

Dawns in Abkhazia are still quiet: the forgotten roots of a post-Soviet frozen conflict

Valeria CHELARU

Ph.D, historian, member of the Center "Territorial Identities and Development Centre" Babeş-Bolyai University

Email: valeria.a.chelaru@gmail.com

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Abstract: This article re-evaluates Abkhazia's frozen conflict in light of the region's shared history with the Soviet Union. The article's primary purpose is to re-examine the role of politicized identities in the emergence and maintenance of frozen conflicts. Since macro perspectives on the frozen conflicts in the former Soviet space might not be entirely relevant to understanding such a mechanism, Abkhazia's case study provides us the opportunity to substantiate the post-imperial legacy's intricacies. To achieve that, the region's Soviet history, intrinsically linked to Soviet Union's political configuration, has been scrutinized. The impact of the Soviet policies on Abkhazia's engineering for political purposes is tackled in conjunction with the region's ethnic identity.

Keywords: frozen conflicts, Abkhazia, nationalism, identities, the Soviet Union.

Rezumat: Articolul încearcă să reinterpreteze conflictul înghețat din Abkhazia în durată lungă a istoriei împărtășite în Uniunea Sovietică. Pentru aceasta va fi reexaminat rolul jucat de identitățile politizate/bolșevizate în crearea și menținerea conflictelor înghețate. Cum viziunile macro nu reușesc să explice pe deplin acest mecanism, prin acest studiu de caz dedicat Abkhaziei încercăm să explicăm moștenirile imperiale postsovietice în lumina dezvoltărilor istorice din perioada comunistă în care ingineriile politice au afectat și identitățile etnice.

Cuvinte cheie: conflicte înghețate, Abkhazia, naționalism, identități, Uniunea Sovietică.

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There are less than nine hundred kilometers between the war-ravaged city of Mariupol in South-Eastern Ukraine and Sukhumi, Abkhazia's capital. Except for their geographical proximity, both cities have to put up with their nearness to what we broadly term 'frozen conflicts'. The Soviet Union's disintegration – the most shattering collapse suffered by an empire not defeated in war¹– unleashed a conflict of identities among the Soviet multiethnic communities. Against the backdrop of the newly-emerging political entities, ethnic nationalism became highly politicized and escalated into interethnic clashes. These escalations and the eventual military outburst led to protracted and bitter disputes at the periphery of the ex-Soviet space, known as 'frozen conflicts'. However, as many specialists have noticed, these conflicts have never been 'frozen,' given their changing dynamics, nature, and even perspectives².

Despite their local particularities, all these territorial disputes emerged in small states or territorial units at the former Soviet Union's periphery. Beyond their political, economic, cultural, or geopolitical aspects, the frozen conflicts in the former Soviet space are characterized by common elements such as the defeat of the ex-titular nations by the so-called 'separatist' minorities; the damage of territorial integrity suffered by both former Union's republic and the irredentist territorial unit; ideologically, the replacement of communism with nationalism; a high number of displaced people (to a lesser degree in Transnistria).

Usually, these frozen conflicts are intrinsically studied and treated as a legacy of Soviet politics and history. The literature emphasized their geostrategic and geopolitical dimension, mainly their role in the state-building and -consolidation processes in both tsarist and Soviet periods and frozen conflicts came to the fore in the context of the new Ukraine-Russia War. Gauging the exact number of these post-Soviet disputes would be impossible due to inevitable volatility concerning the term and the fact that many of them are officially integrated as Russian territorial subjects. Apart from the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh – the first conflict to evolve into a 'frozen' one – the Caucasus is the scene of other four unsolved crises, such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Prigorodnyi raion (between North Ossetia and Ingushetia) and Chechnya. Dagestan could follow, considering

¹ Janusz Bugajski, *Cold Peace: Russia's New Imperialism*, Westport, Praeger, 2004, p. 1

² William H. Hill, The thawing of Russia's frozen conflicts, Russia Direct, 23 August 2015, pp.10-11, <https://russia-direct.org/catalog/product/russia-direct-brief-frozen-conflicts-post-soviet-space>, visited on 1 July 2022

the republic's high instability and the increasing religious extremism associated with international terrorist movements. Since many of these latent territorial conflicts have been incorporated into the Russian Federation, they add a new semantic perspective on the so called frozen conflicts..

A `frozen conflict` means an armed conflict during which the military clashes have been stalled or lessened while no agreement has been reached. Consequently, the `separatist` territorial unit's status remains undefined internationally. Terms used while referring to such entities became rather exonyms which vary depending on the source: `separatist states`,` `de facto states`,` `quasi-states`,` `self-proclaimed republics`,` `partially-recognized autonomous republics`,` etc.

In this article, I will reassess the frozen conflict in Abkhazia as a case study of the center-periphery relationship. Abkhazia's case is defined by a series of identity and geopolitical elements that allow, on the one hand, to analyze how identities can be officially instrumentalized and exploited and how these politicized identities can react under altering circumstances. On the other hand, the role of political geography can be studied as another factor in reshaping approaches to ethnic and national identities in an area with overwhelmingly multiethnic societies. It has been argued, however, that multiethnic societies with a "world as exhibit" view carry the risk of freezing "ethnicity into categories while ignoring what is really significant, namely, a history of institutionalization that gives rise to organizational expression and systems of political patronage."³

Frozen conflicts in the former Soviet space are inherently bound to nationalism and ethnic identities (or various types of identity, as in Transnistria⁴, for example). When dealing with these concepts, Vladimir Kolossov stressed that communities called nations are social constructs highly related to political elites` efforts and the political institutions they create⁵.

³ John O'Loughlin, Vladimir Kolossov, Jean Radvanyi, "The Caucasus in a Time of Conflict. Demographic Transition, and Economic Change", *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 2007, 48(2):135-156, 135.

