

Ethnicity and Political Development Processes in Caucasus: Georgia

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Introduction

The multiple tasks of stateness¹, such as nation- state-building besides economic and political institutional transitions between contradictory sociopolitical cultures amid changing world order are a daunting mission for most post-Soviet multicultural societies. Since independence, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have faced domestic ethnopolitical conflicts with cross-regional ramifications obstructing the sociopolitical development. The territorial conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia on Nagorno-Karabakh regions and seceding movements in Georgia's Abkhaz and South Ossetia regions as well as inequality controversies in Ajaria hasn't helped. These conflicts originate from the political transition of a unitary nature, just as from the operating sociopolitical culture with the past Soviet legacies, perceptual differences over national ethnic histories, as well as contradictory perspectives over the nature of nation-state vis-à-vis the relatively autonomous past enjoyed by ethnic regions. Georgia's restructuring as a unitary form of nation-state with national Constitution, a Parliament, and institutions of the Executive and Judiciary with plans for regular elections solely emphasize upon the Georgian/Kartvillian values in an otherwise a multicultural state does not complement. Political culture oriented machination and mechanisms, which might help balance the centripetal and centrifugal tendencies appear missing. This void has led to an expectations and achievements conflict among ethnic and religious groups and other minorities in Abkhazia, Ajaria and South Ossetia depicts feelings of relative deprivation that derive from the previously enjoyed autonomous status and right to self-determination (at least theoretically) under the Soviet system. Contradictions between the over-centralized unitary form of political socialization and the relatively liberal one under a federal state persist with region wide sensitivities.

¹Concept utilized by Monica D. Toft, "Multinationality, Regional Institutions, State-Building, and the Failed Transition in Georgia" in James Hughes and Gwendolyn Sasse (ed.) **Ethnicity and Territory in the Former Soviet Union: Regions and Conflict**, London: Frank Cass, 2002, pp. 123-144

The ethnic phenomena in Caucasus necessitate explanations at varying analytical levels. Therefore, relying upon “geopolinomics²” we explain ethnopolitics and political development processes with relatively appropriate recommendations. Geopolinomics in this context relates to the synchronized influences of historical geography, political psychology, politics and economics over ethnonational and cultural movements. Primordiality reflected by the political positions of various ethnic groups justifies our concerns confined within at least three analytical variables: 1) historical geography and perception, 2) sociopolitical and 3) economic-transition levels. Soviet legacies, particularly shaping of national identities and autonomous regions elucidates the perceptual uniqueness of the post-Soviet nationalisms vis-à-vis the traditional explanations of nationalism as a source of independence movements and the ideology of nation-state. Besides the structural processes to form a unitary and/or federal state, the geopolinomics of ethnonationalism helps explain both the prospects and processes of political development. The choice of state to appreciate ethnicity as a tool to cement national cohesion or its neglect as a source of fragmentation helps to diagnose the problems of political development. The next section explains the ethnopolitical phenomena in Georgia at the historical geography perceptual level.

Historical Geography and Perceptual Level

Ethnonational movements fed by exaggerated ethnohistorical myths often symbolize particular versions of nationalism. Although geography vitalizes the cultural contours, historically, conquerors have shaped the cultures of the conquered, either through acculturation and/or forced assimilation, or ethnolinguistic and cultural fragmentation or integration. Under the influence of several civilizations/Empires, from Greece to Persia and Romans to Muslim, Byzantine, Ottoman, Russia and the Soviet, Caucasian sociopolitical culture has absorbed multiple influences. Until the 18th century, idea of “nation” was largely unknown outside Europe. Primordial tribes, clans and groups of people lived under various Empires, where rulers attempted to cement state cohesion through patriotism for state unity. People of one Empire could overnight become subjects of another Empire after a new conquest, hence obliged to respect new ruler’s dominion under the doctrine of patriotism. By historical geography, ethnonational myths often help to claim existence as a nation for centuries; nevertheless many geographical regions had different names than the modern identities. Georgia surely existed in early A.D. as a people -not as a nation- under somewhat changing boundaries

² George Demko, a geographer at the Department of State and William Wood, a geographer at the Dartmouth College fathered “geopolinomics” as an alternative analytical tool for the 21st century related policy issues. See George Demko and William Wood (ed.) **Reordering the World: Geopolitical Perspectives on the 21st Century**, Westview Press, 1999, 2nd edition. Aftab Kazi found it most useful and has authored approximately ten articles and trained students to utilize this tool in research. Traditional analytical tools have often been found inadequate to explain the post-Soviet situations appropriately.

