newly established National Guard, which harassed the civilian population.<sup>73</sup>

The conflict dwindled during the spring and summer of 1991, when Gamsakhurdia declared Georgia an independent state. This happened on 9 April 1991, on the second anniversary of the Tbilisi massacre. Gamsakhurdia, holding an emotional speech at the occasion, was elected president with 86 per cent majority. In September, however, Gamsakhurdia's National Guard entered South Ossetia, wreaking extensive havoc in

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<sup>72</sup> Goltz, p. 18

<sup>73</sup> Zürcher, p. 125. It is claimed that the population was exposed to "looting and attack" by Gamsakhurdia's newly-founded National Guard and a group of paramilitaries.

the Tskhinvali region but facing fierce resistance from Ossetian militias. The conflict drew into a stalemate as turmoil spread to Georgia proper. By the time Russia intervened to enforce a ceasefire agreement in June 1992, Gamsakhurdia was no longer in office, and the battles were fought between Georgians – on Georgian territory.

### 3.8.3 Internal conflicts and the ousting of Gamsakhurdia

Despite the large support for Gamsakhurdia's presidency in the elections, the Georgian national movement was deeply split. The failed attempt of using violence to stop South Ossetia from seceding showed the military weakness of the President's National Guard, and Gamsakhurdia made some bad moves: after attempted coup d'état in Moscow in August 1991, he approved of the putschists' request to incorporate the National Guard into the Soviet Interior Ministry. Ioseliani, the Mkhedrioni commander, resisted and turned against Gamsakhurdia. Ioseliani was supported by Prime Minister Tengiz Sigua and former National Guard commander Tengiz Kitovani. In December 1991, after winning much of the National Guard's support, the opposition besieged the parliament building and forced Gamsakhurdia into exile. Retreating to Armenia and later to Chechnya, the former president organised armed groups in his native Samegrelo to attack Tbilisi. A bitter civil war ensued, bringing the battles to the Georgian heartlands. Admitting their inability to find a way out, Kitovani and Sigua asked former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze to come back and find a solution. Shevardnadze inherited a country in total chaos. From his arrival in March 1992, when he was appointed Head of State Council, Shevardnadze had to keep a balance between the armed secessionists and the unruly paramilitary bands fighting under the banners of the National Guard and Mkhedrioni. After several unsuccessful attempts both to negotiate and to crush his enemies with military force, Shevardnadze turned to Russia for help.

### 3.8.4 War with Abkhazia

The demonstration leading to the 9 April 1989 tragedy had actually started as a protest against Abkhaz demands for autonomy. Abkhazians were a concentrated minority in the region and had sought greater autonomy both during the Democratic Republic and in Soviet times. However, no direct claims for independence had been

made before Georgia under Gamsakhurdia started showing force and Russia started actively supporting the Abkhazian side.<sup>74</sup>

The Abkhaz are an ethnic group with a distinctly different language than Georgians. Some of them also converted to Islam in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. They are thus linguistically and to some extent religiously distinct from Georgians. During the Soviet period, discussions arose in Georgia about to what extent the Abkhaz had the right to claim Abkhazia their homeland or whether they had displaced Georgians formerly living there.<sup>75</sup> This rhetoric was sharpened after Gamsakhurdia came to power.

As previously mentioned, leaders of the Abkhaz ASSR had tried a number of times to break with the Georgian SSR and become a part of the Russian Soviet republic instead. When faced with increasingly outspoken demands for Georgian independence from 1988, authorities of the Abkhaz ASSR feared becoming a mere province in independent Georgia. In March 1989, a petition was signed by 20,000 people including Communist Party members, for Abkhazia to be granted status as an SSR. Georgian nationalists, fearing a situation similar to Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, staged massive demonstrations against Abkhazian autonomy – the one in Tbilisi being the largest demonstration in the city's history.<sup>76</sup>

Despite initial clashes, a violent Georgian-Abkhaz conflict was avoided as long as Gamsakhurdia stayed in power, and a sort of power brokering ensured that Abkhaz politicians had a certain influence in Georgian politics. When Gamsakhurdia was ousted and Kitovani's military junta in Tbilisi claimed that the Democratic Republic of Georgia was restored, the Abkhaz interpreted this as a deprivation of the Abkhaz ASSR's independent status, since it had no autonomy in the DRG.<sup>77</sup> Failure in the negotiations between Abkhazian leader Vladislav Ardzinba and Georgia's new president Shevardnadze led to Tengiz Kitovani taking control and leading his troops into the Abkhazian Gali area, in a move against Abkhaz separatism. War ensued, with Kitovani's troops facing a band of paramilitaries not only from Abkhazia, but also from sympathisers in the Russian part of Caucasus and other places. It has also been claimed that elements of the Russian military, most likely officers operating outside

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<sup>74</sup> Toft 2003, p. 88

<sup>75</sup> Toft, p. 29

<sup>76</sup> Zürcher, p. 121

<sup>77</sup> Goltz, p. 22.

their official mandates, contributed in the clashes.<sup>78</sup> Shevardnadze, initially backed by Yeltsin's government, began to suspect that Russia actively supported the Abkhaz side with weapons and other military equipment. Although this was strongly denied by the Russian Ministry of defence, Shevardnadze in early 1993 did said he did not doubt that "certain circles" in Russia supported Abkhazia's attempts to reoccupy Sukhumi.<sup>79</sup>

### 3.8.5 The Aftermath – Russia's role as peacekeeper

Ironically enough, Shevardnadze had to turn to Russia in order to stop the wars. By late 1993, the country's national project was in shambles: Shevardnadze, having tried to regain control of the situation in Abkhazia, had to flee Sukhumi to save his life and called for Russian intervention to stop a counteroffensive from Gamsakhurdia's forces. Gamsakhurdia, facing utter defeat after an unsuccessful attempt to march on Tbilisi, was found dead under unclear circumstances outside his hometown Zugdidi.<sup>80</sup> Sukhumi and Tskhinvali were lost, and Russia's demands for stepping in as a third party turned out to be tough: Shevardnadze, who had still avoided membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) after the organisation's foundation in 1991, had to sign up. A protocol of friendship and peace that was signed with Russia was never ratified by Russia, after the Duma disagreed with Russia's stated obligation to build up the Georgian military and the intention on giving the UN status as a broker. Duma members claimed that training Georgian soldiers could be perceived as fuelling Georgian aggression by de facto governments in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, and that letting the UN taking part in the brokering would undermine the role of the CIS.<sup>81</sup> Normalising its relations with Georgia and acquiring Shevardnadze's support for the 1994 war in Chechnya, Moscow nevertheless nurtured special relations with Sukhumi and through its peacekeeping mandate established a durable influence in Georgia.

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<sup>78</sup> Devdariani, Joba: «Ch. 4: Georgia and Russia. The Troubled Road to Accommodation», in Coppieters, Bruno & Robert Legvold (red): *Statehood and Security. Georgia After the Rose Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: AAA&S, 2005, p. Goltz (p. 25-26) also describes an airraid by Russian planes in March 1993.

<sup>79</sup> Toft, pp. 105-106

<sup>80</sup> Although there are rumours alleging that Gamsakhurdia was murdered, no serious accounts seem to endorse such rumours. It is widely believed that he died by his own hands after the failed offensive. See for instance Areshidze, Irakly: *Democracy and Autocracy in Eurasia. Georgia in Transition*, Michigan State University Press 2007, p. 31, where the author simply states that Gamsakhurdia "committed suicide on December 31, 1993".

<sup>81</sup> Antonenko, Oksana: «Frozen Uncertainty: Russia and the Conflict over Abkhazia», i Coppieters, Bruno & Robert Legvold (red): *Statehood and Security. Georgia After the Rose Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: AAA&S, 2005. S. 218-20.

### 3.9 Shevardnadze's time of troubles

Gamsakhurdia's attempt to pursue the national project failed horribly. By the end of 1993, Georgia had succeeded in becoming an internationally recognised sovereign state, but had also endured military losses in two chaotic campaigns that led to refugee problems, lasting animosity towards the breakaway states, and a dependence on Russia that would prove hard to break away from. Albeit rid of communist rule, the country suffered greatly from political instability, militancy and horrible crime waves. Shevardnadze, who was formally inaugurated in 1995 and served two presidential periods, had to cope with enormous political and social problems. It seems that he sought to stabilise relations with Russia more than pursuing the ambitions of reintegration. But as the first Russian-led peacekeeping battalions started patrolling the de facto borders in June 1994, Shevardnadze continued parts of the Georgian national project: Constructing a nation-state with a functioning political system. Order was restored and Shevardnadze's careful ways of dealing with Russia and the de facto governments provided stability. However, both his decision to make Georgia a member of the CIS, the continuing Russian influence on the secessionist states, and the Russian success in excluding other actors from entering the stage in the Caucasus did little to quell the speculations that Shevardnadze's attitude to his former colleagues in the Kremlin was rather servile.<sup>82</sup> It should be taken into consideration, however, that it was under Shevardnadze that Georgia started to free itself from Russian quasi-domination and establish closer ties with the USA. These ties included, in addition to economic aid, the so-called Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP), a military cooperation programme established in 2002 to enhance the capabilities of the Georgian army to handle a potential terrorist threat. Moscow, already having accused the Georgian government of hiding Chechen separatists in the Pankisi Gorge on the border to Chechnya, reluctantly had to accept American military presence in Georgia.<sup>83</sup>

With both American and Russian soldiers on their soil, it is safe to say that Georgian security matters were complicated in this transitional period. Moreover, faced with

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<sup>82</sup> Gordadze, Thornike: "Georgian-Russian Relations in the 1990s" in Cornell, Svante and S. Frederick Starr (eds): *The Guns of August 2008. Russia's War in Georgia*. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2009, p. 31

<sup>83</sup> Gordadze, Thornike: "Georgian-Russian Relations in the 1990s" in Cornell, Svante & S. Frederick Starr (eds): *The Guns of August 2008. Russia's War With Georgia*. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2009, pp. 43-47

flourishing corruption and seemingly unable to do anything to reintegrate the breakaway areas, Shevardnadze's support decreased dramatically during the late 1990s. When in 2003 the governmental budget deficit was so high that half of Georgia's population lived under the poverty level, the discontent with Shevardnadze was so palpable that the opposition had an easy time stirring revolutionary sentiments.<sup>84</sup> On 23 November 2003, after protests ensuing a rigged parliamentary election, he was ousted by former party colleagues in what came to be known as the Rose Revolution.

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<sup>84</sup> Papava, Vladimer: "The Political Economy of Georgia's Rose Revolution" in James Kurth (ed) *Orbis, Vol. 50 Nr. 4 Fall 2006*. Amsterdam: Elsevier Ltd/FPRI, 2006, p.661.

## 4 THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE UNDER SAAKASHVILI 2004-2008

The Rose Revolution of November 2003 marked a significant change of pace in Georgian nation building. Representing a relief from the stagnant situation that the country found itself in from the late 1990s, the new government pursued the national project in a much more proactive manner and continued to seek close relations with the west. However, the war in 2008 set ambitions back and created a new situation in which Georgia lost some of the pace in the nation building process.

This chapter seeks to analyse factors that from Saakashvili's inauguration in January 2004 made Georgia's elites continue on the national project. I will also argue that the 2008 war presented an obstacle on this path that has changed its possibilities. Rather than a historical overview, this chapter is more analytical. I will concentrate on two things in particular: the political changes chosen by the new regime to actively pursue the national project, and the ways in which the war has altered the possibilities of pursuing it.

### *4.1 The new political system*

#### 4.1.1 The Rose Revolution and the pre-war period

The Rose Revolution, so called because the peaceful demonstrators used roses as a symbol to show their non-violent intentions, was the first in a series of "coloured" revolutions in the Post-Soviet space. Seeming like a wave of democracy sweeping over a territory dominated by old and corrupt Soviet *apparatchiki*, these revolutions gained popularity among Western journalists and decision-makers. However, the rosy picture painted by the young, energetic and US-educated new president was not without flaws. Scholars have pointed out that a strongly presidentialist system was implemented, particularly at the expense of the judiciary. Moreover, main media facilities (notably broadcasters) have largely been taken over by the state.<sup>85</sup> The

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<sup>85</sup> Papava, pp. 662-664



revolution itself has also been criticised, and the question has been raised as to whether it was necessary to topple Shevardnadze by unconstitutional means, when he was obviously in a lame-duck position and would most likely have been out of office in the planned 2005 presidential elections.<sup>86</sup> In his strongly biased but highly readable account, Georgian-American strategic consultant and former opposition lobbyist Irakly Areshidze contends that

this revolution was the worst possible outcome for Georgia because it inevitably closed the country's third democratic opening [the two other being 1989-1992 and 2001-2003 respectively], while Saakashvili's constitutional changes set Georgia's political developments back by at least a decade.<sup>87</sup>

Some of Saakashvili's reforms have been successful: battling corruption and reforming the police, fighting organised crime and successfully integrating Ajaria are measures which have arguably had a fortunate effect on Georgian society. The economy grew substantially between 2004 and 2008, and the administration even managed to buffer the potentially disastrous consequences of double economic crisis due to the war and the global financial crisis.<sup>88</sup> During the first years in office, the new Georgian government, which was full of young, dynamic and Western-educated officials, received applause from Western decision-makers, scholars and press. Although few went as far as president George W. Bush and calling Georgia a 'beacon of liberty', there seemed to be little doubt that Georgia was on its way towards democratisation and a place in the extended Western community.<sup>89</sup>

The political development seemed to stagnate after a few years, when political disagreements caused a schism within the elite itself. After the incidents in the autumn of 2007, in which former Minister of defence Irakli Okruashvili was arrested and a subsequent protest rally fiercely cracked down upon, western observers started doubting the intentions of the regime that the West had so actively been endorsing.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Areshidze, pp. 3-6.

