

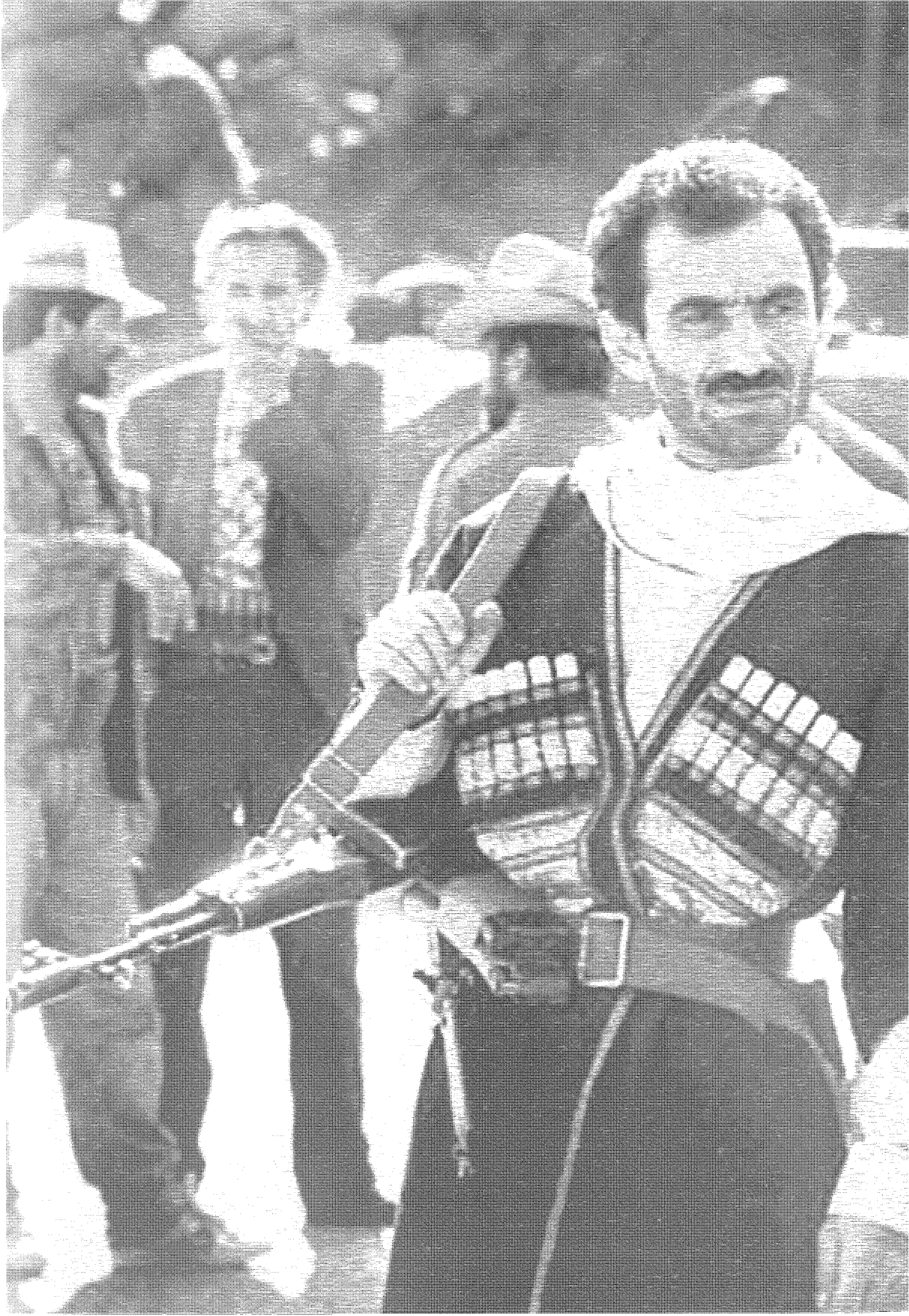
# The roots of the conflict

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**B**efore the war of 1992–93 Abkhazia had a population of half a million. Squeezed between the Black Sea and the Caucasus mountains it had been known as the Soviet Riviera in the 1970s and 1980s, when millions of tourists came every year to enjoy its beaches and subtropical climate. Its agriculture supplied Soviet markets with tobacco, precious woods and citrus fruits. At the end of the 1980s, however, this peaceful area became a violent zone of conflict in the Soviet Union and Abkhazia became a symbol for the failure of Soviet policies to accommodate competing ethnic claims. What went wrong with Soviet policy and why did Abkhazia in particular become the scene of a bloody war that cost several thousand lives?