⁴ See: Valeria Chelaru, "Deconstructing the Case of Transnistria's Conflict: Identities and Representations", *Moldavian Journal of International Law and International Relations*, 2020, Vol.15, Issue 2, pp.74-87; Idem, "The `true` Moldovans of Transnistria: A Case Study of Identity Fabrication in the First Years of the USSR (1924-1940)", *Anuarul Laboratorului pentru Analiza Conflictului Transnistrean*, Vol. V, No. 1 / 2021, pp.35-53; Idem, *Competing identities in the ex-Soviet space: the Republic of Moldova's identity crisis in light of its frozen conflict in Transnistria*, *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie «George Barițiu» din Cluj-Napoca. Series Historica*, LIX, 2020, Supliment, 2, pp.235-248.

⁵ Vladimir Kolossov, "Ethnic and political identities and territorialities in the post-Soviet states", *GeoJournal*, 1999, 48,2; p. 71

Moreover, in the former Soviet space, identities have been fluid and characterized by rapid dynamics as a natural response to a collapsing sociopolitical reality and the need to face it strategically. My approach to identity brings out the `constructivist` paradigm by re-evaluating the frozen conflict in Abkhazia. Contrary to the `primordialist` perspective, – which “has undertaken to show how individuals who think of themselves as autonomous agents are in fact entirely determined in their choices, whether ethnic, political, cultural, aesthetic or even sartorial”⁶– describing (social) identities as primordially given, David Laitin remarks that “identities are not inherited like skin color [...] but constructed like an art object”⁷.

Such a frame of reference is close to Dmitri Gorenburg's perspective on the state's authority as an external force “to deliberately shape ethnic identity”⁸.

The aim of the article is thus to re-examine the role of politicized identities in the emergence and maintenance of the frozen conflicts. Since the article's main focus relies on conflict's roots rather than conflict's development, the analysis of Georgia-Abkhazia military clashes exceeds the scope of my investigation. In this paper, I will scrutinize the region's Soviet history, which is intrinsically linked to Soviet Union's political configuration. The latter's impact on Abkhazia's engineering for political purposes will be tackled in conjunction with the region's ethnic identity. Ultimately, since a macro perspective on the frozen conflicts in the former Soviet space might not be entirely relevant to understanding such a mechanism, Abkhazia's case study provides the opportunity to substantiate the intricacies of a post-imperial legacy. Having introduced the article's theoretical preliminaries, I tackle Abkhazia's Soviet history in four chapters divided according to the country's defining periods. The establishment of the Soviet state and its first tumultuous years; the Stalinist period in Abkhazia, and the subsequent stage between post-Stalinism and the Soviet Union's disintegration.

Abkhazia's incorporation into the Russian Empire in 1810 was a cumbersome event. A vassal region to the Ottoman Empire, Abkhazia's cultural linkage with its Georgian neighbors dated back more than one thousand years. According to a shared theory, the Abkhaz people belong

⁶ Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A philosophical guide to living*, Edinburgh, Canongate Books Ltd., 2019, p.201.

⁷ David D., Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1998, p. 11

⁸ Dmitri Gorenburg, “Identity change in Bashkortostan: Tatars into Bashkirs and back”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, May 1999, Volume 22, Number 3, p. 555

to a distinct ethnic group related to the North Caucasus's Circassian tribes: the Kabardians, the Shapsug, and the Ubykh⁹.

In addition, they developed strong linguistic and cultural affinities with the so-called 'Mountain peoples' – the Ossetians, the Nakh group (the Chechen and Ingush) and the Dagestani¹⁰.

Strong interconnectivity between the Abkhazians and their multiethnic neighbors flourished economically, politically, and culturally. When Tsarist Russia strived to annex the region, it had to put up with a strong pro-Turkish camp among Abkhazians. Russia's fragile reputation in Transcaucasia was largely affected by its inability to conquer the Mountain People in the Northeastern Caucasus. Since religion and culture inevitably placed Abkhazians closer to the Ottoman Porte and against Russia, the aspect played a tremendous role in the context of numerous Russian-Turkish wars in the nineteenth century. Russia launched a devastating campaign to subjugate the region against the Circassians, Ubykh, and Abkhazians. In 1864 the Principality of Abkhazia was abolished, and the whole area was renamed Sukhum Military District, under direct administration of the Russian Empire.¹¹

Abkhazia and the Soviet engineering

After February 1917, in the wake of Imperial Russia's disintegration, Abkhazia became the battleground between the Bolshevik and the Whites' armed forces. The Menshevik militaries from the newly-founded Democratic Republic of Georgia supported the latter. In the spring of 1918, Abkhazia was incorporated into Georgia through a repressive process against the region's national movement and civil population; in March 1919, Abkhazia received the status of an autonomous region inside Georgia. According to Georgia's Constitution (1921), Abkhazia (the Sukhum Region), Muslim Georgia (the Batumi Region), and Zagatala (Zagatal'skiy Raion) were recognized as

⁹ Viacheslav Chirikba, *The Origin of Akkhazian People*, on-line: <https://abkhazworld.com/a/w/abkhazians/who-are-they/1117-the-origin-of-the-abkhazian-people-by-viacheslav-chirikba>, visited on 30 June 2022; Nikolai I. Marr, *O yazyke I istorii Abhazov*, Moskva-Leningrad, Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1938, p. 135

¹⁰ Georgy Derluguian, *Abkhazia: A Broken Paradise*, on-line: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315797385_Abkhazia_A_Broken_Paradise, visited on 2 July 2022, p. 67.

¹¹ For an extended account of the topic, see: Valeria Chelaru, "Abkhazia between the Past and the Future: Loyalties and Strategies in a Post-Imperial Context", *Moldavian Journal of International Law and International Relations*, 2017, Vol.12, Issue 3, pp.427-441.