<sup>87</sup> Areshidze, p. 11. Areshidze, also educated in the USA, was deputy campaign manager and chief strategist for David Gamkrelidze's New Rights Party, a party competing with Saakashvili's United National Movement Party in the elections prior to the Rose Revolution. The two democratic openings referred to are independence, and the prospect of democratically electing a president as Shevardnadze's successor.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas de Waal: *Georgia's Choices. Charting a Future in Uncertain Times*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2011. P.9.

<sup>89</sup> "Bush: Georgia 'beacon of Liberty'". Article on CNN World, 10 May 2005. [http://articles.cnn.com/2005-05-10/world/bush.tuesday\\_1\\_inspiring-democratic-reformers-georgian-people-abkhazia?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2005-05-10/world/bush.tuesday_1_inspiring-democratic-reformers-georgian-people-abkhazia?_s=PM:WORLD). Accessed 20 October 2011.

<sup>90</sup> Nilsson, p. 100

Regarding reintegration, the new government chose a very proactive stance towards Georgia's unsolved security issues. While Shevardnadze had a more containment-oriented approach to the breakaway states and Russia, the government that emerged in the wake of the Rose Revolution was clear in its ambitions to carry on the national project. Still basing its legitimacy upon the constitution adopted under Shevardnadze in 1995, Saakashvili's government made several amendments and adopted a number of decrees and laws to fulfil its ambitions. Notably, a range of new ministerial posts with cabinet status were established: The State Ministry for Euro-Atlantic integration was created early in 2004, followed by the State Ministry on Diaspora issues and State Minister for Reintegration with Saakashvili's second presidency in 2008. The position of reintegration minister was initially taken by Temuri Yakobashvili, who was the architect of the document called *State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation*, launched in 2010.<sup>91</sup>

This document, including a comprehensive action plan, includes a number of soft power measures and focuses mainly on the non-Georgian population in Abkhazia. Seeking to build confidence between the Georgian government and the various citizens in certain Abkhaz regions, the action plan boasts free healthcare and education to those who cross the border. As I will discuss in a later chapter, the actual efforts made to engage the populations in the breakaway states have been limited by the war in 2008.

#### 4.1.2 Ajaria and the “near miss” in South Ossetia

In terms of reintegration, it is safe to say that Saakashvili has come closer to define and pursue the major guidelines of the national project than his predecessors, and that he has succeeded in combining nation building and state building. Although the goals have not changed, Georgia's ability to achieve these goals increased after the Rose Revolution.<sup>92</sup> It turns out, however, that the president's ambitions to reintegrate all the breakaway regions before the end of his first term would not be fulfilled.

The successful reintegration of Ajaria into Georgia proper was a great victory for the Saakashvili government. Like Abkhazia, Ajaria was an ASSR enjoying a certain

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<sup>91</sup> “State Strategy on Occupied Territories. Engagement Through Cooperation.” Published on Government of Georgia Webpage, January 2010. [http://www.government.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=225](http://www.government.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=225). Accessed 21 March 2011

<sup>92</sup> Nilsson, Niklas: “Georgia's Rose Revolution: The Break With the Past” in Cornell, Svante & S. Frederick Starr (eds): *The Guns of August 2008. Russia's War With Georgia*. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2009, pp. 102-103

autonomy during the Soviet Union. Unlike the other autonomous regions, however, Ajarians are ethnic Georgians and had no national project of their own by the time they could have seceded.<sup>93</sup> The former regional leader, Aslan Abashidze, was member of the old Soviet *nomenklatura*.

The success in Ajaria sparked hopes among Georgian elites that it might be possible to reintegrate South Ossetia as well. Here, however, the pretext and methods were rather different. Using a crackdown upon smuggling and contraband as a pretext – illegal import from Russia was indeed a nuisance and a threat to the Georgian market – the project that was launched in the spring of 2004 was a combination of soft power measures and military pressure.<sup>94</sup> It failed to serve its intended purpose, and instead fuelled hostilities between Ossetian de facto leaders and Georgian officials. Negotiations were severely hampered, and a possible opportunity for reintegration was missed.

Another attempt by Tbilisi to execute leverage on South Ossetia was the 2006 installation of a Tbilisi-loyal administration for the Georgian settlements in South Ossetia in territories under Georgian control under the leadership of Ossetian ex-prime minister Dmitri Sanakoev. This move was not well received, neither by Moscow nor the Ossetian de facto government, and it culminated in May 2007 when de facto president Eduard Kokoity shut all roads leading to the Georgian-dominated settlements in South Ossetia and threatened with armed resistance. Interestingly, Moscow intervened to stop the escalating conflict.<sup>95</sup>

#### *4.2 The prelude to war*

In the course of 2007 and 2008, hostilities increased between Georgia and Russia. As Russian warplanes violated Georgian airspace several times and diplomatic relations worsened – in particular with the Russian embargo on Georgian goods in 2006 rendering wine producers void of a market – Georgian elites looked forward to

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<sup>93</sup> Nodia 2005, p. 54

<sup>94</sup> “Closure of Ergneti Market Boosted Customs Revenues”, article on [civil.ge](http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=7734) 2 September 2004. <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=7734>. Accessed 9 August 2011. A statement from the Customs department says that the annual damage of unpaid taxes were USD 120 million a year.

<sup>95</sup> “Eduard Kokoity dopustil Osadnuyu Oshibku”, article in *Kommersant* 12 May 2007. <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/764705>. Accessed 23 June 2011.

becoming a part of NATO, as had been a part of the main foreign policy goals for a long time. After the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008, Saakashvili was so sure of this being a *fait accompli* that he called the conditional Membership Action Plan (MAP) a “technical issue”.<sup>96</sup> However, as the weeks went by, the obvious reluctance of several NATO members to provoke Russia by admitting Georgia into the organisation made the process stall. At the same time, Russia’s president Vladimir Putin, apparently as a reaction to the international recognition of Kosovo two months prior, instructed the Russian Ministry of foreign affairs to pursue cooperation with Abkhaz and South Ossetian de facto governments, “within the frames of trade and economic, social, scientific and technical fields, as well as in the spheres of information, culture and education”.<sup>97</sup>

The summer of 2008 saw further diplomatic disagreements and even armed skirmishes between Georgians and Ossetians within South Ossetia. The war nevertheless came as a surprise, at least to the international community.

#### 4.2.1 Who is to blame?

Undoubtedly, in every war the discursive dichotomy of aggressor and victim plays a significant role. The party rightfully claiming to be the victim can more easily legitimise its actions in the course of war, and can take the moral high ground. Arguably, the role of victim can also be used effectively in creating a national myth to unify the nation – the outcome notwithstanding. If the attacked party is victorious, the myth can be constructed upon how the nation bravely defended itself when facing the aggressor, and then won a rightful victory. This discourse is visible in the former Soviet, now Russian, celebrations of the victory over Nazi Germany in 1945. If the victim is vanquished, the story can be built into a myth about suffering and slavery under the yoke of the enemy, or create strong emotions of antagonism towards *the other*, which can be said about the way the Russian-Georgian war is depicted by Georgian elites.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>96</sup> “Saakashvili on NATO Summit Results”, article in [civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge) 6 April 2008. <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17529>. Accessed 1 Oct 2011.

<sup>97</sup> “Soobshenye dlya SMI o poruchenyakh Prezidenta Rosii pravitelstvu Rossiiskoi federatsii v otnoshenii Abkhazii i Yushnoy Osetii”. Press release on the webpage of the Russian foreign ministry, 16 April 2008. [http://www.mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp\\_4.nsf/arh/FD56A80A7198CD7CC325742D003F807C?OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/FD56A80A7198CD7CC325742D003F807C?OpenDocument). Accessed 09 August 2011.

<sup>98</sup> For a comprehensive account on historical myths as ‘hardening of identity boundaries between ethnic and national groups’, see Kolstø, Pål (ed): *Myths and Boundaries in South-East Europe*, London: Hurst&Co, 2005.

It might be difficult to obtain fully neutral accounts on the 2008 conflict.

The Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (IIFFMCG), appointed by the Council of the EU in 2008, delivered a report in September 2009 based on thorough research. The statement describing the start of the conflict reads as follows:

On the night of 7 to 8 August 2008, a sustained Georgian artillery attack struck the town of Tskhinvali. Other movements of the Georgian armed forces targeting Tskhinvali and the surrounding areas were under way, and soon the fighting involved Russian, South Ossetian and Abkhaz military units and armed elements.<sup>99</sup>

Indicating that the Georgian side thus initiated the war, the report then addresses allegations that the Russian army was prepared for the attack:

Georgian claims of a large-scale presence of Russian armed forces in South Ossetia prior to the Georgian offensive on 7/8 August could not be substantiated by the Mission. It could also not be verified that Russia was on the verge of such a major attack, in spite of certain elements and equipment having been made readily available. There is also no evidence to support any claims that Russian peacekeeping units in South Ossetia were in flagrant breach of their obligations under relevant international agreements such as the Sochi Agreement and thus may have forfeited their international legal status. Consequently, the use of force by Georgia against Russian peacekeeping forces in Tskhinvali in the night of 7/8 August 2008 was contrary to international law.<sup>100</sup>

The report was received with fury in the Georgian administration, and with mixed comments in Moscow. Russian officials and politicians complained it failed to mention US participation, while blaming Russia for escalating the conflict.<sup>101</sup>

In the aftermath of the report, several academic texts have offered accounts in order to provide insight into the question. While scholars like Johanna Popjanevski and Andrei Illarionov argue convincingly that the Russian side actually did prepare for a war with Georgia and crossed the Georgian border before Georgian artillery started shelling Tskhinvali, other accounts have done nothing but revealing the political importance of

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<sup>99</sup> IIFFMCG Report, vol I, page 10. Accessible through [http://www.ceiig.ch/pdf/IIFFMCG\\_Volume\\_I.pdf](http://www.ceiig.ch/pdf/IIFFMCG_Volume_I.pdf). Accessed 22 June 2011.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid*, p. 23.

<sup>101</sup> "EU Investigators Debunk Saakashvili's Lies", article on Der Spiegel International, 1 Oct 2009. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,652512,00.html>. Accessed 22 June 2011.

being righteous in the matter.<sup>102</sup> In that sense, books like “A Little War That Shook the World” by the late Ronald Asmus showed blatantly how important this war of discourse is, not least for Washington. In his book, internal conflicts within Georgia are hardly mentioned, and American doubts about including Georgia in NATO strongly downplayed. Russia is one-sidedly depicted as the aggressor, and the book reads as an attempt to blame European reluctance for the West failing to aid Georgia in the war.<sup>103</sup>

Among Georgian elites, the war has become an important milestone in defining the Georgian national myth. The myths created after the war depict the Georgian people as brave and heroic, defending its territorial integrity when attacked, and not losing because this is a war without winners. The Russian side is blamed not only for the aggression, but also for the hostile takeover of political power in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. At a ceremony commemorating the anniversary of the war on 7 August 2009, Saakashvili made an emotional speech mentioning the names of several people, military personnel and civilians alike, who were killed during the war. He put the entire blame on Russia for seeking to “destroy Georgia’s freedom, democracy and statehood” and then elaborated:

After a long embargo, economic blockades, provocations, bombardments, threats, boycotts and other rough but finally not successful pressures, the old KGB followers decided to finish the so-called “Georgian Project”, our common attempt to create a modern, European, democratic, successful state in the Caucasus.<sup>104</sup>

The use of myths in Georgian elite discourse will be thoroughly discussed in a later chapter. Suffice it to say here that Georgian elites have done what they can to create a discourse contrasting their own tireless efforts towards Western-styled democracy with the dark backwaters of authoritarianism and belligerence that Moscow want to drag them back into.