Soviet nationalities policy granted political status to the major nationalities which composed the Soviet state and ranked them in a hierarchical federal system. Their place in the hierarchy depended on a number of factors such as population size, geographical location and political leverage with the Communist Party elite. In the Soviet ethnofederal construction, the union republics had the highest status, followed by the autonomous republics with the autonomous regions in the third rank. The political status of all units could change over time according to circumstances and the political considerations of the Moscow party leadership. Each national group which had received the right to constitute one of these units was recognized as its 'titular nation'. The Abkhaz were thus the titular nation of the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia and the Georgians the titular nation of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia. In the Soviet view, this type of system could not be called ethnocentric, despite the political privileges given to the titular nations, because the Communist Party and its internationalist ideology claimed to preserve the rights of all minorities and all citizens,



independent of their nationality. The centralist exercise of political power was seen as the most effective means of avoiding discrimination in a federal state. With the disintegration of the Communist Party at the end of the 1980s, this institutional guarantee for minorities disappeared.

With the democratization of the Soviet system and the collapse of centralized power, the legitimacy of the federal order and hierarchical relations between union republics, autonomous republics and autonomous regions became one of the main subjects of dispute. Some national movements in autonomous republics and regions refused to be considered part of a union republic. In most of the Russian Federation, these conflicts were settled by mutual agreement, but in the North and South Caucasus the crisis of legitimacy led to political tension and in some cases to violent clashes between the capitals of the union republics and their subordinate units. In Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the legitimacy of the Soviet federal hierarchy was challenged by all sides. The political leadership of the autonomous region of South Ossetia strove to upgrade the status of the region through reunification with the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic (which lay within the Russian Federation). In a counter move Tbilisi abolished South Ossetia's autonomous status in 1990. Georgian nationalists considered such autonomy as a Soviet instrument to divide and rule its dependencies in the South Caucasus. Furthermore the Georgians did not regard the Ossetians as indigenous.

In the Georgian view, the Abkhaz were different. They had the right to preserve their political status as an indigenous people, provided that the rights of the Georgian population in Abkhazia were significantly extended. Georgians made up some forty-five per cent of the population and were challenging the political privileges of the Abkhaz titular nation, which comprised only eighteen per cent. The political leadership in Tbilisi did not see any reason why the Soviet hierarchical system should not be preserved and even enforced after the achievement of independence. The politically privileged position of the Abkhaz minority was unacceptable to them. The leaders of the Abkhaz national movement refused to acknowledge the authority of the Georgian political leadership in Tbilisi and before the dissolution of the USSR had already striven to upgrade Abkhazia's status from autonomous republic to union republic. After its dissolution they demanded equal status with Georgia in a loose federative framework. This form of withdrawal from the authority of the Georgian state would, in the view of the Georgians and of Abkhaz radicals, have paved the way for full secession and the establishment of an independent Abkhaz state.

The conflict over political status reached its climax with the war of 1992–93 when Georgian troops, consisting mainly of paramilitaries, intervened in the political conflict between the two main nationalities of Abkhazia. They were driven out by Abkhaz troops supported by nationalist movements from the North Caucasus and by the Russian military. As a consequence of this victory the Abkhaz authorities attempted to consolidate their position by changing the demographic situation. The majority of the Georgian inhabitants of Abkhazia fled to Georgia and these internally displaced persons (IDPs) were not allowed to return. To date no solution has been found to the political and humanitarian dilemmas at the heart of the conflict. Russian troops were deployed on the ceasefire line between the parties in 1993, formally becoming the CISPKF in 1994. The United Nations has sent military observers to the conflict zone and is mediating between the two sides, with Russia acting as facilitator, but negotiations on political status have not led to significant results. Since 1997 the negotiation process has concentrated on economic and humanitarian co-operation, also without substantial progress. Indeed, in May 1998 violence erupted in the Gali region of southern Abkhazia again, causing a major setback in relations. Over the previous three years the spontaneous return of IDPs to the Gali region had, in the Abkhaz view, provided cover for Georgian guerrillas. Clashes between them and Abkhaz militia led to a resumption of hostilities, resulting in a new wave of IDPs fleeing the region. In order to avoid the accusation of ethnic cleansing, the Abkhaz authorities began to organize the return of Georgian IDPs to the Gali region from March 1999 but refused any direct Georgian involvement in securing their safety. The Georgian government considers bilateral agreements giving security guarantees for the returning IDPs to be vital. The Abkhaz government, however, sees the lifting of the CIS-imposed blockade as a necessary first step in a process of normalization.