“inseparable parts of the Republic of Georgia” and benefitted from “autonomous government in local affairs.”¹²

In the context of the Russian Civil War, in March 1921, the Red Army overthrew Georgia's Menshevik government and proclaimed Abkhazia as Soviet Republic on a par with Georgia.

In July 1921 Joseph Stalin made his first visit to Georgia as People's Commissar for Nationalities. Despite Lenin's advice to manage gently local nationalistic aspirations, Stalin and Sergo Ordzhonikidze¹³ were inclined to apply radical measures. To temper Georgia's nationalism, a compromise was reached in March 1922 when Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan were integrated into a common economic union named the Transcaucasian Federation. The abolition of Georgia's independence triggered strong reactions inside the party, and many Georgian members resigned. After the Soviet Union's foundation in December 1922 - which included the Transcaucasian Federation - the disputes were intensified by the debate on how to organize the new state and the role of Transcaucasia's various nationalities in this process. Lenin outrightly rejected Stalin's and Ordzhonikidze's plan of a centralizing project to counteract interethnic violence and economic fragmentation. The dispute triggered the so-called ‘Georgian Affair,’ through which Lenin tried to block Stalin's political ascension¹⁴.

In his pre-revolutionary theorizations, Lenin underestimated to a certain degree the importance of the nationalities concerning the future Soviet state's engineering. After the tsarist empire's fall, the national revendications among the newly emerging nations stressed the necessity of concessions, which implied administrative units along ethnic lines. Lenin had to accommodate its multiethnic groups through assimilation policies to save the new Bolshevik state. Since completely decentralized approaches threatened to destabilize the Union, Lenin's solution was to create federal structures “national in form, yet socialist in content”¹⁵

In line with this mechanism which comprised four layers of politico-administrative, ethnic, and regional units, national policy on the

¹² Sergey Markedonov, “Abkhazia: Historical context”, in Islam Tekushev, Sergey Markedonov, Kirill Shevchenko, *Abkhazia: Between the Past and the Future*, Praga, Medium Orient, 2013, pp.22-3

¹³ Ordzhonikidze (Sergo by his revolutionary name) was a founding member of the Bolshevik Party in 1903 and the leader of the Transcaucasia's Committee for Nationalities (1922-1926). He was Stalin's ally against Lenin in the nationalities` issue. See: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team. The Years of living dangerously in Soviet Politics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015; Simone Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, London: Phoenix, 2003.

¹⁴ Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2010, p.73.

¹⁵Ian Bremmer, “Reassessing Soviet National Theory”, in: Ian Bremmer, Ray Taras, *Nation and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, New York, Cambridge University Press, pp. 9-10.

official level was to implement a uniform discourse. Due to a series of factors, such as geographical position or demography, nationalities were organized in a hierarchical system¹⁶. On top of this Soviet pyramid – with the official right to secede – ranked fifteen union republics (SSR) represented by the top nationalities. They were followed by twenty autonomous republics (ASSR) as part of the union republics and directly subordinated to them. Eight autonomous regions (AO) and ten autonomous districts (AOK) had the lowest statuses.

Due to this political structure, in December 1922, Abkhazia's status was lowered to a contractual republic within Soviet Georgia, becoming part of the Transcaucasian Federation. Georgia's new Constitution, adopted in 1922, read that Soviet Georgia included Adjara ASSR, South Ossetia AO, and Abkhazia SSR. Regardless of the considerable autonomy granted to Abkhazia, the Transcaucasian Territorial Committee of the Bolshevik Party annulled the document, which stressed Abkhazia's contractual relationship with Georgia. The paper would later become Abkhazia's first Constitution and a strong underpinning for Abkhazians' secession struggle

The first Soviet years in Abkhazia (1921-1936)

Lenin's ideology, which guided the first years of Soviet Russia, pointed out the need to combat the country's significant `deviations` – `the Great Russian chauvinism` and `the local bourgeois nationalism.` Accordingly, the authoritarian tendencies of ethnic Russians would be counteracted, while the rest of the Soviet nationalities were educated in the spirit of common citizenship with their Russian counterparts¹⁷.

Eager to comply with Lenin's theories, the Bolshevik leadership adopted a new political line in which the non-Russian nations became Kremlin's favorites. Soviet Russia's early years were defined by particular care for its multiethnic legacy; in the 1920s, the non-Russians amply benefitted in terms of language, culture, and their ethnic representatives' access to political apparatus. With the growing role of the Soviet state's political structures, the nationalities issue became a political resource for Moscow's leaders and the local nomenklatura, represented by the

¹⁶ Bruno Coppieters, "War and Secession: A moral analysis of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict" in: Bruno Coppieters and Richard Sakwa, *Contextualizing Secession, Normative Studies in a Comparative Perspective*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 187

¹⁷ Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States. An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism*, London, Methuen&Ltd., 1977, p. 312.

national elites. The strategies created to integrate the alienated ethnic groups, and to fortify citizens' belonging to an organic Soviet entity born out of a single social class, characterized the center-periphery relationship during the 1920s and the 1930s. Since such resources were ideologically loaded and the Soviet state's hierarchies were based on access to power sources, the federal structures' political status sparked interethnic animosities and competition.

Abkhazia's first Soviet decade, when it was led by its local leader, Nestor Lakoba, (1921-1936), is still difficult to define. Contrary to Georgia's bleak memory of Sovietization, Abkhazia's approach is more nuanced, complex, and positive. According to local scholars, the region enjoyed a period of prosperity and interethnic harmony until Lakoba died in 1936¹⁸.