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<sup>102</sup> Illianorov (in Cornell/Starr pp. 72-76 and 83-84) points to the increased number of Russian peacekeepers on Ossetian territory and to a large contingent of Russian journalists arriving in Tskhinvali, directly prior to the outbreak of conflict. Popjanevski (in Cornell/Starr pp. 156-158) points to several publications indicating Russian military presence in the region prior to the outbreak, as well as the conduct of the *Kavkaz-2008* exercise in North Ossetia, which had a strikingly similar scenario to the war.

<sup>103</sup> Asmus, Ronald: *A Little War that Shook the World*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2009.

<sup>104</sup>“The President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili’s speech delivered at the ceremony dedicated to Russia-Georgian war anniversary”, from the official site of Georgia’s Presidential Administration, 12 Feb 2009. [http://www.president.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=228&info\\_id=4134](http://www.president.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=228&info_id=4134). Accessed 22 June 2011.

#### 4.1.3 Towards democracy or still in the post-Soviet orbit?

Nevertheless, there is reason to ask whether the current political system *is* really moving in the direction of Western-styled democracy. Charles Fairbanks has argued that Saakashvili's methods of ruling –including the keeping of a “Potemkin-village opposition”, control of media and the absence of Rule of Law - are reminiscent of tactics used by Soviet leaders, and that this “combination of a leftover Soviet reality [...] and a novel Western institution (private property) has proven particularly toxic to democracy”.<sup>105</sup>

To strengthen this point, an example can be given from the aftermath of the anti-governmental riots on 26 May 2011. On the next day, the Georgian Ministry of Interior released “secretly recorded” material depicting among others opposition leader Nino Burjanadze, her husband and her son, all recorded while planning a violent coup where loss of lives would be accepted in order to topple the president.<sup>106</sup> In a comment, Saakashvili claimed he was principally against “broadcasting police recordings obtained in the process of investigations”, but said that in this particular case it had been very helpful. He also made it clear that such measures could be defended when “we know Russia is behind it”.<sup>107</sup>

This legitimisation of unlawful behaviour as long as the end justifies the means has occurred on some occasions during Saakashvili's two presidential periods, but increasingly after August 2008. Similar conduct during the protests in the spring of 2009 and in May 2011 shows that the experience of the 2008 war has done little to soften the government's attitude towards oppositional protest. Saakashvili, in order to legitimise excessive use of force and unlawful surveillance, has alleged that the opposition serves as a fifth column for Russia's secret services.<sup>108</sup> Arguably, it has become easier to defend such allegations after the war: the horrors of war are still fresh in people's memory, and when Russia is depicted as threatening the very

<sup>105</sup> Charles H. Fairbanks Jr.: “Georgia's Soviet Legacy” in Plattner, Mark F. & Larry Diamond (eds) *Journal of Democracy, Volume 21, Number 1, January 2010*. Washington DC: Josh Hopkins University Press, p. 150.

<sup>106</sup> “Statement of the Ministry of Internal Affairs”, *released on Ministry of Internal Affairs homepage 27 May 2011*, <http://police.ge/index.php?m=8&newsid=2511>. Accessed 9 June 2011.

<sup>107</sup> “Saakashvili: Fifth Column Operates Openly in Georgia”, *article in Civil Georgia 27 May 2011*, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23538>. Accessed 9 June 2011.

<sup>108</sup> “The Georgian Political Landscape After May 26”, *article on RFERL's Georgian Service 8 June 2011*, [http://www.rferl.org/content/caucasus\\_report\\_georgia\\_political\\_landscape\\_after\\_may\\_26/24228715.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/caucasus_report_georgia_political_landscape_after_may_26/24228715.html). Accessed 9 June 2011.

existence of the Georgian national project, citizens may be more tolerant towards the use of extreme measures such as covert surveillance, arbitrary arrests and excessive use of force.

Still, in my own experience, people's views are highly different in this regard. Interviewing a number of people in Tbilisi about the legitimacy of the opposition after the May 2011 riots, I received answers ranging from approval of the government's heavy-handed measures, through disappointment in the radical opposition for cooperating with Moscow, to angry denouncement of the whole government. A number of people also said that they wanted relations with Russia restored, and that they did not approve of the official hostility to their neighbour, with which they felt a certain solidarity.<sup>109</sup>

One might give Fairbanks a point in his suggestion that in the Georgian government's behaviour, some methods have survived from the Soviet past. However one should not be tempted to make any further comparisons between Saakashvili's administration and the Soviet Union. On the contrary, the political elite has skipped one generation, and consists almost entirely of young, western-educated people who bear little resemblance to the *nomenklatura* that survived throughout the Shevardnadze era. With an average age of 37.5 years (June 2011), Georgian ministers represent a segment much more oriented towards cooperation with the West than the other Caucasian countries. Nevertheless it can be argued that the elite is highly exclusive in the way it is constructed by the president's inner circle: ministers are often replaced, leaving few with more than a year of experience.<sup>110</sup> Division of power strongly favours the executive, and the parliament consists of a majority from Saakashvili's party. The 2011 decision to move the Parliament to Kutaisi, some 200 kilometres away from the capital, also suggests a weakening of the legislature.<sup>111</sup>

In its pursuit of fulfilling the national project in all its aspects – a modern, European nation-state mastering its territorial integrity – the Saakashvili administration passes

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<sup>109</sup> These interviews were conducted on several occasions with up to twenty different people of both genders and different ages, most of whom insisted on anonymity. All interviews were conducted in Tbilisi in June 2011.

<sup>110</sup> De Waal, p. 7

<sup>111</sup> "Relocation of Next Parliament in Kutaisi Endorsed", *article in Civil Georgia* 21 June 2011.

<http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23650>. Accessed 23 June 2011. Relocation of the Parliamentary building was proposed as a constitutional amendment in September 2009 and passed its first hearing in June 2011. The proposal, based on the idea of 'decentralising politics', has met fierce resistance from the opposition.



bills and consolidates decisions at such a speed that the opposition feels neglected and excluded. As David Usupashvili, leader of the oppositional Republican Party remarks:

Pluralism and democracy is an obstacle to these grandiose ambitious reforms of the ruling elites. [The] ambition is not only to change mentality of the Georgians, [but] to develop a new kind of men and to change the landscape of the country as well. I mean, for instance this moving of the Parliament from Tbilisi to Kutaisi, which only has justification from the government side, [claiming] that they are trying to decentralise the country politically. They are saying that, but can we recall any example of a president that by moving parliament somewhere to a different city than the capital, was the main road to political decentralisation? Of course, this is absurd! And what is really needed for political decentralisation, to give real power to the parliament and to the judiciary, to media, to empower local self-governance bodies, nothing like that is happening there. Even the smallest issues, like what colour different buildings should have in Gori and in Batumi, are decided somewhere in Saakashvili's room.<sup>112</sup>

There seems to be a danger in the ruling elites not allowing the opposition a say in political issues. Studying the opposition and its alternatives to the current pursuit of the national project gives us valuable insight in political tendencies outside elite circles, and can provide an answer to why they are not allowed a voice in the political game.

#### *4.2 Opposition and political pressure*

Opposition politicians have used varying rhetoric when criticising Saakashvili's reintegration efforts. It can be said that this rhetoric is different after the 2008 war from what they were before, something that reflects the government's position on solving the problem. In 2007, when the government for the first time encountered fierce resistance from former allies of Saakashvili, the opposition's stance was that the president had done too little and been too weak and indecisive to reintegrate the breakaway states. Irakli Okruashvili, who served as Minister of defence and Minister of interior until his arrest in September 2007, alleged publicly that Georgia had been

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<sup>112</sup> Interview with David Usupashvili, leader of the Republican Party. Conducted 24 June 2011.

“only a step away from reclaiming one of our lost territories if it were not for the president’s incapability, weakness and inability to take a political and historical decision, as he was afraid of losing power.”<sup>113</sup>

The most radical part of the opposition is formed by some of Saakashvili’s former allies, notably Okruashvili and former speaker of parliament Nino Burjanadze. After breaking with the government and forming their own parties in 2007, they have both been sharp critics of Saakashvili’s politics. Burjanadze has criticised the president’s handling of post-2008 relations with Russia and called for a dialogue with Russian authorities. By fellow members of her party, Burjanadze is presented as a “diplomat” able to solve the disputes with Russia avoiding the use of force.<sup>114</sup> Apparently, her association with Vladimir Putin and her numerous travels to Russia have done little to quell Saakashvili’s allegations that she collaborates with Russia. Whether this is true or not, her support has indeed dwindled among Georgians, and observers believe that after the 26 May riots her political career might be over.<sup>115</sup> It has also been suggested that the riots have weakened the radical opposition to such an extent that more moderate oppositional forces will now gain more support, and that this could have a positive effect on the democratisation process.<sup>116</sup> If it is indeed true that Burjanadze’s “diplomacy” with Russian leaders has damaged her reputation, this could be seen as an indirect consequence of the 2008 war. Before August 2008, the opposition did not want any dialogue with Russia, whereas now, after the president has chosen to break off contact with Moscow, the radical opposition has chosen to change sides – apparently with unfortunate results. In the context of the national project, the lack of political pluralism and the elites’ denouncement of the opposition as a fifth column is unfortunate because it alienates the goal of acquiring democratic values and make Georgia a part of the Western community. Since one of the major guidelines comprise Europe as a provider of political identity, this implies – as Saakashvili himself has stated – a state based on democratic values. However, when the pursuit of another

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<sup>113</sup> “Irakli Okruashvili’s Speech at Presentation of his Party” article at *Civil Georgia*, 25 Sep 2007. <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=15862>. Accessed 10 June 2011

<sup>114</sup> Kolbaia, Vakhtang: “New Approach to Russia is Already Old”, article on *Democratic Movement United Georgia webpage*, 27 May 2010. <http://www.democrats.ge/en/siaxeleebi/coments/863-vakhtang-yolbaia-akhali-midgoma-ruseththan-mimarthebashi-romelic-ukve-dzvelia.html>. Accessed 9 June 2011.

<sup>115</sup> Cornell, Svante E.: “The May Protest and the Prospects of Political Normalization in Georgia”, article on *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute webpage*, 8 June 2011. <http://cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5571>. Accessed 14 June 2011.

<sup>116</sup> Gurgendze, Maka: “May 26 Violence Sets New Rules in Georgian Politics”, article on *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst webpage*, 8 June 2011. <http://cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5578>. Accessed 14 June 2011. See Also Cornell: “The May Protest...”.

guideline – resisting the potential adversary of Russia and its “puppets” in the breakaway states – is used to legitimise undemocratic measures, Georgian elites find themselves in a difficult position. If this dilemma is to be resolved, elites should not undermine democratic ambitions in order to prioritise territorial integrity.

## 5 THE GEORGIAN NATIONAL PROJECT. ELITE PERCEPTIONS AND DISCOURSE

### *5.1 Introduction*

As previously discussed, the national project is defined as an overarching ideological narrative for the Georgian nation-state, while nation building is the political consolidation of this narrative. Analysing texts and statements from the various presidents of the Second Georgian Republic, I will discuss how the ruling elite's discourse has changed over the past twenty years in terms of how the national project is represented.

In Georgian elite discourse, the national project seems to be built up around consistent themes that concern many Georgians: Security, modernisation/europeanisation, domestic issues including fighting corruption and poverty, and integration of the disputed territories. This discourse seems to have been more or less constant during the three successive presidencies, although approaches and measures taken to implement the project have varied significantly. While the means have differed, the goal seems to have remained permanent.

Taking note of Nodia's guidelines for this project presented in sub-chapter 2.5, it is safe to argue that the three presidents have focused on different guidelines in their discourse: Gamsakhurdia, his rule limited to two years, paid attention to the nation-state as the only acceptable framework for development of the Georgian nation, and the relationship to minorities. Shevardnadze, never really pursuing the nation building part but concentrating mainly on state building, established contact with the West and sought to Europe and the USA for a role model of state building, while struggling to keep a balance in the relationship with Russia. Finally, Saakashvili, has put special emphasis on Georgia's pursuit of 'Westernisation', and has also sought to establish relations with the national minorities and Russia – however, after the war, the discourse concerning the latter two has been ambivalent and less determined.