under various political orders. Modern day ethnopolitical issues originate in colonial legacies of the past, materialized through conquests, migrations, forced assimilation and/or acculturation, as well as ethnolinguistic and cultural fragmentations, compelling several groups to disintegrate into sub-ethnic groups or to form new ethnicities. Different historical accounts by Georgian, Abkhaz and Ossetian cultures about who colonized the land first may multiply the levels of conflict, but not to resolve or manage it. As the core ethnic group, ethnic Georgians are likely to benefit from culturally pluralistic policies in a nation-state. The symbolization of myths may have helped Georgians to overcome psychological insecurity in a unitary state as the core group, political myths, such as, "Georgians are ancient Europeans"; "Georgia is the first Christian country in Europe" and coloring nationalism with ethnic and religious content is likely to hinder the formation of a stable state. Concurrent problems in Georgia originate in the recent historical geography, inherent in the Soviet autonomous national republic policies. The new state of Georgia would have benefited by understanding the complex nature of its political culture and subsequent perceptual differences over national histories and territoriality, before embarking upon the creation of an overly centralized unitary state.

Ethnopolitical problems are not unique to Georgia, but resemble to the problems of most nation-states. Deprived minorities, without recourse to sociopolitical stratification are likely to seek need satisfaction from alternative border dynamics of the nearby regions. Historical geography helps understand that various cultures and sub-cultures in a nation-state are bound to survive side by side. Fair notions of stateness may have demanded from the elite of the core national group(s) to balance between their centripetal and centrifugal tendencies for long-term national unity. Political culture of Georgia demonstrates that the autonomy enjoyed during the previous political order still remains fresh in historical memories of ethnic groups. Political socialization and stratification processes are instruments to cement society across generations. Perhaps, political balance between the Abkhaz and Georgian governments through affirmative action, without credence to ethnicity, race, religion and cultural differences, etc. and somewhat decentralized state institutions could have helped Abkhaz to avoid becoming an unrecognized de facto independent state or as a different administration. Moreover, the affirmative emphasis upon accepting Ajarian as full-fledged Georgians without credence to Christian or Muslim background together with a carefully designed political stratification plan may have helped reshape their political psychology. Although Ajarians favor the Georgian state, continued deprivation on religious grounds may eventually compel them to form their own new ethnic group. Cross-national populations are common worldwide. A positive approach towards historical geography about the north/south division of Ossetia with south Ossetia as a part of the Georgian Autonomous Republic

under the previous political order, rather than emphasis on territoriality might have helped new Georgia to understand insecurities of South Ossetians as well. The experiences of Germany and France as well as Germany and Poland with large cross-border populations offer important lessons on border dynamics.

Sociopolitical

Georgia's primordial strategy towards national integration might have benefited by recognizing its multicultural national political culture. Ethnic and religious minorities, whether Armenians, Azeri, Abkhaz, Ajarian and South Ossetians or cultural sub-groups in core Georgian constituencies have expressed reservations over the unitary policy of "Georgianness". A consensual resolution of ethnic conflict based upon democratic principles might have helped to create a culturally diversified nation with sociocultural enrichment. Georgia is facing two ongoing ethnopolitical conflicts that have led to the creation of two unrecognized administrations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These regions comprise approximately 15% of the national territory. Its negative impact on Georgian society can be summarized in terms of economic and social difficulties, rising crime, discrimination and displaced refugee populations. The 2002 census reports the presence of approximately 264.000 of internally displaced refugees in Georgia³, although numbers may be higher. Lack of historical democratic traditions -a "Potemkin democracy phenomenon"⁴ has undermined stable power distribution as experiences of regime change in Georgia demonstrate. New presidents often criticize predecessors and their policies, yet maintain their methods of governance. Leaders fallen from the state power often immigrate for the fear of prosecution by the new government (some NGOs indicate the existence of political prisoners in Georgia)⁵.

The 2002 census did not include demographic data from Abkhazia and parts of South Ossetia. Ethnic minorities in Georgia consist approximately 16,3% of the total population. Minorities with former autonomous background oppose the unitary nation-state model⁶ and compare their present with the institutional resources and administrative privileges enjoyed under previous order. The ethnocentric policies of early Georgian governments favored only the core ethnic groups, while neglected non-core ones and preferred "Georgianness" over cultural pluralism as an instrument of policy to acculturate loyal Georgians. Citizens of

³ Bruno Coppieters "In Defense of the Homeland: Intellectuals and the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict" in B. Coppieters and M. Huyseune (eds.) **Secession, History and the Social Sciences**, Brussels: VUB Press, 2002.

⁴ Charles King, "Potemkin Democracy: Four Myths about Post-Soviet Georgia", **National Interest**, #64, Summer 2001, pp. 93-104.