Despite the Soviet Union's dreadful hardship of the time, Abkhazia managed to benefit from relative autonomy and register some cultural and economic progress, which strengthened its national identity. On the other side, it also widened the Abkhazian-Georgian cleavage. While fortifying the ethnic element, the Soviet nationalities policy contributed to informal ties – based on patronage and clientelism – in the multiethnic areas; at the same time, these policies stressed ethnic differences and brought about identity wars.

At the end of 1920s, when *korenizatsia*¹⁹ was in full swing, Lakoba managed to increase the number of ethnic Abkhazians in local political structures. Since local cadres were in high demand due to indigenization, their number soared from 10 to 28.3 percent between 1923 and 1929²⁰.

Moreover, Lakoba exploited his relationships with prominent leaders in the central party apparatus – including Stalin and Ordzhonikidze – to channel significant funds into the 'Soviet Riviera' and to open Abkhazia's path to industrial progress. In 1926, coal mining began in Tkvarcheli region. At the end of the 1920's, small power plants developed in Gudauta, Ochamchira, and Gali regions followed in 1930 by large-scale power stations in Sukhumi and Tkvarcheli.

¹⁸ Kirill Shevchenko, "The Struggle for the National State: Abkhazia in the context of post-Soviet state-building processes", in: Islam Tekushev, Sergey Markedonov, Kirill Shevchenko, *Abkhazia*, p. 11-12.

¹⁹ *Korenizatsia* or indigenization, was a pragmatic policy through which the Soviet state ensured its consolidation over the ex-political subjects of the Russian Empire. The etymology of the word is related to *koren* (root). It was characterized by the center's support for local language and culture, ethnic identities, and autochthonous leaders to accommodate the various ethnic groups inside the new Soviet state and party apparatus

²⁰ Timothy Blauvelt, "Abkhazia: Patronage and Power in the Stalin Era", *Nationalities Paper*, 35:2, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 208.

Abkhazia's preferential status and Lakoba's informal network significantly impacted on region's collectivization. Until 1931 they postponed the socialist transformation of agriculture using various tactics and subterfuges. Climate particularities, the backward agricultural methods and underdeveloped technology, and even the absence of the kulaks were used to justify this policy. When the central nomenclature sanctioned Abkhazia's reluctance, the procedures were more lenient than those in the North Caucasus or other USSR areas. In February 1931, massive protests against collectivization and forced alphabetization took place in Gudauta district, and despite Moscow's intervention, collectivization was not introduced until Lakoba's death. According to the Soviet figures, collectivization in the USSR reached 50.7 percent in 1931 and 61.5 percent in 1932; by contrast, in Abkhazia it registered only 34.1 percent in 1934²¹.

Since Abkhazia's new political status influenced the protests in Gudauta, the Georgian-Abkhazian animosities escalated. Abkhazia became an autonomous republic inside Georgia due to an austerity program meant to reduce the local bureaucracy. However, Moscow's initial project targeted only the autonomous regions – such as Adjara and South Ossetia – and Abkhazia's status was downgraded due to Georgian leadership's upper hand on local leaders²².

Abkhazia's demotion overlapped the Gudauta's uprisings; therefore, most Abkhazian historians are inclined to see it as Lakoba's negotiated price for the republic's failed collectivization. Although no documents can certify these theories, the resolution of the 'Gudauta's incident' coincided with the decision to decrease Abkhazia's political status. Considering local cadres' ample influence among the autochthonous ethnic groups, and particularly Lakoba's popularity among Abkhazians, Kremlin's concern for interethnic unrest seemed to be highly likely. Despite the republic's subordination to Tbilisi's leadership, until 1936, the region enjoyed preferential treatment during Lakoba's administration; Abkhazia's leader managed to evade the collectivization and Stalinist purges but also maintain the privileged position of Abkhazia's nobility.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 213

²² 'Prilozhenie k Pis'mu Predstavitelei Abkhazskoi Intelligentsii Prezidiumu XIX Vsesoiuznoi Konferentsii KPSS (1988g.)', on-line: <http://abkhazia.narod.ru/Glava1-2.htm>, visited on 5 July 2022.

Stalin's terror in Abkhazia (1936-1953)

In December 1936, in the context of Lavrentiy Beria's ascension to power, Lakoba was poisoned and discredited as the Soviet state's enemy. Radical changes ended the Abkhazians' sheltered life, and anti-Georgian feelings increased when ethnic Abkhazians faced Georgian leadership's authoritative role in the region. Much in tone with the show trials in Moscow, a wave of purges unfolded in Abkhazia and exacerbated the anti-Georgian animosities. Between 1937 and 1938, Abkhazia's political and cultural superior cadres were decimated. Elites' purges simultaneously hit the civil population. Between July 1937 and October 1938, at least 2.186 people were arrested on political grounds; 754 were shot. A similar fate had the victims of the show trials in Sukhumi in October-November 1937, accused of espionage and treason²³.

The physical consequences of those policies had a destabilizing demographic effect on the region and represented a new identity drama for the Abkhazians, similar to *mukhadzhirstvo* in tsarist times²⁴. Since ethnic Abkhazians were mostly the subjects of persecution and ostracization, a radical shift in political representativity followed. Local political elite's disproportion became one of region's characteristic until 1952, when 80 percent of the total 228 senior positions in the party and leadership apparatus belonged to ethnic Georgians; the remaining positions were divided between the Abkhazians (34), Russians (7) and Armenians (3)²⁵.

The anti-Abkhazian repressive measures took a much more complex form since they followed Stalin's general line concerning minorities' issues. After the empire's disintegration, Stalin proposed to solve the national question in the Caucasus by rallying "the backward peoples and nationalities to the common course of superior culture."²⁶

Since the Abkhazians were perceived as underdeveloped and lacking in cultural values, they were inferior to Georgians and were subordinated to

²³ Stephen D. Shenfield, *The Stalin-Beria Terror in Abkhazia, 1936-1953*, <https://abkhazworld.com/aw/abkhazia/history/499-stalin-beria-terror-in-abkhazia-1936-53-by-stephenshenfield.html>, visited on 9 July 2022.