## 5.2 *The successive Georgian Governments*

### 5.2.1 The Gamsakhurdia government

Gamsakhurdia's political circle displayed an ethno-nationalistic discourse anchored in a primordialist orientation claiming Georgia's historically rightful domination in the disputed territories. It also denounced Abkhaz and Ossetian rights for autonomy and numerous times referring to them as "guests" who had to behave properly if they wanted to stay on Georgian soil.<sup>117</sup> Gamsakhurdia, himself a celebrated philologist, surrounded himself with academics who used Georgia's ancient (mediaeval) and more recent (1918-21) history to justify their arguments that Abkhazia and South Ossetia should be integrated into Georgia proper. Gamsakhurdia used an academic pretext to construct a strong perennial, national myth, claiming that Georgian ethnic roots could be traced back to the biblical Japhet (also identified with Iaphetus in Greek mythology). Japhet was one of Noah's sons, and a forefather of the "white race".<sup>118</sup> Gamsakhurdia blamed both Moscow and the minorities for setting Georgian language and culture at stake.<sup>119</sup>

Leading intellectuals in Gamsakhurdia's circle, like archaeologist Miriam Lordkipanidze, used their professions to legitimise the territorial claims of the Georgian president by claiming that "[t]he (ancient) Kingdom of Abkhazia was a Georgian (Western Georgian) state" and that "a vast majority of its population were Georgians", and furthermore that

[t]he so-called independent Abkhazian SSR was an artificially created entity, whose existence in isolation from Georgia was absolutely unnatural and untenable historically and culturally.<sup>120</sup>

This hostile rhetoric, crudely distilled into the slogan "Georgia for the Georgians!", was the order of the day under Gamsakhurdia's short presidency, and certainly contributed to sharpening animosity between Georgians and non-Georgians, who interpreted this slogan as an incentive for repression and hostility against

<sup>117</sup> Nodia, Ghia: "Political Turmoil in Georgia and the Policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia" in Coppieters, Bruno (ed): *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*. Brussels: Vubpress 1996.

<sup>118</sup> Gamsakhurdia, Zviad: "The Spiritual Mission of Georgia. A Lecture Delivered at the Idriart Festival in Tbilisi Philharmonic House 2 May, 1990". <http://iberiana.wordpress.com/zviad-gamsakhurdia/mission/>. Accessed 21 June 2011

<sup>119</sup> Toft, p. 96

<sup>120</sup> Lordkipanidze Miriam: *Abkhazia and the Abkhazians*. Ganatleba: Tbilisi, 1990, pp. 65-74.

minorities.<sup>121</sup> Gamsakhurdia, who had little experience in politics, did little to reform the Georgian state system and institutions. His ministers also had limited experience with governance, and did not change the constitution from 1978. No state building projects were undertaken until Shevardnadze came to power.

### 5.2.2 The Shevardnadze government

Of the three Georgian presidents, Shevardnadze's rhetoric is the most difficult to analyse. Since his inauguration was the result of an invitation made by the so-called Military Council after the ousting of Gamsakhurdia in December 1991, he did not run any election campaign and thereby had no need to explain his points of view. His presidency, at least during the first years, was more oriented towards finding a balance between Russia, the breakaway states and the militant nationalist forces that were rampant within Georgia. Installed in an attempt to legitimise the unconstitutional overthrow of Gamsakhurdia by the opposition (notably, paramilitary leaders Kitovani and Ioseliani and former Gamsakhurdia ally Tengiz Sigua), Shevardnadze's task of stabilising the situation was extremely difficult.<sup>122</sup> Also, considering Shevardnadze's background as communist party boss and Soviet foreign minister, he was an easy victim of oppositional accusations claiming that he cooperated with Moscow. This, however, is not very likely.

Reckoning that he used his network to achieve his political goals, it is believable that he, at least at the outset, acknowledged Russia as a key component in the Georgian reintegration process, thereby allowing Moscow to function as such. Later, when Georgian forces were driven out of Sukhumi and Shevardnadze himself barely escaped, he strongly criticised Moscow for putting military support behind Abkhaz separatism, and for giving the Abkhaz separatist cause, "to put it mildly, sympathetic propagandist support".<sup>123</sup>

It should also be noted that it was Shevardnadze who made the first significant steps towards alignment with the Western powers.

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<sup>121</sup> Slider, Darrell: "Democratization in Georgia" in Dawisha, Karen and Bruce Parrott (eds): *Conflict, Cleavages, and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 170-171.

<sup>122</sup> Toft, 2003, p.100

<sup>123</sup> Shevardnadze, Eduard: "Foreword", in Chervonnaya, Svetlana: *Conflict in the Caucasus. Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow*. Glastonbury: Gothic Images 1994, p. xxii

Recalling how the Georgian elite took political control from the deep grip of Russian power in the early nineties, Irakli Menagarishvili, minister of foreign affairs between 1995 and 2003, describes the turn towards the west as a gradual process. In this interview he talks about the difficulties Georgia faced when he accepted presidency in 1992, and about Shevardnadze's clear ambition to transform the state based on western political ideals.

[Shevardnadze] was talking about the CIS as a transformed form of post-Soviet existence. So this way he claimed that Georgia's choice is independent development, and at the same time [...] that even Georgia's way is the western way, towards European structures. The integration into the 'civilized world', he mentioned. Definitely he was one of the architects of perestroika, and had in mind the western model. But unfortunately, after Abkhazia and Ossetia the Georgian state was failed; was almost destroyed entirely. The economy collapsed, the state structures didn't work, armed gangs were in power, both locally and in the centre, the Georgian state was forced to move into its initially chosen way. Georgia was forced to join the CIS, to sign the collective security treaty, to allow Russian forces to stay here – to remain on Georgian soil – and Russian border guards to guard the Georgia-Turkey border. It was one of the main sets of consequences of that. Another one was that Moscow was imposing its will on every important political decision in Georgia. [...]

From the way Menagarishvili describes the 'forced' CIS membership and acceptance of Russian forces on Georgian soil, it is clear how Shevardnadze was in a difficult position and had to rely on Russian intervention in the conflict. The way he acted was still in line with the national project: protecting the fragile, but still sovereign nation-state, work for Western-inspired state building and keeping Russia as far away as possible. After a few years, according to Menagarishvili, gradual steps were taken to move Georgia out of the post-Soviet orbit and in the Western direction:

And then followed a period when the political elites started the first attempts to consult power, to stabilise the attempts to reform the economic and state structures. The first set of activities was to stabilise the financial situation. It was a total mess. And I remember very well that in those times it was extremely difficult. But finally, step by step, the overall situation [was] normalised. Even more, in 1996-97, the beginning of 1998, Georgia's economic rise was one of the highest in the Post-soviet, post communist states. Then, I would say that step by step Georgia started removing the remnants of all those past failures. [The] Russian border service had been moved from the Turkish border, it was in '98, and Georgia left the collective

security treaty, and finally in 1999, in Istanbul, we signed a treaty of withdrawal of the Russian military forces.<sup>124</sup>

Shevardnadze managed to put together a new constitution, reform the parliamentary system and establish a post-Soviet state relatively early on. However, few nation-building efforts were made, and the constitution as well as all the national symbols (flag, coat of arms and national anthem) remained the same as they had been during the First Republic. Shevardnadze most likely had too much to do keeping Georgia afloat to develop a proactive nation building effort. Perhaps also because his predecessor had shown how dangerous nationalism could be in its most extreme forms, Shevardnadze chose to downplay this and concentrate on creating stability in the region. Still, during his eleven years in office, little was achieved as far as the national project was concerned. When Shevardnadze was swept away by his bodyguards as Saakashvili and his companions burst into the parliament building on 22 November 2003, the questions of Ajaria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were still unresolved. Russian soldiers were still in the country, and the government was ridden with corruption.

### 5.2.3 The contemporary Georgian government

It is safe to say that the Saakashvili government has been the first in post-Soviet Georgia to combine nation building and state building, thus comprehensively pursuing the national project. The Saakashvili administration has used its elite position to strengthen Georgian national identity markers, while making no secret of its wish to be included in the European community. Christian symbols and the history of the Georgian-Orthodox church are used as identity markers but the secularised, modern Europe is still the ideal state for elites. On several occasions, Saakashvili has expressed a wish to develop Georgia economically in a way that will make it look like “the Switzerland of this region with elements of Singapore”.<sup>125</sup> Faced with criticism for using Singapore as an ideal, Saakashvili has underscored that this comparison is

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<sup>124</sup> Interview with Irakli Menagarishvili, conducted 28 June 2011. The Istanbul 1999 document referred to is the document from the OSCE summit of that year, when Russia agreed to reduce its amount on military equipment in Georgia. The OSCE 1999 summit document can be found on [www.osce.org/mc/39569](http://www.osce.org/mc/39569). Accessed 14 July 2011

<sup>125</sup> “Saakashvili: Georgia Switzerland with Elements of Singapore”, article on [civil.ge](http://civil.ge) 9 March 2010. <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22064>. Accessed 22 Aug 2011.



only valid as far as economics is concerned, and that Singapore is not a role model when it comes to democratic development.<sup>126</sup>

Concerning reintegration, the war has forced the government to think differently. Over the past three years, a comprehensive strategy has taken form, although the effect of the intended actions might be hard to measure. In 2010, a strategy and an action plan were officially implemented. The strategy document claims that the intention is to “counter the isolation and division resulting from occupation by creating frameworks, incentives, and mechanisms for engagement”. It furthermore stresses the importance of ensuring “that residents of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia enjoy the rights and privileges available to every citizen of Georgia”.<sup>127</sup> Both the title of the document and the text quoted here show the importance of discourse: the term ‘occupied territories’ still show that Tbilisi will not give any recognition to the *de facto* governments. They also show that ‘Tskhinvali region’ is the preferred name for South Ossetia. The strategy and its action plan show a vast array of measures to create dialogue and cooperation. There is, however, no intention of dialogue with the *de facto* governments – not recognising these entities, the ministry addresses the citizens through internet and the word of mouth in rural communities. According to deputy State minister of Reintegration, Irakli Porchkidze,

[t]his document does not require any endorsement from anyone on the other side. We target people. [...] We would like to be human centric about it. We do not politicise this issue. Once we politicise it, the problems will arise from the start. [...] These people [Abkhaz] live in villages and the urbanisation level is very small there. So if someone comes from a village and says, ‘oh, I got treated there’ [in Tbilisi]...it spreads...this word spreads very, very easily. That’s the biggest charm of this strategy. We don’t aim to engage with someone so that we have an official approach to this. No. This is absolutely human centric.<sup>128</sup>

Despite healthcare offers and other strategies for confidence building, the Ministry does not operate with a timeline for when it wants reintegration to be completed. Unlike before the war, when president Saakashvili promised to finish reintegration by

<sup>126</sup> “From Popular Revolutions to Effective Reforms: The Georgian Experience”. Saakashvili’s speech at Brookings University 17 March 2011. [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2011/0317\\_saakashvili/20110317\\_saakashvili\\_transcript.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2011/0317_saakashvili/20110317_saakashvili_transcript.pdf) . Accessed 22 Aug 2011.

<sup>127</sup> “State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation”, from the Georgian government page. <http://www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/file/SMR-Strategy-en.pdf> Accessed 22 Aug 2011.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with Deputy State Minister of Reintegration, Irakli Porchkhidze. Conducted 17 Jun 2011.

the expiry of his second term in 2013, this process has been put on hold and is obviously not expected to be completed very soon. According to Ghia Nodia, there seems to be a “tacit consensus” between state and society where citizens “don’t blame the government” for not challenging Russia militarily, and the government having given up the reintegration issue for the time being, even if not admitting it publicly.<sup>129</sup> How, then, do elites present this supposed resignation? It clearly seems like the discourse after 2008 has changed: What were formerly clear statements, promises and specified timelines, have now turned into more blurred sentiments.

### *5.3 Analysing elite sentiment – before and after the war*

#### 7.3.1 Saakashvili’s inaugural speeches

Analysing president Saakashvili’s two inaugural speeches can provide us with much information about various focus points of his two terms in office. Moreover, it says a lot about how elite attitudes and priorities have changed over the years.

In his inaugural speech of 20 January 2004, newly elected president Mikheil Saakashvili presented some long-term national project issues. Having won the presidency after the dramatic but bloodless Rose Revolution, Saakashvili’s speech in general concerned anti-corruption measures and inner reforms. Not unexpectedly, however, a clear position to western alignment was taken: Thanking the United States for its support during times of “acute hardship”, Saakashvili also stated that “our direction is towards European integration” and made a plea to Europe to take steps in that direction so that Georgia could again take the place in European civilisation that they had lost “centuries ago”. Being cooler in his address to the northern neighbour, he said that Georgia needs Russia as a friend, ally and partner, and offered Russia a “friendly hand”.<sup>130</sup> Not much attention was given the issue of reintegration, but the point of unity was made: By mentioning four places in every corner of Georgia to create a geographical frame, the new president hinted that a unified nation-state was a goal: “From Tsiteli Khidi (Red Bridge) to river Psou, from [sic] Sarpi to Daryali, Georgia must become a state”, the speech reads. These four landmarks seem to have

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Ghia Nodia, professor in political science, Ilya State University. Conducted 15 Jun 2011

<sup>130</sup> “Mikheil Saakashvili Sworn In”, translated version of Inauguration speech of 25 January 2004, [http://www.president.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=219&info\\_id=4990](http://www.president.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=219&info_id=4990). Accessed 8 March 2011.

little other relevance than framing the corners of the country – except for the river Psou, which is found west of the Abkhazian capital Sukhumi on the Russian border. That can be taken as a discreet hint about the plans of reintegration.