There is no commonly accepted analysis for the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict among either those who are politically involved or among outside observers. Different explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but each explanation has specific political implications which determine the type of resolution that is most appropriate.

## Understanding nationhood

The conflict may be seen primarily as a consequence of conflicting views and of existing fears with regard to the preservation of language, culture and national identity. The Georgians feared the Russification of Abkhazia by cultural means and the loss of the 'historical' Georgian character of this region. They criticized the close links between the Abkhaz leadership and Moscow. The Abkhaz feared that the Georgianization of Abkhazia, which in their view was far

advanced under the Soviet regime, would be completed through the integration of Abkhazia into a Georgian framework. They were concerned that a rise in the number of Georgians through further 'colonization' would lead to the exclusion of the Abkhaz from political power in their own homeland and limit their rights. In the view of both parties, political sovereignty – which meant in practice full control of the state apparatus of Abkhazia – was the sole instrument to counter that fear of extinction. Concepts such as shared sovereignty had no practical meaning for politicians whose experience was restricted to Soviet practice. The Leninist regime had never recognized any form of division of powers as legitimate. A federal division of political power into various levels of authority with separate jurisdictions was unknown in the Soviet Union.

Those citing fear of cultural extinction as the cause of the conflict emphasize the ethnic and cultural understanding of nationhood by political elites. The Georgian and Abkhaz concept of the nation is based on language, religion and common descent and emerged as a consequence of the modernization of the region at the end of the nineteenth century. The debates between historians and linguists from both communities on national descent were linked to territorial claims on Abkhazia. Some Georgian historians claimed that the Abkhaz had settled in the area only a few centuries ago. From the Abkhaz perspective, Georgians had settled in Abkhazia as a result of Tsarist and Soviet colonization policies. According to this type of explanation, the national projects which both communities developed included claims of an exclusive right to sovereignty over Abkhaz territory. The root of the conflict is seen in the ethnic nature of Georgian and Abkhaz nationalism, which was bound to have explosive results as the communist regime weakened. Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika did indeed lead to a radical redistribution of power between the national elites. The leaderships of Georgia and Abkhazia proved incapable of reaching agreement in renegotiating their political relations after the disappearance of an overarching Soviet framework, which left the use of force an increasingly likely possibility.

This focus on ethnic nationalism calls for a solution based on the creation of a more civic type of national consciousness with individuals voluntarily associating themselves in a state, and with common values and democratic institutions as binding forces. The democratization of political institutions and the creation of a civil society are seen as part of an overall strategy to create new links between individuals which are not based on ethnicity. Scholars of nationalism would, however, stress that idioms of nationhood found in Georgia and Abkhazia have characteristics which tend to persist throughout the whole process of nation building and which change only very slowly. But it is also true that a peace settlement and the creation of a new institutional framework in Georgia

and Abkhazia may have a positive influence on the political practices and attitudes of the elites. Their search for legitimacy will require a more pluralistic, assimilationist and inclusive understanding of nationhood as opposed to the previous exclusive idiom. The Georgian authorities have already had to respond to the universalistic legal obligations imposed by organizations such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe. Although not recognized by these organizations, the Abkhaz government is unwilling to be seen as a pariah in terms of the observance of human rights standards. It also has to find legitimacy among the Armenian, Russian and Greek communities in Abkhazia and integrate the returning Georgian IDPs. A peace settlement may further encourage a gradual transformation of the state and nation-building process on a civic rather than an ethnic basis.