²⁴ *Mukhadzhirstvo* occurred in the late XIXth century during the Russian Empire's expansion. It was a process of Abkhazians' banishment from their homeland and the emergence of the Abkhazian diaspora. According to Thornike Gordadze, it represented "the first tragic classification which differentiated the two ethnic groups of the region - the Abkhaz and the Georgians," see: Ivlian Haindrava, *Perceptions of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict before August 2008*, in: Archil Gegeshidze and Ivlian Haindrava, *Transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict: rethinking the paradigm*, <https://www.c-r.org/resource/transformation-georgian%E2%80%933abkhaz-conflict-rethinking-paradigm-georgian-perspective>, visited on 4 July 2022

²⁵ Stephen D. Shenfield, *The Stalin-Beria Terror in Abkhazia*.

²⁶ *Prilozhenie k Pis'mu Predstavitelei Abkhazskoi Intelligentsii*.

the latter. The Georgians boasted an ample stratum of educated elites along with the Armenian people. At the end of the nineteenth century, they were the bearers of modern nationalism on the Russian Empire's territory and displayed solid political activism based on socialism²⁷.

The role of Georgia's new communist elites in the Soviet state's party apparatus consolidated Georgians' sense of superiority even compared to ethnic Russians; these opportunities for identity affirmation also affected the Abkhazian-Georgian relationship. Abkhazians' instruction under Georgia's guidance was part of a large-scale project to forge a new Soviet nation, seen as a stable community, historically constituted on common language, territory, and economic life; its common culture and psychological mindset were seen as intrinsically linked²⁸.

A process of cultural uniformity – manifested by what Stalin perceived as policies of nations' rapprochement (*sblizhenie*) and merging (*slyianie*) – would allow the project's implementation. In line with Stalin's cultural policy, the Abkhazians faced an intense process of Georgianization carried out by Lavrentiy Beria. With the official aim to improve the Soviet fertile lands' exploitation, massive groups of Mingrelians and Svans were forced to move to Abkhazia. According to an explanatory note, the relocation of ethnic Georgians to Abkhazia was necessary based on the region's lack of workers²⁹.

By 1939 dense networks of Georgian housing were erected next to Abkhazian settlements in Gudauta and Ochamchira – the only districts with a compact Abkhazian population. At the end of 1939, ethnic Abkhazians accounted for 18 percent of Abkhazia's total population³⁰.

However, the reality in Abkhazia, at least in geographical terms, was strikingly different compared to the Soviet official propaganda. Dominated by a mountainous landscape, Abkhazia's arable lands have always been scarce. To accomplish Moscow's agricultural program in Soviet Georgia, in 1949, the Turkish and Greek minorities inhabiting Abkhazia were deported to Central Asia; Abkhazia was repopulated with a new wave of ethnic Georgians. The remaining Abkhazians were also doomed to deportation; nevertheless, confidence in the success of assimilation made the Abkhazians' relocation unnecessary³¹.

²⁷ Hugh Seton-Watson, *op.cit.*, p. 315.

²⁸ Iosif. V. Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1913/03a.htm#s1>, visited on 9 July 2022

²⁹ Ivlian Haindrava, *Perceptions of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict*, p.8

³⁰ Thomas de Waal, *op.cit.*, p. 151

³¹ Stephen D. Shenfield, *The Stalin-Beria Terror in Abkhazia*.

In the middle of the 1940s, authorities carried out new attacks on local traditions, language, history, and culture. The toponyms' Georgianization (Sukhum became Sukhumi) was followed by eliminating the Abkhaz language from education and public use. Between 1945 and 1946, Abkhazian schools were shut down, and pupils were forced to attend Georgian schools. Since most students did not speak Georgian and the Abkhazian language was banned, deep generation's traumas would amplify the resentment over the Georgian neighbors. Moreover, the Latin alphabet, in which Abkhazian language had been written during *korenizatsia*, was replaced with the Georgian script. By 1940, the politicization of the academic sphere was overwhelming; the Georgian historian Pavle Ingorovka's theory concerning Georgian descent of the Abkhazians became the most illustrative example of identity fabrication and history's falsification.

As Georgian-Abkhaz animosities intensified, the measures to suppress the Abkhazian identity gave way to a new post-Stalinist discourse concerned with Tbilisi's deliberate contribution to Abkhazia's repressive policies. According to the party's archives, the Georgian nomenclaturists' actions were based on the center's directives, and Abkhazia's Georgianization was part of a broader policy concerning Georgia's ethnic groups. However, the various factors which had deepened interethnic hostility due to Georgia and Abkhazia's common history within imperial Russia and the Soviet Union contributed to Georgia's enthusiasm when using authority over Abkhazians. Many of the Kremlin's policies were either taken to extremes or inefficiently exploited when concessions could have been made. The issue of the Abkhazian language is among such examples. When announcing the decision to suspend ethnic groups' education in their native languages, Moscow's authorities did not mean languages' complete elimination from the school curriculum. The removal of the Abkhazian language as a curricular subject and means of study was a decision of the local bureaucratic apparatus; for most Abkhazians, it was proof of Georgians' deliberate persecution.