The President's second term inaugural speech is less humble and very explicit in its goals of reintegration. National unity is here a much more dominant theme, and this time the geographic symbols seem less randomly picked:

We resolve anew to ensure Georgia is safe from our adversaries; at peace with our neighbours; united by mutual respect; and integrated across all our territories, from Tskhinvali to Akhalkalaki - Sighnaghi to Sukhumi.<sup>131</sup>

The choice of cities in this geographical illustration of unity could not possibly be more politicised: Tskhinvali and Sukhumi, capitals of breakaway regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia respectively, are obvious. Akhalkalaki, located in southern Georgia close to the Turkish border, is home to an overwhelming Armenian majority and to one of the Russian army bases that was closed down in 2007. The Armenians, unnerved by their proximity to the Turkish border and not trusting Georgian nationalism, protested against the closure of the base, as they felt protected by the presence of Russian forces.<sup>132</sup> Sighnaghi, for its part, is a small town in eastern Georgia, recently refurbished and being held out as one of the cornerstones in Georgian tourism. A symbol of the country's prosperity and beauty, Sighnaghi can be seen as an image of everything Georgians can be proud of together. Perfectly fitting into the role as a token of national unity, choosing Sighnaghi is less politically loaded than the capital Tbilisi.

Later in his speech, Saakashvili stated that Georgia and Europe were joined by a

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<sup>131</sup> "Inaugural Speech by President Mikheil Saakashvili", translated version of inaugural speech of 20 January 2008. [http://www.president.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=219&info\\_id=4956](http://www.president.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=219&info_id=4956). Accessed 8 March 2011

<sup>132</sup> Nodia, p. 59.

common and unbreakable bond -one based on culture -on our shared history and identity-and on a common set of values that has at its heart, the celebration of peace, and the establishment of fair and prosperous societies.<sup>133</sup>

Saakashvili once again extended a friendly hand towards Russia, while firmly stating that Georgia was to continue its way to membership in NATO and EU.

Although speaking more confidently in the 2008 inaugural, Saakashvili's two speeches are remarkably similar when one considers the fact that four eventful years had passed. The latter inauguration speech came only months after Tbilisi had seen significant anti-governmental protests, and in a time when Russian-Georgian relations and negotiations with the *de facto* governments had been deteriorating. True, the Saakashvili administration had moved swiftly in the first period of presidency to reintegrate Ajaria, but similar attempts in South Ossetia had failed utterly. Moreover, Russia had recently suspended the CFE Treaty<sup>134</sup>, and tensions were building up between Moscow and Western powers, especially USA due to disputes over the planned rocket shields in Eastern Europe. Overall, as time would show, Saakashvili's confidence was not to last for long. Some eight months later, the ambitions of joining NATO and EU were longer out of reach than ever before, and Russia had severely bitten the hand extended by the Georgian president.

### 5.3.2 Post-war discourse

When speaking about the war, Saakashvili strongly refuses to admit any loss.

Oppositional politicians calling the war lost have been met with arguments such as “you can be a loser in the war when there is a winner. Do you want to tell me that Russia is a winner?”<sup>135</sup>

<sup>133</sup> Inaugural speech of 20 January 2008.

<sup>134</sup> The Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) is a treaty signed between NATO and former Warsaw Pact countries. Signed by the participants in 1990 and carried out in 1992, the treaty sets ceilings for the amount of troops parts can sustain in every country in Europe. Russia suspended the treaty in December 2007 on the grounds that NATO still had not ratified it – the reason for this being a demand that Russia pull out their troops from *de facto* states in Georgia and Moldova. Negotiations for an adapted treaty are still ongoing, but without any luck so far. Russia's official suspension document can be read at the home pages of the Russian foreign Ministry: [http://www.mid.ru/Brp\\_4.nsf/arh/10DA6DD509E4D164C32573AF004CC4BE?OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/Brp_4.nsf/arh/10DA6DD509E4D164C32573AF004CC4BE?OpenDocument), accessed 21.03.11

<sup>135</sup> “The President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili Responded to the Questions Asked by the Opposition”, from the official site of Georgia's Presidential Administration, 12 Feb 2009. [http://www.president.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=228&info\\_id=4162](http://www.president.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=228&info_id=4162) . Accessed 22 June 2011.

At the same time, the governing elite goes far in blaming Russia solely for the war, seeming aware to include Ossetian and Abkhaz in the extended Georgian family. Addressing the parliament in September 2008, Saakashvili declared that Georgia still belonged to “Ossetians and Abkhazs [sic] [...] Georgia belongs to the representatives of all ethnic and religious groups.”<sup>136</sup>

The post-war discourse seems to treat reintegration issues more discreetly. Russia and their “puppet regimes” are blamed for the situation, and the Georgian people credited for standing together in difficult times.<sup>137</sup> An interesting phenomenon found both in these speeches and in the way the State ministry of reintegration treats the question, is how Russia is portrayed stereotypically as an enemy, while the Ossetian and Abkhaz people are viewed as helpless victims occupied by Russia and their “puppets”. A far cry from Gamsakhurdia’s denunciation of the Abkhaz “guests”, Georgian authorities today talk about reintegration as a common pan-Caucasian project hampered not by the general populations in the breakaway regions but by Russia. Deputy state minister of reintegration Irakli Porchkidze, emphasising that the population on “the other side” are still considered “legitimate Georgian citizens”, explained that Russia, unlike Georgia, has no understanding of Caucasians:

[F]or Russians, [the] Abkhaz are....Caucasians! And since you’ve been there [in Russia], you understand that they don’t really care if there are Abkhaz there, or Ossetians, or Georgians - for them it’s all the same! Right now they use this tool because they need to project their own power, but in reality, in essence, they feel a very different emotion towards these areas.<sup>138</sup>

To some extent, this rhetoric reflects the tragic complexity of the conflicts. In both conflict areas, there has been a high degree of personal contact between citizens.

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<sup>136</sup> “The President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili’s annual speech presented in the Parliament of Georgia”, from the official site of Georgia’s Presidential Administration, 16 Sep 2009. Accessed 22 June 2011.

<sup>137</sup> “The President of Georgia...”

<sup>138</sup> Interview with Irakli Porchkidze, First Deputy State Minister of Reintegration, conducted 17 June 2011.

### 5.3.3 Signals to ethnic minorities – Armenians and Azerbaijanis

Recognising perception as a major element in national unity, it can safely be said that the best way for elites to achieve unity is to make citizens feel united. In a state populated by various ethnic groups, like Georgia, it is important to maintain this perception lest minorities feel intimidated and seek their way out of the national community.

Armenians and Azerbaijanis represent the largest minority groups within the country. Despite sporadic tension between Georgian authorities and minority communities, especially during Gamsakhurdia's years in office, these tensions never materialised into armed conflicts. This can be explained partially by the fact that the kin-state of both minorities need stable relationships with Georgia because of their involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.<sup>139</sup> There are certain similarities as to how the two minorities relate to the Georgian government: both groups have majorities in local governments (*Sakrebulo*) in the regions of Akhalkalaki and Kvemo Kartli, respectively. In addition, they both have a representation in the Parliament reflecting their population in Georgia. In 2007, when the Russian military base in the Armenian-dominated city of Javakheti was dismantled, the local population used Russian language and even currency. This has obviously been an incentive for Georgian authorities to work actively on improving communication with the Armenians: In May 2009, following up a programme called 'The National Concept for Tolerance and Civic Integration' issued in August 2005, a strategy and an action plan was launched. The comprehensive action plan contains numerous measures for easier access of minorities lacking command of the Georgian into higher education facilities, financial support for news media and cultural institutions, and improved infrastructure so as to connect the minority regions physically to Georgia.<sup>140</sup> The State ministry of reintegration is also in charge of this process, which has been funded by USAid. Deputy state minister for reintegration, Irakli Porchkidze, explains:

So we created these mechanisms that Georgian citizens of Azeri or Armenian descent can pass these exams in their own language, and once they pass these exams and collect the right points[...] For one year they will start to learn Georgian, so they will have intensive Georgian skills, and in one year they actually start to be full-fledged BA students. And that is a tool to

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<sup>139</sup> Nodia 2005, p. 58

<sup>140</sup> National Concept for Tolerance and Civil Integration, 8 May 2009. <http://www.diversity.ge/eng/concept.php>, accessed 15 June 2011

integrate them inside the educational system; we have more and more people going through this. [...] Apart from this, we have invested heavily also in infrastructure development. To get from here to Akhaltsikhe or to the Samtskhe-Javakheti region in general would have taken you approximately five to six hours because of the bad infrastructure. After we invested heavily together with our international partners, you can cover the same distance in two, two and a half hours. So you have this approach that enhances relationships through the language, giving opportunities in part of education, jobs and many other things.

The minister stresses that the Georgian system has been enhanced so well that it is now better than in the home countries of the minorities. This regards not only the quality of the infrastructure, but also the bureaucracy, which is described as corrupt in the neighbouring countries:

So nowadays it is better for a...for example an Armenian descent citizen in Samtskhe-Javakheti, for them to study here than to go to Armenia, simply because it is more transparent here. The state finances everything, it is less costly because there they will have to pay bribes to get to the university, they sustain them there and it costs some money, so it is better and more cost efficient to have their children educated here. Since the infrastructure is better, there are more opportunities for them to sell produce elsewhere around in Georgia. So we are trying to increase opportunities for integration processes.<sup>141</sup>

In addition, the Georgian government has recently made large efforts to show tolerance towards the religions of the largest minorities. In March 2010, president Saakashvili proclaimed the Iranian holiday of Nowruz, which is celebrated officially in Azerbaijan, a national holiday in Georgia. Declaring that Nowruz "from now on (...) will be marked like any other major Georgian holiday", the president told the population of the Azerbaijani-dominated town of Marneuli that they were an "important part of Georgian society".<sup>142</sup> In 2011 he proceeded to state that integration of all ethnic minorities in Georgia has been one of the greatest achievements of recent years.<sup>143</sup> Earlier in 2011, Saakashvili made similar remarks to Armenian minorities when visiting an Armenian Christmas celebration.<sup>144</sup> In July, the Georgian government amended the civil code, granting legal status to five of the more

<sup>141</sup> Interview with Irakli Porckidze, First Deputy State Minister for Reintegration, conducted 17 June 2011

<sup>142</sup> "Nowruz declared as National Holiday in Georgia", article on civil.ge

<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22108>, accessed 21.03.11

<sup>143</sup> "Saakashvili says Building of State for all Ethnic Groups Major achievement", article on civil.ge.

<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23261>, accessed 21.03.11

<sup>144</sup> "Saakashvili on Georgian-Armenian Ties", article on civil.ge <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23022>, accessed 21.03.11

“traditional” religious minorities, including the Armenian Apostolic church.<sup>145</sup> Although, as we shall see, religious tolerance is still rather low, the government’s endorsement of religions shared by the largest of Georgia’s ethnic minorities can be expected to have a positive effect on the integration process. It could be argued that this recent interest in domestic national minorities comes as a result of a new strategy on ethnic minorities – that when the ambition of reintegration is now abandoned it is increasingly important for the Georgian elites to consolidate unity within Georgia proper and to avoid further separatism from happening.

#### 5.3.4 Religious affiliation and intolerance

The granting of legal status to religious minorities, especially to the Armenian church, initiated unrest among the Orthodox community in Georgia. In July 2011, thousands of demonstrators took to the streets in protesting the government’s amendment of the legislation. The demonstration was described as “one of the largest demonstrations held in Georgia in recent years”.<sup>146</sup> Patriarch Ilia II, leading the demonstration, warned that “those who have ever humiliated the Church [...] will be punished”, complaining that the law had been adopted without sufficient consultation with the Church.<sup>147</sup> Sitting firm in his position since 1977, Patriarch Ilia enjoys solid backing from more than 90 per cent of the population, and it is hard for politicians to criticise his decisions or statements.<sup>148</sup> In the case of granting legal status to some religious minorities, the minorities in question were groups with “close historic ties” to Georgia: in addition to the Armenian Apostolic Church, this regards the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Baptist Church, as well as Muslim and Jewish communities.<sup>149</sup>

While these ‘traditional’ religions – which are connected with the significant ethnic minorities – have been shown due respect by the government, other religious

<sup>145</sup> “Armenian Church Hails Georgia’s Religious Minorities Law”, article on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 8 July 2011. [http://www.rferl.org/content/armenian\\_apostolic\\_church\\_georgia\\_orthodox\\_church/24259999.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/armenian_apostolic_church_georgia_orthodox_church/24259999.html). accessed 14 July 2011.