## Geopolitical factors

The lack of legitimacy of the new states that emerged on the post-Soviet scene and the eruption of violent conflicts between national communities may be understood as a consequence of geopolitical factors which are not ideological. According to such a perspective, the conflict between Georgians and Abkhaz was generated first by the Soviet and then by the Russian authorities in a desperate attempt to retain their hegemony on their southern borders. The key to the solution of the conflict is therefore to be found in Moscow. This explanation is based on the presupposition of a continuity in imperial domination of the periphery by the centre from Tsarist through to the Soviet and Russian political eras. The conflict between the Georgians and Abkhaz, which is so detrimental to the interests of both communities, should be seen as a consequence of a deliberate divide and rule policy designed in Moscow. In 1992–93 pro-Abkhaz forces in Russia would have supported the Abkhaz secessionists in order to take revenge on the Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze who, as Soviet foreign minister, had, in their view, sold out all Soviet interests to the West. This Russian imperial policy secured Georgia's entry into the CIS after its military defeat in September 1993 as well as the stationing of Russian bases on Georgian territory. Russia might, according to this type of explanation, have used the conflict to influence the negotiations between Western oil companies and governments on the routing of oil pipelines from the Caspian region to the world market. One of these routes – the so-called western route – passes through Georgia to the Black Sea port of Poti. A destabilization of the western route would have made the northern route, which passes through the North Caucasus in the Russian Federation to Novorossiisk, more attractive. Moreover, an agreement between Georgia and Abkhazia would strengthen the position of nationalistic anti-Russian forces in the Caucasus region and facilitate Georgia's





Source: Gia Chikharashvili

integration into Western political and military structures, which is not in Moscow's interest. NATO's increasing presence in the region through programmes such as Partnership for Peace should not be underestimated in an assessment of Russia's policies. Russia's divide and rule policy would on the other hand gain nothing by allowing Abkhazia to be independent, as this would strengthen instability and separatism in the North Caucasus.

Georgian public discussion focuses almost exclusively on the Russian factor. For Tbilisi, this is useful in mobilizing support among Western powers, which are receptive to the argument that Russia retains imperial ambitions that ought to be counterbalanced with more support to the countries along Russia's southern belt. This approach implies a harmony of interests between the Georgian and Abkhaz communities that would have continued but for outside manipulation, a view that is obviously problematic. The contrast between the harmonious relations that are supposed to have existed in the past and the violent character of the war focuses exclusively on external factors of conflict. To say that the key to the solution of the conflict is to be found in Moscow distracts attention from a serious discussion of the difficulties in overcoming the antagonistic relations that both communities have been building over a long period. It also impedes a fruitful discussion of the federalization of Georgia. Many believe that granting any form of self-government to Georgia's numerous minorities would give Russia an instrument with which to exploit ethnic divisions in the country.

The critique of an exclusively external approach to the conflict does not invalidate the geopolitical explanation. The poor record of Russian mediation in the conflict is partly due to the fact that Russia has particular interests to defend in the region. Russia's past as a colonial power makes it poorly suited for the role of peacemaker. Both parties to the conflict depend on Moscow, but at the same time have a deep distrust towards its policies and intentions. The Georgians blame Moscow for the failure of the negotiations, while the Abkhaz blame Moscow for the economic blockade.

Any perspective of a political settlement to the conflict based on federal principles has to take into account the geopolitical context. No federal system may be considered stable if outside powers constantly intervene. Some authors therefore plead for a policy of neutrality for Georgia and Abkhazia. Only by refusing to be part of a 'great game' between external powers would both communities be able to reach a stable federal arrangement in which they would not constantly seek external support.

Another option would be the constitution of a larger framework of political integration for the Caucasian countries which would include Russia and which would receive support from the West including the USA. Both options presuppose that a policy based on the balance of power between stronger states would destabilize any political arrangement between less powerful states such as Georgia and Abkhazia.