From post-Stalinism to the USSR's demise (1953-1991)

The interethnic competition, driven by power resources' exploitation, defined the Abkhazian-Georgian relationship even after the political relaxation that followed the dismissal of Beria, Stalin's death, and Khrushchev's 'thaw.' Since Khrushchev's speech and policies aimed to gain the broadest popular audience, the non-Russian ethnic groups became the new Soviet leader's target. The relaxation regarding Soviet nationalities was also felt in the Abkhazian-Georgian relationship, although a viable

interethnic dialogue was far from being reached. Moreover, Khrushchev's measures to restore interethnic relations as a counter-reaction to Stalinist discriminatory policies produced a phenomenon similar to korenizatsia in the 1920's. While designed as a compensatory strategy, the new political program aimed to counteract the imbalance of power between the Union's ethnic groups. Accordingly, in the mid-1950s, a quota system introduced in Abkhazia meant increasing the titular nation's representation in the leading positions. Consequently, by allowing the access of the titular countries to the state's superior structures, Khrushchev ushered in the Abkhazians in the best position in the 'nomenklatura' to the detriment of the other ethnic groups; that is to say, the Abkhazians' promotion to key-positions translated into their monopoly on most profitable sectors³².

It is important to bear in mind Abkhazia's profile and overall potential in exploiting the informal profits which characterized the bureaucratic networks and newly emerging social classes. Along with members of nomenklatura, the growth of consumerist proletariat, – including various specialists and professionals – whose needs differed from those of the actual peasantry, played a significant role³³.

Abkhazia's development as a holiday destination began in 1900. Between 1930 and 1950, due to considerable effort, the area became a subtropical oasis and Moscow leaders' favorite refuge. Stalin's and later Khrushchev's examples to own dachas in Abkhazia consolidated the tradition among the Soviet political and intellectual elites, such as the members of Writer's Union, or representatives of "Pravda" newspaper. Large investments in property, the influx of capital and the new lifestyle adopted during a period of Soviet prosperity between 1950 and 1980, significantly changed Abkhazia's value and status³⁴.

The drastic changes in post-Stalinist Abkhazia produced sociopolitical and identity asymmetries. Moreover, the new approach on nationalities distinctly lodged in the collective Georgian consciousness a sense of discrimination against the Abkhazians. Most importantly, while Abkhazians enjoyed evident benefits, – apart from political representation, they rejected Pavle Ingorovka's theories and switched to the Cyrillic script – the Georgian-Abkhazian differences rekindled the old hatreds. The striking disproportion between ethnic Abkhazian cadres and their demographic percentage became alarming because it threatened

³²Ivlian Haindrava, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

³³Georgi Derluguian, "The Sovereign Bureaucracy in Russia's Modernization", in: Piotr Dutkiewicz and Dmitri Trenin, *Russia the challenges of transformation*, New York, University Press, 2011, pp. 77-78.

³⁴*Ibidem*, p. 66

interethnic equilibrium. At the same time, it became a significant force in the Abkhazians' process of national consciousness. Due to various policies that had successively affected the region's demographic balance, the Abkhazians' anxieties resurfaced and reinforced their anti-Georgian phobia. Between 1897 and 1959, the number of ethnic Georgian in Abkhazia increased six-fold; ethnic Armenians registered a ten-fold increase, while the number of Russians soared to a seventeen-fold growth. During Khrushchev's administration, a new wave of ethnic Russians and Armenians settled in the region. Whereas they numerically equaled or even exceeded the Abkhazians, the Georgians became Abkhazia's largest ethnic group. The new demographic reality and local Soviet policies became irreconcilable. During Leonid Brezhnev's period, ethnic Abkhazians were still a minority group yet possessed 67 per cent in Abkhazia's top echelons of power³⁵.

For the Georgians, that was evidence of abuse and bias against them; such frustrations naturally permeated throughout the Georgian society and fuelled the Georgian-Abkhazian hostility. To counteract the Georgian discontent, Soviet officials would rely on bureaucratic constraints, a general method embraced by the USSR in 1954 to combat nationalism. Despite such coercions, Georgia's civil society – bolstered by an assertive and eclectic intelligentsia – articulated strong protests against Moscow. In light of the milder political climate that followed post-Stalinist years, negotiations with Tbilisi were dealt with care. From 1956 the Kremlin became preoccupied with Georgia's sociopolitical unrest and combined various strategies to co-opt the nonconformists with repressive measures against local intelligentsia. Despite Moscow's cultural and economic efforts in the region, Georgians' dissatisfaction with the political center remained steadfast³⁶.

At the same time, since its incorporation into Soviet Georgia, the revision of its political status became Abkhazia's priority. In 1931, 1957, 1967, and 1977, representatives of the Abkhaz national intelligentsia pleaded for the split with Georgia and requested the status of a Soviet republic. In 1989 ethnic Georgians constituted 45.7 per cent of Abkhazia's total population, while the Abkhazians accounted for 14.6 per cent³⁷.

Since throughout a century, the Abkhazians became their homeland's minority group, while the Georgians became more

³⁵ Serghei Markedonov, *De facto obrazovaniia postsovetskogo prostranstvo: dvadstat' let gosudarstvennogo stroitel'stvo*, Yerevan, Institut Kavkaza, 2012, p. 53.

³⁶Georgi Derluguian, *The Sovereign Bureaucracy in Russia's Modernization*, p.73.

³⁷ Ivlian Haindrava, *Perceptions of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict before 2008*, p.9.

numerous, an identity obsession permeated Abkhazians' collective consciousness. Owing to their sense of superiority and domineering position backed by Moscow's policies, the Georgians would refuse to accept the Abkhazians as a distinct ethnic group³⁸. Against the backdrop of the multiple traumas suffered throughout the shared history with the Georgians, the fear of being 'swallowed' by their neighbors, became Abkhazians' greatest anxiety.