<sup>146</sup> “Protest march against la won Religious Minorities Status”, article on civil.ge, 11 July 2011. <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23730>. Accessed 26 August 2011.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. See also “Patriarch: Legislative Amendment on Religious Groups’ Status ‘Dangerous’”, article on civil.ge 7 July 2011. <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23716>. Accessed 26 August 2011.

<sup>148</sup> Nodia, Ghia: “Georgia’s Showdown Between Church and State”, article on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 20 Feb 2011. [http://www.rferl.org/content/commentary\\_georgia\\_churches/2314963.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/commentary_georgia_churches/2314963.html). Accessed 26 Aug 2011.

<sup>149</sup> “Bill on Legal Status of Religious Minorities Passed with Final Reading”, article on civil.ge. <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23706>. Accessed 26 August 2011.



minorities are still discriminated against. The Public Defender's office, noting no complaints from ethnic minorities but several from religious minorities, expresses worry in their parliamentary reports concerning discrimination and violence against religious minorities or non-religious individuals, and official indifference to such.<sup>150</sup> According to deputy public defender Tata Khuntsaria, the representatives of the public defender have received criticism from the Orthodox church "several times" for just including this topic in their report. She points out that the relationship between the Patriarch and the president is not the best:

Although it is not written anywhere, [...] it is absolutely clear that the church doesn't support [Saakashvili], the church doesn't like him, the church doesn't want to communicate with him [...] However, on official big religious holidays like Christmas or Easter – our president goes to church, kisses the hand of our Patriarch, and expresses his religious feelings [...] However, it's not written anywhere – you can see it, you can feel it, sometimes you can experience it, sometimes you can see it when the church becomes especially aggressive. Sometimes you can see how the state continues being too neutral in cases when they don't have to be neutral. But when they meet each other they shake hands, they kiss etc. So they stick to protocol.<sup>151</sup>

As a reason for this, Khuntsaria points to the church being sceptical, and sometimes directly hostile, to the governing elites' ambitions of closer alignment with the western world. She mentions that "some priests say that our teenagers should not go abroad to get degrees there, because Europe is bad, because they are losing their traditions there".<sup>152</sup>

The governing elites, mainly western-educated and doing little to promote religious principles in their politics, have to recognise the enormous influence the Patriarch and the church has on Georgian society. As Khuntsaria suggests, Saakashvili recognises the church as a main national identity marker and has stated that "our statehood and faith is indivisible".<sup>153</sup>

The Church, for its part, has so far kept out of the main political debates which do not directly regard religion, but on occasions issues warnings about "the dangers of

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<sup>150</sup> "The Situation of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia. Report by Public Defender of Georgia". 2009, second half. pp. 146-150.

<sup>151</sup> Interview with Tata Khuntsaria, Deputy Public Defender, conducted 23 June 2011.

<sup>152</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> de Waal, 2011. p. 28

globalisation” and scepticism to Western values.<sup>154</sup> It has kept fairly good relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, but protested in September 2010, when Russian Patriarch Kiril congratulated South Ossetian de facto president Eduard Kokoity on the twentieth anniversary since South Ossetian independence was declared.<sup>155</sup> The two patriarchs have agreed that Georgia’s canonical borders should be respected, and the Russian Orthodox Church has not endorsed the breakaway states’ requests to form eparchies independent of the Georgian church.<sup>156</sup>

Religion is an important identity marker in Georgian nation building. Still, it is important to note the potential conflict between the secularised, western-oriented elites and the traditionalist, conservative stance of the Patriarchy. This may be the main conflict line between state and society, and also a reason for some Georgians to feel closer to the Orthodox sphere – including Russia – than to European values. Thomas de Waal has suggested that the philosophy of ‘Old Georgia’, in which religion and traditional ethical values are anchored, is one out of three possible directions for the future development of the Georgian state, but is less likely to prevail than the ‘European’ or the ‘Singapore’ models because it does not include any economic or financial models. Besides, it has associations with “the disastrous nationalist presidency of Zviad Gamsakhurdia [...], when Georgia’s minority communities faced ethnic discrimination”.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> de Waal, 2011, p. 28

<sup>155</sup> “Georgian Church ‘Surprised’ over Russian Patriarch’s S. Ossetia Move”, article on civil.ge, 25 Sept 2010. <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22702>. Accessed 15 July 2011.

<sup>156</sup> “Russian Orthodox Church ‘Respects’ Georgian Church Authority over Abkhazia, S. Ossetia”, article on civil.ge, 16 Sept 2009. <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21469>. Accessed 15 Junly 2011.

<sup>157</sup> De Waal 2011, p. 28.

## 6. GEORGIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY – MYTHS, SYMBOLS AND ‘OTHERS’

Georgia is a country rich on history and traditions, and nation-building elites in Georgia have a vast spectrum of identity markers to choose from. In this chapter I will analyse some of these markers, and discuss their main features and how they influence Georgians’ perception of “Georgianness”. I have chosen to focus on the national symbols (flag, coat of arms and national anthem) and two national heroes from Georgia’s recent history, Kaktusa Cholokashvili and Ilia Chavchavadze. In addition, I will discuss the lingual use of the different names of Georgia; *Gruzia* (Russian/Slavic) and *Sakartvelo* (Georgian.) I will also discuss Russia’s role as the other in Georgian nation building.

### 6.1 *Georgian myths*

As discussed above, national elites attempt to ‘control’ history and create myths defining the nation and its members. These myths are often linked to the nation’s ancient history, defining its birth or origin. They might also describe golden ages, where the nation was at its cultural height or its summit of power – or dark ages, when a foreign power held it captive. Myths can also be created to describe a national mission or pre-designated destiny, and to legitimise the conquest of a certain territory that belongs to the nation’s ancestors.<sup>158</sup>

Georgian national myths are manifold, and taken from various periods of the nation’s existence. In many cases, national heroes serve as a personification of the nation, and their deeds become an example for the citizens.

#### 6.1.1 Heroic myths – Cholokashvili, Chavchavadze and Stalin

Historical myths are strong national identity markers in Georgia, and myths around historical personalities or national heroes are strongly present. Rulers of the golden age – notably David the Builder and Queen Tamar – are depicted in monuments and

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<sup>158</sup> Coakley, pp. 542-552.

presented as representatives for the period when Georgia was at its strongest. More recent heroes, representing the struggle for Georgian independence, are also cherished. Interestingly, the face on the highest-valued banknote in Georgian currency (200 lari) is the one of Kaktusa Cholokashvili (1888-1930), a noble officer who served with distinction in the Russian cavalry in World War I and who became a fighter for Georgian independence after the revolution. He fought against the Soviet occupation in 1921 and continued his struggle for a number of years as a leader for the partisan movement, before eventually emigrating to France. Cholokashvili became such a strong symbol of resistance against Soviet occupation that the mere mentioning of his name was forbidden under Soviet rule, and it bore a high symbolic value for the national movements that emerged in the 1980s.

The most centrally symbolic role, however, is occupied by Ilia Chavchavadze. He was a writer and intellectual who, typically for a national liberation activist of the time, published his lyrical texts in Georgian, resisted Russian cultural influence and led a strong national movement to a higher national conscience. The assassination of Chavchavadze in 1907 only strengthened his popularity. When the Soviet Army put a stop to Georgian national aspirations in 1921, Chavchavadze remained an icon to those who yearned for independence. Eighty years after his death and two years after the declaration of Soviet *Glasnost*, in 1987 Chavchavadze was canonised by the Georgian Orthodox and Apostolic Church. He was given the name *Saint Ilia the Righteous*. His stories and poems were widely quoted during the 1989 anti-Soviet protests, and he thus became a pivotal symbol during Georgia's second nation building process. Chavchavadze's legacy seems to be held in high esteem by just about every faction of Georgian nationalism: The current president Mikheil Saakashvili named his party after the poet's National Movement. Former president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, known for his militantly Georgia-centred nationalism, also claimed to represent a continuation of Chavchavadze's legacy, as he together with his partner Merab Kostava formed the Society of St. Ilia the Righteous in 1988.

Josef Stalin, although not celebrated officially, remains a hero to many Georgians, especially in the older generations. When his six-meter high statue was taken down from its pedestal in his birthplace Gori in June 2010, it was done without prior announcement and with police guards sealing off the town square to avoid public

protest.<sup>159</sup> Stalin's popularity is not endorsed by the elites, and in that sense this case serves as an interesting example of how elites monopolise heroes even to the extent of taking down statues.

## *6.2 Invented traditions and symbols*

In many cases, cultural traditions can also be used for creating national unity. Elites, wanting citizens to socialise and identify with the nation-state, can invent or re-invent traditions to internalise attitudes, value systems and rules of behaviour – in other words, create a feeling of unity and community. Often, these traditions are extracted from the nation's history or national culture, and distilled into symbolic acts (dances, songs, marches, re-enactments) or objects (flags, costumes) that are easy to identify with.<sup>160</sup>

In the Georgian case, the traditions of the national project have been invented and re-invented four times this century: Once with the formation of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (DRG) in 1917-1918, then forcibly after the Soviet invasion in 1921; then taking back the DRG symbols in 1990-1991, and finally in 2004, after the Rose Revolution. Arguably, these symbols have been successful for nation building, since they have been picked to make all Georgians identify with them. The flag, national anthem and coat of arms are all created paying heavy attention to Georgia's historical 'golden age' and Christian (Eastern Orthodox) traditions.

### 6.2.1 The flag

In January 2004, when Saakashvili was inaugurated, a new flag was hoisted on official buildings. Taking down the old flag, which for many had become the symbol of the broken dreams of the 1990s, the new Georgian elites had chosen a flag they claimed to be deeply rooted in Georgian history – long before the Democratic republic, even long before the Russian annexation. The white flag dotted with five blood-red crosses is a mediaeval symbol identified with the crusader knight Godfrey of Bouillon (1060 – 1100) and was also used as the flag and coat of arms of the kingdom of Jerusalem from 1099 to 1291. The constellation of the five crosses,

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<sup>159</sup> "Stalin Statue Removed from Gori", article on civil.ge 25 June 2010. <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22453>. Accessed 11 August 2011.

<sup>160</sup> The main account on the topic of invented traditions is Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger (eds): *The Invention of Traditions*. Cambridge: University Press 1996.

together called the Jerusalem Cross, comprises the cross of Saint George – the same as found in the English flag – and one *Bolnur-katskhuri* cross (a *cross pattée* that has been found inscribed in the towns of Bolnisi and Katshkhi) in each of the quadrants. The flag, which was popular with Saakashvili’s National Movement before and during the Rose Revolution, has its origins in Georgia from mediaeval times, and is depicted on Georgian territory in Angelino Dulcert’s 14<sup>th</sup> century map<sup>161</sup>. Replacing the wine-red, black and white flag that was created by painter Jacob Nikoladze in 1917 (the red was Georgia’s national colour, the black and white symbols of the tragic past and the hopeful future), the new flag is a symbol of the movement’s attention to Georgia’s glorious past and its Christian connection. The former flag was designed for the declaration of the DRG in 1917, and was picked up again when Gamsakhurdia came to power. When parliament voted for replacing the flag with the five-cross banner in 1999, Shevardnadze hesitated, assembling a heraldic commission instead of issuing a decree.<sup>162</sup> In this way, the five-cross banner became a symbol of “new” against “old”, or the reconciliation of the ancient and new Georgias against the stagnant, corrupt regime that many felt Shevardnadze represented.

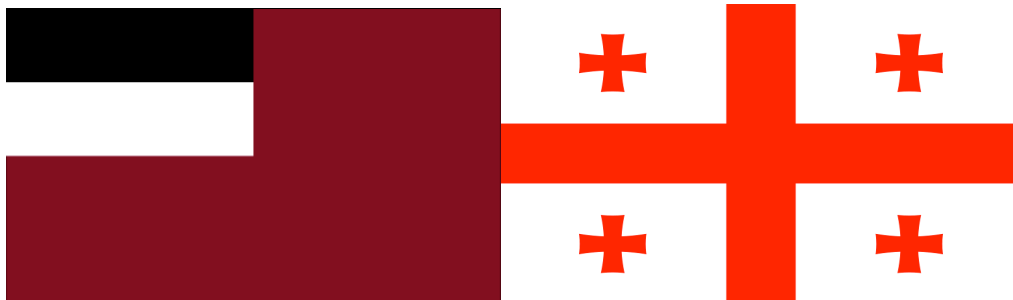


Fig. 1: The two flags of independent Georgia. Left: The flag used in 1981-1921 and 1991-2003. Right: The five-cross banner implemented in 2004.