⁵ Toft M. Duffy, "Multinationality, Regions and State-Building: The Failed Transition in Georgia" in J. Hughes and G. Sasse (eds.), **Ethnicity and Territory in the Former Soviet Union**, London: Frank Cass, 2002.

⁶ Johanna Popjaneuski, "Minorities and the State in the South Caucasus: Assessing the Protection of National Minorities in Georgia and Azerbaijan", Silk Road Paper, September, Central Asia – Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, (CACI), September 2006.

Georgian ethnic identity were expected to be the most loyal citizens of the nation-state. Afterwards are Azeris and Armenians. Abkhaz and South Ossetians were neglected. As such, these potentially disloyal ethnic groups rationalized by arguments over ethnohistoric legitimacy felt deprived at the bottom of power hierarchy. The ethnic policy of various governments (especially under Zviad Gamsakhurdia 1990-1992) intended Georgia as an Orthodox Christian state reflecting non-consensual centralization patterns. Ethnic outsiders and marginal groups reacted by revitalizing their own hierarchies, leading to reciprocal ethnic cleansing in Abkhazia and in the central parts of Georgia during 1991-92. "Georgianess" as a primordial category was based upon territory and language. A good Georgian must speak the Georgian language and he/she or their parents must have lived in Georgia during the Soviet times. Unfit under this category were considered as "guests". Any form of behavior considered inappropriate by authorities could cause deportation to their "historical motherlands". Speaking of ethnonational origins was treated anti-Georgian. Restrictions were implemented in language policy. Minorities without knowledge of Georgian felt outcast from the political life fearing ethnic discrimination in a society that operates through clan cleavages for influence and access to power.

Despite Ajaria's autonomous republic status in Soviet Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia were other two), Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze preferred unity with Georgia and considered themselves as ethnic Georgians. Yet he was removed, when in 1990s Tbilisi did not control the region. Even after the Soviet disintegration he did not exploit ethnic slogans or advocated a Georgian "federation" or "confederation". Under the first Georgian state in 1918-1921, Ajaria was considered as "Muslim Georgia" with restricted religious autonomy. Abashidze avoided ethnic rhetoric to mobilize supporters, despite Ajaria's approximately 30,6% Muslim and about 54% Orthodox, yet won 20% of vote. His victory was perceived as a threat of "Ajaria-i-zation" of national politics, as was his support for the Russian military base, leading the opposition to protest.

Abkhazians and Ossetians have never been the main minorities in Georgia. In early 1990s, Armenians were considered first (8.1%) in ethnic structure, Russians second (6,3%) and Azeris third (5,7%). Russian migrations due to the lack of Russian schools, books and newspapers changed the demographics as reflected by the census 2002. Today, Azeris (6,5%) and Armenians (5,7%) inhabited in Kvemo Kartli and Samtshe-Javaheti regions are considered main minorities. They possess limited knowledge of Georgian and a weak sense of Georgianess together with a strong attachment to their ethnic homelands. Inter-ethnic

tensions between Armenians and Azeris during the Nagorno–Karabakh war (1992-94) erupted in the Kvemo Kartli region-inhibiting approximately 500.000 Azeris, who attacked Armenian owned cars and pipelines transporting gas to Armenia, reflecting a trend in inter-minority conflict as well.

Although Georgian law prohibits political party activity based on ethnicity and religion, ethnic factor remains significant, particularly for the forthcoming parliamentary and presidential elections to be held in 2008 and 2009 respectively. Approximately 20% of the population believes that the Abkhazian conflict to be among the major electoral issues, besides urgent economic problems, blackouts, medical care and so on. Despite some failures (e.g. ineffective education reforms caused the social crisis of June-July 2005) President Mikhail Saakashvili remains popular for the many new development projects his government has initiated. People appear exhausted from constant ethnopolitical conflicts and wars of the past decade despite the desire for peaceful political development, ethnic identity however seems to provide a sense of psychological security.