## Demographic change in Abkhazia 1897–1989

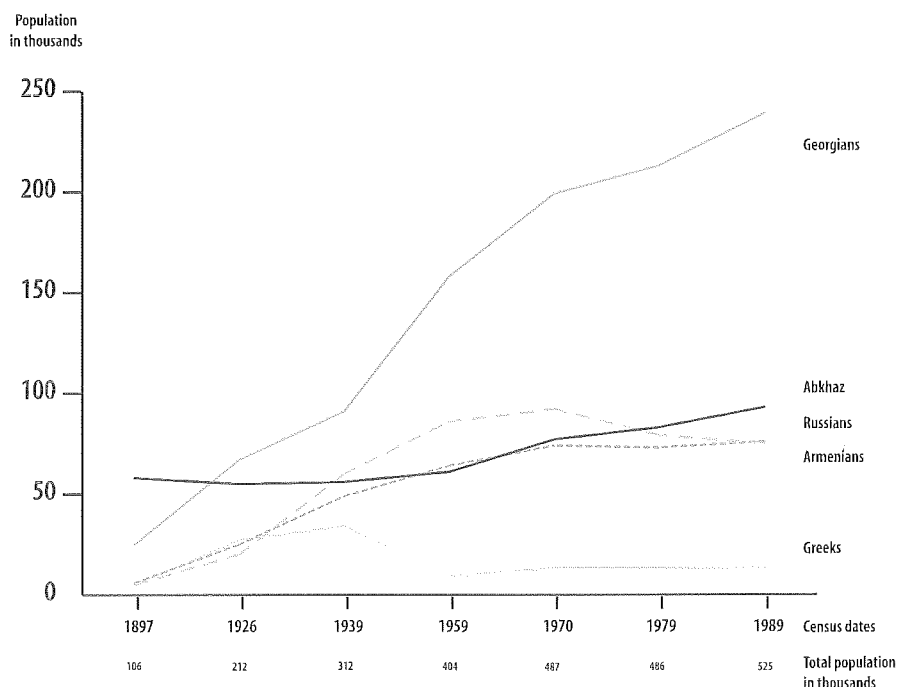
*These census figures are disputed on a number of grounds including the way in which ethnic groups have been defined.*

*By 1992 the population of Abkhazia was estimated to have been 535,000. Numbers displaced by the war are disputed.*

*The UN Needs Assessment Mission in 1998 estimated the population of Abkhazia at between 180,000 and 220,000, whereas Abkhaz sources present a figure nearer 300,000.*

*In 1989 the Georgian population was 5,443,000 but large-scale economic out-migration occurred in the early- to mid-1990s.*

*Source: Russian, Soviet and Georgian population censuses*



## Legitimate rule

Just and legitimate rule are crucial concepts for explaining a political conflict and for its resolution. In the case of the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict, historians have extensively researched the historic grievances of both communities. The French historian Papin described in 1824 the ‘state of perpetual hostility’ in which the Abkhaz were living ‘with their neighbours the Russians from Doudjouk-Kal and the Mingrelians’. Events such as the Caucasian war, which ended in 1864, the deportation of a large part of the Abkhaz population by the Tsarist regime in the wake of the failed uprisings of 1866 and 1877, the Georgian colonization of the country and the establishment of Soviet rule, are grievances still held by Abkhaz today. The subjugation of the Abkhaz by stronger powers such as Russia, Georgia or the Soviet regime failed to secure their loyalty even though it was usually enshrined in some kind of treaty. The demise of the Soviet Empire could be seen, according to this type of explanation, as having created a window of opportunity for the Abkhaz leadership.

At the end of 1991 Georgia was plunged into a civil war in which President Zviad Gamsakhurdia was ousted by his former supporters and later replaced by Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs. In Abkhazia the majority of the Georgian population had supported Gamsakhurdia, and was, moreover, involved in a severe conflict with the Abkhaz representatives. None of these competing authorities was strong enough to impose its will on the territories of Georgia or Abkhazia. No arrangement could be found which could be considered legitimate. An attempt to overcome the destabilizing consequences of rule by the largest ethnic group was

sought in a system of ethnic quotas for the elections to the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet, implemented in 1991 under Gamsakhurdia but considered ‘racist’ and a form of ‘apartheid’ by his successor Shevardnadze. As a consequence, the power relations between the various political actors in Georgia and Abkhazia had to be measured by other than democratic and peaceful means. The war should be seen as a result of the failure of the previous agreements and institutions to gain acceptance.

Explaining the roots of the conflict in terms of legitimacy calls for the creation of a federative system – a ‘common state’ as it has been called in the negotiations – which would be based on the principles of equality, liberty and self-government for all major national communities. The legitimacy of such a federative arrangement would depend on the ability of both parties to make compromises that are acceptable to public opinion. Institutionalization on its own, however legally sophisticated, could not survive without popular support.

The negotiations on political status may be combined with the other two conflict resolution strategies – the development of a more civic approach to state and nation building and a neutral foreign policy. The creation of a pluralistic and democratic ethnofederal system, accommodating the claims of all national communities, could prevent the destructive consequences of ethnic nationalism. The parties to the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict have presently failed, however, to change the logic of confrontation. It may be years before all those who consider Abkhazia to be their homeland are able to accept the simple truth that dialogue and accommodation may be more rewarding than the present stalemate.