### 6.2.3 The national anthem

Only months after the new flag was adapted, Georgia’s national anthem was changed. It was the third time that century – the anthem written for the DRG had been replaced by an anthem for the Georgian SSR, praising Stalin and communism, only to be put back in place again after independence. From May 2004, however, just a week before the celebration of independence day, Georgians could sing the *Tavisupleba* (freedom), an anthem based on the adapted version of two melodies written by the famous

<sup>161</sup> Angelino Dulcert’s 1339 map can be viewed on

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Map\\_of\\_Angelino\\_Dulcert](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Map_of_Angelino_Dulcert). Accessed 20 September 2011

<sup>162</sup> “What’s With Georgia’s Flag?”, article in Slate magazine 25 Nov 2003. <http://www.slate.com/id/2091667>. Accessed 11 August 2011.

composer Zakaria Paliashvili. The lyrics, written by poet and politician David Magradze, once again show the close affiliation with religion:

Our icon is the homeland  
 Trust in God is our creed,  
 Enlightened land of plains and mounts,  
 Blessed by God and holy heaven.  
 The freedom path we've learnt to follow  
 makes our future spirits stronger;  
 the morning star will rise above us  
 and lighten up the land between the two seas.  
 Glory to long-cherished freedom,  
 Glory liberty!<sup>163</sup>

The song is short, and the lyrics are much simpler than the DRG anthem, which is said to be more difficult to sing and remember. The melody is widely known among Georgians – written as it is by one of the country's most celebrated composers – and the lyrics are easy to remember. The religious content shows how elites recognise religion as a strong identity marker. The anthem can be heard every day with the opening and closure of the governmental TV channels, and is played in connection with Parliamentary sessions.

#### 6.2.4 The coat of arms and St. George as the patron saint

The last of the national symbols to be approved by Parliament in 2004 was the coat of arms. Contrary to the flag and anthem, it took some time and political disagreement to agree on a draft, and the result was not clear until October that year. It was decided that the coat of arms should be a red shield depicting St. George slaying a dragon. The greater coat of arms has borrowed the crown and the rampant lions from the heraldic crest of the Bagrationi, the dynasty of Georgian rulers between the ninth and twentieth centuries. In addition it contains a vineyard branch and a banner saying *dzala ertobashia* (*strength in unity*), which is Georgia's motto.

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<sup>163</sup> “The Georgian National Anthem”, from the pages of the President of Georgia.  
[http://www.president.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=243](http://www.president.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=243). Accessed 12 August 2011.

The link with the Bagrationi dynasty strongly indicates Georgia's roots in the past and reminds of a glorious history as a monarchy. When these attributes were not displayed by the elites of the DRG, it is obviously because the Menshevik elites of the time did not approve of the use of nobility symbols. However, the symbol of St. George was seen as so strongly affiliated with Georgia that this was not changed.

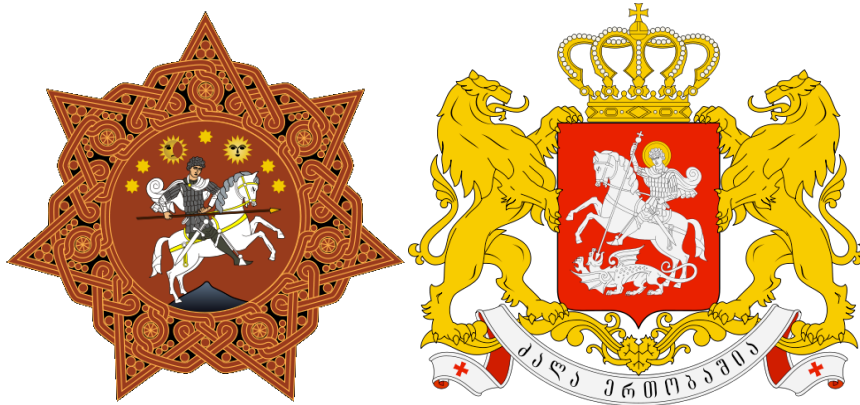


Fig. 2: The two coats of arms of independent Georgia. The one to the left was used 1918-21 and 1991-2004. Note the St. George theme in both of them, and the 'royal' theme suggested by the Bagrationi crown and lions on the right one. The banner underneath the shield reads 'dzala ertobashia' ('strength in unity').

### 6.2.5 Georgia, Gruziya or Sakartvelo?

Interestingly, despite the fact that Saint George is the patron saint of Georgia, the name Georgia, used in most European languages, does not derive from the saint, but from the Persian word *gurj* (or Arabic *kurj*), meaning wolf.<sup>164</sup> The Persians used the name *Gurjistan* about the heartlands of today's Georgia, known then as *Iveria* to Greek and Roman historians and *Kartli* to the people living there.<sup>165</sup> The mistake of mixing up the names was made already in the Middle Ages. The Patriarch of Jerusalem, Jaques de Vitry, described the Georgian crusaders there in 1225 as "warlike and valiant" people who "especially revere and worship St George, whom they make their patron and standard-bearer in their fight with the infidels"<sup>166</sup>.

The name *gurj* can also explain why the Slavic interpretation of the name is *Gruziya*. Today, this name is so connected to the Russian language that the Georgian foreign ministry in 2011 asked states to stop using it and switch to *Georgia*.<sup>167</sup>

In the Georgian language, Georgia is called *Sakartvelo*, the language *Kartuli* and the people *Kartvelebi*. This name is derived from the mythical figure Kartlos, who was

<sup>164</sup> Lang, David M.: *The Georgians*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1966, p. 112.

<sup>165</sup> Lang, David M.: *A Modern History of Georgia*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962, p. 5.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> "Tbilisi Want to be Referred as 'Georgia' not 'Gruzya'(sic)", article on civil.ge. <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23673>, 27 June 2011. Accessed 12 August 2011.



great-grandson of the biblical Japhet (one of Noah's sons) that Zviad Gamsakhurdia claimed to be 'a forefather of the white race'. Kartli was the name of the mediaeval kingdom founded in the third century, where Mtskheta was capital, and which at its peak stretched eastward to what would later be the separate kingdom of Imereti. By the time of the Treaty of Giorgievsk in 1783, the kingdom was called Kartli-Kakheti because it also comprised the formerly autonomous city-state of Kakheti. *Sakartvelo* means 'land of the Kartvel-ebi' – what in Europe were known as Georgians.<sup>168</sup>

### *6.3 The troublesome neighbour – Russia as the 'other'*

Clearly, for the current Georgian government Europeanisation and possible inclusion in the European Union is a goal, and Russia is "the constituting other" to a stronger degree than before.<sup>169</sup> In the long history of the relationship between the two countries, Georgian sentiments of freedom have been opposed to Russian rule and coercive influence. As we have seen, however, it was Russia that introduced Georgia to modernity, and before the fall of the Soviet Union, Georgian concepts of Europe and modernity never came directly from the west, but from Russia.<sup>170</sup> Are Russia's ties with Georgia so strong that even now, after a war that could only be perceived as a horrendous display of raw military power from the Russian side, they cannot be severed?

One assumption might be that the 2008 conflict unified the nation in its resistance against Russia. The role of such an "other" can be a strong impetus for national unity.<sup>171</sup> As previously discussed, however, not all Georgians want to see Russia as an enemy. Through education, military service and work in the Soviet period, and through subsequent trade and personal relations, many people in post-Soviet republics still have complex relations to Russia. Russian is still used as a *lingua franca* between speakers of different Georgian languages and with Abkhaz and Armenian minorities. Although the Russo-Georgian relationship has not only seen trouble since its formal beginning in 1783, Russia has proven to be a difficult neighbour on many occasions

<sup>168</sup> Lang 1962, p. 5

<sup>169</sup> As defined by Neumann in. Neumann, Iver B: *Russia and the Idea of Europe: A Study in Identity and International Relations*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

<sup>170</sup> Dzhokhadze, Avto: *Rossiya Glazami Gruzina*, article in "Gruzia online".

<http://www.apsny.ge/society/1177005060.php>. Accessed 24 March 2011.

<sup>171</sup> Most scholars agree that such "others" or "out-groups" tend to strengthen unity, and that it is also used by elites to deliberately build or strengthen such unity. See Neumann 1996, Gellner 1998.

in Georgian history. There is no doubt that Russia remains an important factor in Georgian identity and self-perception. Besides, the long years of co-existence have given Georgians a multifaceted view on Russia: The perception of the northern neighbour depends on which Russia one is talking about, according to Norwegian scholar Pål Kolstø *et al.*: ” Is it the cultural Russia, the bureaucratic-administrative Russia, or the military Russia? Georgian attitudes towards Russian culture are highly ambivalent: the Russians are seen as both barbarians and as carriers of high culture.”<sup>172</sup>

Georgian elites use Russia as the other in many occasions, and anti-Russian sentiment has increased sharply after 2008. In some cases, the sentiment has been criticised by the opposition. A good example of dispute is the government’s attempt to detach citizens from the pan-Soviet sentiment of World War 2. The Soviet victory has been celebrated in all post-Soviet countries since 1945, marking 9 May as the day of victory, instead of 8 May, which is the Western tradition. Since many Georgian citizens participated in the war, the memory and celebration has been important to many Georgians. After 2008, however, Georgian government has taken measures to put less emphasis on the common Soviet effort that Stalin so much used to his advantage to unify Soviet people after the war. In December 2009, a 46-meter high commemorative WW2 monument in Kutaisi was demolished, much to the consternation of the Russian foreign and defence ministries. Locals also protested against the demolition, but were not heard. Tragically, a woman and her 11-year old daughter died during the demolition works.<sup>173</sup>

Moreover, in May 2011, Georgian foreign minister Grigol Vashadze stated that the Foreign Ministry would prefer to move Victory day celebrations to 8 May, explaining that the 9 May celebrations were a Russian tradition chosen by Russia for “absolutely incomprehensible reasons”. Although receiving support from some analysts, among them Ghia Nodia, the statement was criticised by the opposition and later neutralised by deputy foreign minister Nino Kalandadze, who claimed that the opinions of Georgian WW2 veterans would be “taken into account” before taking a decision on the matter.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Kolstø, Pål and Aleksandr Rusetsky: “Power Differentials and Identity Formation: Images of Self and Other on the Russian–Georgian Boundary” (unpublished)

<sup>173</sup> ”Two die in Demolition of WWII Monument”, article on civil.ge 19 Dec 2009.

<http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21807> . Accessed 5 Oct 2011

<sup>174</sup> ”Tbilisi Responds to Medvedev’s Congratulation Message”, article in The Messenger.

[http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/2353\\_may\\_10\\_2011/2353\\_mzia.html](http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/2353_may_10_2011/2353_mzia.html). Accessed 5 October 2011.

This example shows how elites push to distance Georgia from the pan-Soviet national myths of the past, reinventing even those traditions that are connected to Georgia's Soviet history. Demolishing or removing monuments, as with the Stalin monument in Gori, can have a provoking effect on some citizens. As these examples show, there is not always a clear consensus among people or even among elites.

## 7. THE PUBLIC OPINION

### 7.1 Introduction

Although this thesis is focusing mainly on the elite perspective, insight in the public opinion can give valuable information about to what extent the public approves of the way elites pursue the national project, or of the national project in itself. As we have seen, opposition parties criticise elites for moving too fast, but few of them seem to disagree to the political concepts that the Saakashvili administration pursue, or to the four guidelines that the national project include.

### 7.2 Surveys

Various institutes are currently carrying out quantitative surveys in Georgia on issues concerning reintegration and Georgia-Russia relations. In this chapter, I will compare a number of different findings by three different institutions: Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), an independent research organisation conducting projects in several fields of Georgian politics, Caucasus Research Resource Centre's program (CRRC) and the Georgian branch of the US-financed International Republican Institute (IRI), which has also conducted a survey in Georgia in recent years.

#### 7.2.1 IPS surveys

Analysing the IPS surveys, we learn that Russia is indeed perceived as a primary threat to the country and that the public does care about the problems caused by questions of reintegration. Especially after the 2008 war, surveys show that "relations with Russia" and "the presence of Russian Forces" rank high on the list displaying the significance of problems in Georgia. "Restoration of borders" and "Declaration of independence by Abkhazia and South Ossetia" also rank among the top ten problems, although lower than Russia-related problems.<sup>175</sup>

Regarding the strategies of how to reintegrate the breakaway regions, the 2008 war seems to have had a significant impact on the population's view on reintegration issues. The following quote, from IPS surveys, also gives interesting data as to

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<sup>175</sup> The list ranking the significance of problems contains 26 scenarios. The top ten are, in order of percentage: Unemployment, poverty, Relations with Russia, Presence of Russian armed forces, access to quality health service, Drug addiction, Restoration of pre august 2008 borders with Abkhazia and south Ossetia, Situation with IDPs, Education, and Declaration of independence by Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Nana Sumbadze: *Civic Participation: Desired and achieved. Report on the Survey of Population: Barometer 2009*. Survey made for IPS 2010. [www.ips.ge](http://www.ips.ge). Accessed 20 March 2011

differences in attitudes towards reintegration of South Ossetia versus Abkhazia – as well as other dividing lines in age and gender.