In the context of the Soviet political liberalization in the 1980s the Georgian-Abkhaz animosities took the form of reciprocal incrimination. Georgia's struggle for ethnopolitical self-determination and the growth of Abkhazians' demographic vulnerabilities escalated the interethnic strife. Moreover, Tbilisi's nationalistic discourse, claiming Georgia's lost status in 1921, was Abkhazia's new threat since approximately two thousand Abkhazians lived in the AO Adjara, on Georgia's territory. The preservation of territorial integrity, along with economic and political independence seemed to be Abkhazia's last resort option; however, without Moscow's backing such desideratum was in vain.

Throughout the post-Stalinist period, a strong alliance was forged between Sukhumi and the Kremlin. It derived mainly from region's sociopolitical stability, which was ensured by the so-called 'ethnic machinery' - by allowing the Abkhazians' disproportionate access to resources, informal ties of patronage thrived on preserving the local power³⁹.

At the same time, it became an Abkhazian habit to address complains to Moscow concerning Abkhazia-Georgia relationship. In March 1989 a petition conceived in Likhni by Abkhazia's political and intellectual elites stood out against such previous documents. Regardless of its orthodox Leninist tone concerning the Soviet nationalities issue, the request represented the joint effort of Abkhazia's Popular Front, 'Aidgilara', which managed to bridge the gap between the national discourse and public sphere. The Georgians in Abkhazia stressed the discriminatory

³⁸ The Georgians' lofty attitude towards the Abkhaz had been constantly exercised throughout their shared history within the Russian Empire. Moreover, the geographical proximity and the strong cultural and economic bonds added to the issue. The Georgian Bolshevik Akaki Mgeladze, Abkhazia's leader between 1943-1951 stressed Stalin's opinion on Abkhaz's origins: "They [the Abkhaz] are closer to Georgians than Svans, but it doesn't occur to anyone that Svans are not Georgians. Everyone who knows his or her history well ought to understand that Abkhazia was always part of Georgia. The customs and beliefs of the Abkhaz don't differ from the customs of western Georgians." See: Thomas de Waal. Op. cit., p. 151.

³⁹ Georgi M. Derluguian, "The tale of two resorts: Abkhazia and Ajaria before and since the Soviet Collapse", online: <http://georgica.tsu.edu.ge/files/06-History/Soviet%20Era/Derluguian-d.u.pdf>, p. 262, visited on 7 July 2017

distributions of region's key positions; most importantly, they felt deprived of the region's most profitable sectors on the Soviet market – the tea, tobacco, wine, and citruses industries – which ethnic Abkhazians monopolized. Consequently, Tbilisi distrusted the Abkhaz-Moscow relationship, since it reminded Abkhazia's patronage networks; in light of the new political atmosphere, Abkhazia's national movement was seen as a hindrance to Georgia's national aspiration⁴⁰.

In the general context of political liberalization, Abkhazians' assertiveness accelerated the crystallization of Georgia's national movement. Along with new emerging answers to ideological reorientation, the old patterns of categorization readapted to sociopolitical change. Consequently, the 'Abkhazian separatism' was perceived by Georgians as synchronization with or part of Moscow's new machinations⁴¹.

In light of Georgia's increasing nationalism, dissociating imperial Russia's from the Soviet Union's aggressive policies in the region became but an illusion. Historical facts – such as the abolition of the Kingdom of Georgia in the nineteenth century and the Bolshevik invasion, followed by the suppression of Georgia's independence in 1921 – were reminded as highly illustrative examples.

In July 1989, the tense dialogue between the two ethnic groups gave way to violent clashes. The decision to divide the University in Sukhumi and Abkhazia's request to independently join the USSR brought about unprecedented protests in Georgia. Moreover, the anti-Abkhazian feelings exploded not only in Georgia proper, but also on the Abkhazian territory, where anti-communist and anti-Abkhaz slogans were simultaneously voiced. The Kremlin's intervention on nine August 1989 to stifle one of the biggest demonstrations in the region's history, reached the climax of Georgians' phobia of the Russians; in Georgia's nationalists' eyes, the Soviet militaries became foreign occupation forces⁴².

Moscow's armed actions in Tbilisi marked a turning point. Not only due to their brutality imprinted in Georgians' collective consciousness but also to the final delegitimization of the Soviet Union's Communist Party. In addition, Moscow's role in managing the exacerbation of interethnic animosities widened the conflict's gap and anticipated the transformation of conflict's three participants into radicalized political actors. Georgia's subsequent political atmosphere would be characterized by a moderate

⁴⁰ Christoph Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars. Rebellion. Ethnic Conflict and Nationhood in the Caucasus*. New York, New York University Press, 2007, pp.120-121

⁴¹ Serghei Markedonov, *De facto obrazovania postsovetского prostranstvo*, pp. 56-57

⁴² Vicken Cheterian, *op.cit*, p.204.

stance's complete eradication and opposition leaders' radical demands. The aversion to compromise and the distrust of the authorities produced a fragmented and rigid national movement, incapable of creating a strong National Front. Moreover, radicalization became commonplace in Georgia's political sphere; following the events in April, for the country's leadership, it was not difficult to align the public opinion to the new political discourse. The nationalistic rhetoric paved the way for the emergence of the 'Mkhendroni' paramilitary group (The Horse Riders), led by the playwright and racketeer Jaba Ioseliani.

Exhausted by concessions to solve the Georgian crisis, Moscow's leadership tried to reinvigorate Tbilisi's power apparatus, but it only unleashed a new stream of demands. To cooperate and appease, further compromises were made by the central authorities. The national movements' leaders, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Merab Kostava, and Georgiy Chanturia were released from prison; in August 1989 the Georgian language became the SSR Georgia's official language and provoked loud protests in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Further requests of Givi Gumbaridze from Moscow's Central Committee concerning Georgia's more extensive political autonomy acquired an astounding national success. In March 1990, Georgia's Supreme Soviet annulled all country's post-1921 treaties, recognized the opposition parties, and declared Georgia's independence while condemning its illegal annexation by the Soviet Union.