Economic-transition

Georgia's hardships in economic and political structural transition are similar to other post-Soviet societies. Political instability is accompanied by economic difficulties. Salaries are not enough to survive – even if the “shadow economy” and informal job market is counted. Inability to appropriately address the economic and sociopolitical issues seems to develop a sense of alienation, particularly among ethnic minorities. Average pension in Georgia is US\$21, while normal salaries average around \$70 per month (in the interior even less so) together with higher inflation. Although levels of poverty cross ethnic boundaries, inter-ethnic differences complicate policy processes. Georgia is a fairly well off country with forests, hydropower, manganese deposits, iron ore, copper, minor coal and oil deposits with a large tea and citrus production. However, underdeveloped economic infrastructure and poor management practices appear taking a toll. Although the over all GDP per capita in Georgia has more than doubled in 2006 (US\$1763) since 2002 (US\$741) and inadequate distribution of wealth and a fast growing inflation at the rate of 8.8% in 2006 exacerbates hardships both in urban and rural areas. Georgia's export capacity has also declined from 34.5% in 2004 to mere 14% in 2006, while imports have multiplied from 5.6% in 2002 to 47.8% in 2006.⁷ Reliance on assistance such as loans and grants, particularly from the West has helped to some extent; lack of major

⁷ http://www.mfa.gov.ge/print.php?gg=1&sec_id+54&info_id=60&lang_id=ENG. Accessed June 17, 2007, 3 pm.

infrastructural development investments however, hasn't helped economy. Earlier forms of interdependence under the Soviets have not been replaced with new ones.

Economically oriented institutional transition without sufficient comprehension has weaknesses, despite Georgia's membership in the World Trade Organization⁸. WTO membership could only help balance trade with considerable manufacturing capacity, currently almost non-existent. Moreover, weaker economy has in fact aggravated the ethnopolitical conflict. Low salaries mean low power of consumption and low consumer expenditures mean low profits for local industry. The gap between higher salaries of foreign corporations in Tbilisi and low salaries of national government has extended corruption and broader societal depression. Talented Georgians are migrating overseas. Weird it may appear the English language-training programs (a part of educational development) seem to be furthering the "brain drain" hindering the foundations and growth of the national market economy. Georgia's importance as a transport-route for oil and gas transfers from Caspian to the West⁹ though advantageous, sole Western focus on transportation without heavy investment in economic infrastructure is hurting industrial development. Although total revenues earned by Georgia in transit fees are about 1,2% of GNP (about 56 millions dollars) with estimates of multiplication to 185-225 million per year might help the government with ethnopolitical stratification and reintegration with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, although some observers have reservations¹⁰.

Conclusion

The above geopolinomic discussion at geohistory, geoculture and geoeconomic levels suggest that the intra-Georgian ethnopolitical differences over interpretations of national histories and perceptual variations on the unitary form of new nation-state vis-à-vis the levels of operating political culture with recent memories of a formerly autonomous republic status has intervened. Had the political culture as a variable in the Georgia's national integration policies been appreciated by the elite and centripetal tendencies of the core group been balanced with centrifugal ones, the ethnopolitical conflict in Georgia could have had been avoided or maintained at manageable levels. Competing nationalisms within a nation-state do not augur well for political development. Processes of democratization and national integration in a multicultural state necessitate culturally appropriate strategies of political socialization, making every national component feel at home within the state. In the case of Caucasus, particularly Georgia, it appears that the national

⁸ Ghia Nodia, "Political Parties in Georgia", Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, # 8, May, 2003, pp. 8-14.

⁹ Svante E. Cornell and Frederick S. Starr, eds., "The Baku – Tbilisi – Ceyhan Pipeline: Oil Window to the West", CACI, 2005.

¹⁰ Svante E. Cornell, Jonsson Anna N., Isson Niklas, Haggstrom Per., "The Wider Black Sea Region: An Emerging Hub in European Security", Silk Road Paper, CACI, December, 2006.

integration processes lack appropriate instruments and mechanisms of political socialization. Sole focus on Georgian/Kartevilian national values at the expense of other ethnic groups has complicated political processes, hence hindered development. Economic and political democratization strategies may not succeed amid the transition conflict between core and non-core group ethnonationalisms. Reconciliation may still be possible, however, this largely depends upon acts of consensual balancing of centripetal and centrifugal forces aimed at intra and inter-ethnic political stratification between rivaling interest groups.

Recommendations and Implications

1. Decentralized national integration policies together with an affirmative action program in every national policy issue area may suffice.
2. To balance diverse interpretations of ethnohistorical myths, political socialization anew must begin with educational policy as an instrument with standardized uniform social studies curricula emphasizing cultural pluralism.
3. Abkhaz, Georgian, Ossetian and Armenian are declared as national languages with minority languages allowed as medium of instruction at the higher education level for minorities. Standardizing Georgian by integrating its dialects with standard script may help as well.
4. Adaptation of a representative federal form of government with equal opportunity guarantee for all citizens, including the autonomous regions and ethnic minorities together with a fair share in federal jobs in bureaucracy, army and paramilitary forces might help stabilize the state.

Implications of these recommendations are likely to help strengthen political development processes through multicultural understanding in cross-generational terms. Ethnopolitical problems are not a quick fix.