The war has changed the attitude of the population with regards to the strategy of reintegration of Abkhazia and Ossetia. The share of those who considered this possible by the use of force sharply declined. In contrast to 2007 when 37 per cent considered reintegration possible by the use of force in Abkhazia, in 2008, their share decreased to 16.5 per cent. In regard to Ossetia, corresponding figures were 27.6 per cent and 16.3 per cent. It appears that there is a stable portion of the population who saw the possibility of conflict resolution only through the use of force.<sup>176</sup>

The survey shows differing opinions across gender and age. Somewhat surprisingly, older people were more against the use of force:

In this regard, statistically significant differences were found across gender, age and location of the respondents. More men than women supported the use of force. A fifth of surveyed men (20 per cent) considered the use of force in Abkhazia as appropriate, and almost the same number (19.8 per cent) in Ossetia. The corresponding figures among women were 13.5 per cent and 13.3 per cent. In addition, the number of supporters for the use of force decreased with age. 25.8 per cent of the people under the age of 25 supported the use of force in Abkhazia, and 25.7 per cent in Ossetia, while only 11.6 per cent of senior citizens, those over the age of 65 were in favour of the use of force in Abkhazia, and 11.7 per cent in Ossetia.<sup>177</sup>

The more than 20 per cent drop in attitude towards forceful reintegration of Abkhazia and 10 per cent drop for South Ossetia suggests that apart from the 16 per cent "hard core" obviously supporting the use of force in both cases, few Georgians have faith in the successful outcome of a solution including force. Interestingly, the number supporting use of force is overrepresented among the youngest group. Furthermore, it might seem like these opinions have dropped even more in recent enquiries:

In the 2009 survey, when given a list of "effective ways of reintegrating Abkhazia and Ossetia", only five per cent chose "use of force" regarding Abkhazia and four per cent in Ossetia. Direct talks with the de facto governments was the most favoured solution in both cases (72.2 and 73.5 per cent respectively), followed by "talks with Russia" (66.2/66.6) and "increasing the attractiveness of being a part of Georgia through

<sup>176</sup> Nana Sumbadze: *Georgia Before and After the August War. Report on the Survey of Population: Barometer 2007 and 2008*. Survey made for IPS, p. 8. [www.ips.ge](http://www.ips.ge). Accessed 20 March 2011

<sup>177</sup> Nana Sumbadze: *Georgia Before and After the August War. Report on the Survey of Population: Barometer 2007 and 2008*. Survey made for IPS, p. 8. [www.ips.ge](http://www.ips.ge). Accessed 20 March 2011

economic development in the country” (63.3/63.2).<sup>178</sup> A majority of the interviewees think it is possible to live alongside with Abkhazians (70.1 per cent) and South Ossetians (74.4 per cent) in the future.

The surveys reveal other noteworthy public opinions: Half of the group responding to the survey say they ”don’t know” when asked to give a possible timeframe of reintegration, and among the few who answer the question, they a rather short timeframe – three to five years, whereas less than ten per cent believe it will never happen.

### 7.2.2 CRRC Surveys

Caucasus Research Resource Centers programme (CRRC) is conducted in cooperation with the Carnegie Corporation in New York, The Eurasia Partnership Foundation and USAID. The programme operates in Armenia and Azerbaijan in addition to Georgia, and similarly to the IPS carries out ”barometers” of public opinion. In a survey conducted in March 2011, the CRRC posed the question to Georgian interviewees on Abkhazia’s prospect on becoming an integral part of Georgia proper after the 2008 conflict. The figures (fig.1) were not optimistic: A 41 per cent majority thinks the chances have decreased, while 35 per cent see them as the same as before.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Sumbadze 2009, p. 33. Other options included ”Heightening the attractiveness of being a part of Georgia through fostering democracy and protecting minorities”, ”Georgia’s membership in NATO” and Georgia’s membership in EU”, all of which have more than 50 per cent support.

<sup>179</sup> Downloaded from CRRC webpage/datasets: <http://crrccenters.org/caucasusbarometer/datasets/>, accessed 4 April 2011. For a commented version, see the article ”Georgians on Abkhazia: What is to be done?” on <http://crrcc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2011/03/georgians-on-abkhazia-what-is-to-be.html>, accessed 4 April 2011.

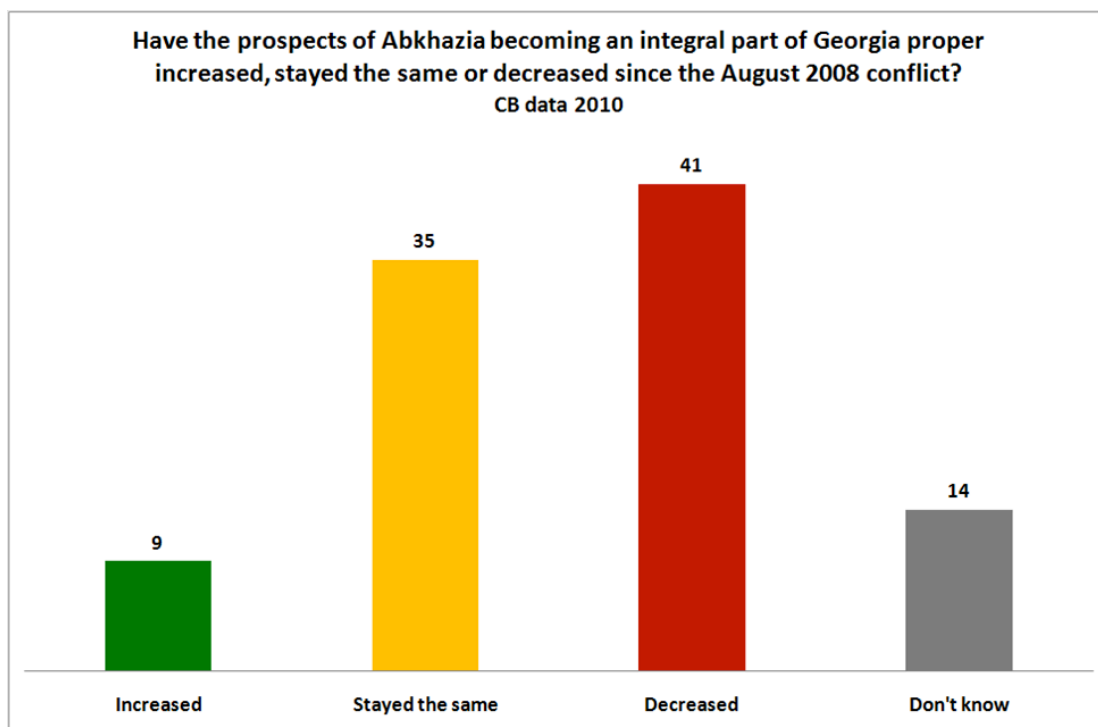


Figure 1. From CRRC survey conducted autumn 2010.

The surveys also show that the desire for joining NATO has dropped since before the war, but is still high; at 65 per cent. EU membership is supported by an overwhelming 82.8 per cent.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Sumbadze 2010, p. 33.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have used different sets of terms to explain the nation building processes in a country with a rich, but troubled history. Explaining the main historical lines of Georgia's path to becoming a nation-state, I have used Ghia Nodia's national project term to explain how an ideological framework emerged in the late nineteenth century. This coincided with the rise of national movements in other Eastern European countries at the time, but when Georgia became a part of the Soviet Union, the process of nation building, that is the political consolidation of the national project, became stalled. Existing within the intellectual elites of the Georgian Soviet Republic the duration of Soviet rule, Georgian national awareness resurfaced in the late 1980s, this time with a more aggressive stance towards Russia and the national minorities that also wanted autonomy and were not interested in taking part in the Georgian project. As the first president of this Second Republic, Zviad Gamsakhurdia's only successful effort was to establish independent Georgia as a nation-state. However, the goal of keeping a neutral relationship with the external and internal others, Russia and the main national minorities, failed horribly. Shevardnadze's period as president was characterised by less emphasis on the nation building process, and more on state building. The Western world was chosen as a role model for Georgian statehood, in accordance with the national project. However, the conflicts with Russia and the minorities remained frozen – protracted and unresolved. Saakashvili picked up nation building as a main effort, quickly re-establishing Georgia's markers of national identity replete with national symbols and a heavy national awareness. At the same time, under his administration the Georgian state has been consolidated and reformed, to some degree at the expense of democratic development. In addition, the undertakings of the Saakashvili administration to reintegrate territories inhabited by national minorities have had mixed results: Ajaria was successfully reintegrated, but the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain protracted conflicts and major problems to Georgian national security. Therefore, after the 2008 war, Georgia's possibilities to complete the two latter guidelines of the national project – establishing a neutral relationship with Russia and dealing with national minorities – remain unclear. Russia is now defined as an adversary, and the goals of reintegrating Abkhazia and South Ossetia are put on hold while straightening out relations to the Armenian and Azeri minorities has become more important.



Georgian-Russian relations remain undetermined. Diplomatic relations are still not restored after the 2008 war, and at the time of writing Georgia uses diplomacy to keep Russia out of the World Trade Organisation – an institution that could serve as an arena for negotiation and trade between the two states. The aftermath of the 2008 war keeps the two countries, and the de facto states, in a diplomatic deadlock that seems difficult to break out of.

In his two terms of presidency, Mikheil Saakashvili has combined the endeavours of his predecessors: He has continued the state building that Shevardnadze started on, establishing institutions and nurturing relations with the West. At the same time he has paid attention to the nationalist currents so strongly visible under Gamsakhurdia. He has built the nation on a strong nationalist sentiment, in which Georgian history, language, religion and heritage are strong identity markers. After the war, even more emphasis has been put on these markers. The 2008 war is already incorporated into a historic myth, in which the Georgian nation bravely defended itself against imperialistic aggression in Russia's attempt to interfere with Georgian plans of national self-realisation. The myth is complex and displays all the virtues and the uniqueness of everything Georgian: Modernisation against the Russian backwaters, defending the homeland vs. attacking small neighbours; democracy against authoritarianism; and a potentially glorious future as a member of the European and Western communities. To some extent, this myth has served as a justification for employing less democratic methods for state coercion: excessive use of police force, unlawful surveillance and arbitrary arrests have been legitimised by the need to crack down upon alleged fifth columnists working for Russian intelligence. Saakashvili's party, United National Movement, controls the executive and has a large parliamentary majority, and opposition parties are marginalised. For all Saakashvili's promises to make Georgia a modern, European state, he might seem to be in danger of ending up with a system of *managed pluralism*: a system not unlike the current Russian one, where elites define a set of political, ideological and religious views within a boundary outside which everything is deemed hostile to the state.<sup>181</sup> The current speculations that Saakashvili will choose to "do a Putin" and stay in power after the 2012 elections – either by amending the constitution or by appointing a

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<sup>181</sup> A good account on managed pluralism can be found in Balzer, Harley: "Managed Pluralism: Putin's Emerging Regime" in *Post-Soviet Affairs Vol. 19/No. 3 2007*, pp. 189-227.

trusted ally and assuming the role of party leader - fuels the notion that he has created a system that is modelled more on contemporary Russia than on Western Europe.<sup>182</sup> In that case, there is a certain irony in how Georgian elites have worked hard to get out of the Russian orbit, only to adapt a similar political system.

Even if the Georgian national project seems well defined, there might exist alternative conceptualisations on the project that might compete with the one pursued by elites. Religion, although recognised by elites as a strong identity marker, is not the highest priority, and as the chapter on religious intolerance shows, religion might be a cause for more political conflict in the future. The Patriarch has by and large stayed out of politics so far, but both the Church and religious organisations have expressed reluctance to embrace the part of the national project that claims Europe as the main provider of cultural capital for the future.

Taking this into consideration, then, it is safe to say that Georgia's opportunities for nation building have changed after the 2008 war. In one way, it has united the citizens, including national minorities, by an increased sense of "Georgianness". On the other hand, it has posed major challenges to elites as to what steps to take next.

Georgia has a long way ahead to complete its national project. The most efficient means to reach this end is active civic participation, in a process where elites allow civil society to thrive and exchange ideas within a modern, democratic framework. Open and transparent democracy seems to represent the best way for Georgia to become a member of the European community, which in its turn is the most efficient way to exercising human-centric soft power on the breakaway states. Such an approach would arguably be the best way to keep Ilia Chavchavadze's legacy alive.

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<sup>182</sup> De Waal, p. 21.

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## Interviews

- Interview with Ghia Nodia, professor in political science, Ilya State University. Conducted 15 June 2011
- Interview with Irakly Porckhidze, Deputy State Minister of Reintegration. Conducted 17 June 2011.
- Interview with Tata Khuntsaria, Deputy Public Defender, conducted 23 June 2011.
- Interview with David Usupashvili, leader of Republican party. Conducted 24 June 2011.
- Interview with Irakli Menagarishvili, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1995-2003. Conducted 28 June 2011.