However, the most significant consequence of the radicalization was the emergence of an uncompromising interethnic stance. In 25 August 1990, the Abkhaz's faction in Abkhazia's Supreme Soviet formulated a Declaration of sovereignty which was rejected by their Georgian counterparts. The split of Abkhazia's Supreme Soviet was followed by severe interethnic rifts manifested during the referendums in March 1991, which had to conclude the Soviet Union's preservation and Georgia's independence. In light of the new political climate, when liberalization and Soviet power's weakening gave way to identity expression, the Georgian and Abkhazian national interests – though identical in content – clashed. Both political entities aspired to protect their identity space while struggling with a traumatic past based on a shared history. Against the backdrop of the Soviet collapse, Abkhazia's independence movement and the region's fondness for the Soviet status-quo were blamed by Tbilisi as separatist actions; at the same time, Abkhazia's aspirations of self-determination were proportional to Georgia's struggle for national emancipation and country's retreat from the USSR. Moreover, Abkhazians' pro-Moscow orientations were based on identity protection considerations,

in the same way, as Georgians sought to regain independence from Moscow and consolidate their state. Abkhazia and Georgia used the same discourse to incriminate each other for disloyalty and separatism, and both perceived the Kremlin as the conflict's ultimate authority.

The last attempt at interethnic cooperation was Zviad Gamsakhurdia's renouncement of extremist discourses⁴³ in his efforts to approach Abkhazia's national leader, Vladislav Ardzimba. The project of a new Abkhaz parliament, – in which the Abkhazians were to occupy 28 and the Georgians 26 seats, out of a 65 total – was nipped in the bud by the USSR's collapse and the intransigence of the two ethno-political camps. At the beginning of 1992, the domestic turmoil and political secessionism between Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Eduard Shevardnadze influenced the dispute in Abkhazia. The Georgia-Abkhazia War started on August 1992 with the Georgian Army's entry in Abkhazia.

Conclusions

Despite the savage and brutal nature of tsarist Russia's imperialistic sprawl, the Soviet dawn over the multiethnic Caucasus has left a more powerful imprint. The Soviet Union's political structures impacted differently than its predecessor since the empire had constantly been conquering and hegemonizing the autochthonous peoples. During seventy years, Soviet Russia had altered its socio-political fabric; these changes had a resounding echo at its periphery. The revolutionary transformations of the new state opened an unprecedented path for the Caucasus's multiethnic cauldron. Regardless of Moscow's centralizing policies which stifled the region's short-term independence, the Soviet rapid changes took over through simultaneous processes of modernization, indigenization, terrorization, Russification, and identities' breeding. Compared to the previous regime, whose policies had been more even, the Caucasus's Soviet history was marked by radically different phases. As Thomas de Waal has put it, "it is tempting, but misleading to see the seventy-year Soviet experiment as just a second Russian imperial project. [...] Modernization meant the destruction of old traditions and emancipation for women, and technological progress. Policy toward the nationalities veered from implementing a liberal `affirmative action empire,' which gave opportunities to non-Russian nations, to genocide. While some small ethnic

⁴³ Zviad Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric, as leader of Georgia's national movement (1980-1990), and later as the country's president, had been characterized by virulent xenophobia against Georgia's ethnic groups. See: Sergey Markedonov, *Zemlia i volia Zviada Gamsakhurdia*, on-line: <http://politcom.ru/4379.html>, visited on 10 July 2022; Thomas de Waal, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

groups benefitted hugely from `nativization` programs, others were subject to deportation and mass terror."⁴⁴

Needless to say, Abkhazia's evolution inside the Soviet Union was deeply marked by its belonging. Its identity had undergone an intricate process and resurfaced in the context of the dismantling Soviet system. Moreover, the Soviet Union's failed attempt to harmonize its highly centralized policies with interethnic relations, took its toll when the country collapsed; it became a thorny issue which outlived the USSR and displayed grave incompatibility with the new post-Soviet status quo.

Ever since the Soviet Union's disintegration, Abkhazia's sociopolitical evolution has remained intrinsically linked with the former centre of power. When in August 2008, Georgia attempted to recapture South Ossetia, – which had also fought a war against Georgia in the 1990s – Moscow poured troops in, ousting Georgian forces from South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Currently, Moscow recognizes both as independent states and maintains a significant military presence in both regions. Russia's efforts to retain its historical `rights` in the former Soviet space by counteracting the United States or European Union's influence in these countries have made scholars still perceive Russia as a great imperial power. Until recently, the Kremlin's attempts to initiate a restoration project in the `near abroad` were scrutinized through the prism of the means. However, with the war in Ukraine, old paradigms have gone into the debate; at the same time, the issue of post-Soviet frozen conflicts has become both alarming and puzzling.

Nevertheless, H el ene Carr ere d'Encausse has put forward a much more nuanced picture regarding Russia's relationship with the frozen conflicts. Her approach derives from Celeste Wallander's findings, according to which Russia is but an authoritarian state based on centralization, control, and the rule of an elite who feels they are in the right not to account to society. This type of trans-imperialism is closer to Russia's evolution given the contemporary international realities; the country's survival would have been at stake had Moscow stuck with its imperial system dating back to the nineteenth century.⁴⁵

Since the logic of the trans-imperial relationships is that of patrimonial authoritarianism, the patron-client relationship is the best description of Moscow's dialogue with its former periphery. Moreover, it describes Russia's historical ties with frozen conflict's areas in the best illustrative way.

⁴⁴ Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 71

⁴⁵ H el ene Carr ere d'Encausse, *U.R.S.S a murit, tr aiasc a Rusia!*, [USSR is Dead, Long Live Russia !], Bucureşti: Artemis, 2010, p.99

