Ethnic and civic identity: incompatible loyalties? The case of Armenians in Post-Soviet Georgia

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3 GEORGIA IN HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

In this chapter, an account is given of the relevant background factors for the analysis of identification among Armenians within the Republic of Georgia and includes historical as well as geographical aspects of the state. The first part deals with Georgia in general and is subdivided into three time periods: Georgia before 1918 and as the first independent Republic of Georgia between 1918 and 1921 (3.1); Georgia as one of the Union Republics within the Soviet Union (3.2); and Georgia from the transition in 1985 and since its renewed independence in 1991 (3.3). After this outline of the general history of Georgia, the geographical position of Georgia is discussed (3.4) and the specific background of the urban research areas (3.5) and rural research areas (3.6) is dealt with in order to gain insight into the regional influence on the identification of Armenians.

3.1 History until 1921: Growing national consciousness among Georgians and loss of position among Armenians

Georgia has an ancient history. Although many think of Georgia within the framework of the Soviet Union, the first Georgian kingdoms were founded a few centuries before Christ. The most important factor in the formation of a single Georgian nation is said to be the official conversion of these kingdoms to Christianity between the fourth and the sixth centuries. The development of a phonetic alphabet for the Georgian language (differing from Latin or Cyrillic) seems to have contributed greatly to the formation of a unified Georgian nation because it enabled a distinctive Georgian literature to develop from the fifth century onwards (Gachechiladze 1995: 19).

However, the cultural and political developments in Georgia over the centuries have not always been directed towards the establishment of one Georgian nation and state: Georgia’s past is rather turbulent. Situated in the Caucasus, which for a long time was an important geopolitical location at the crossroads between Asia and Europe, the Georgian kingdoms experienced an excessive number of conquerors. Only between the eleventh and the twelfth centuries were they not occupied by foreign powers, and were united into one Georgia under the leadership of King David IV – ‘The Restorer’. This unification and independence of Georgian lands brought about a powerful political, economic and cultural upsurge and, to this day, this glorious time in the history of Georgia forms the basis of national pride and identity. Apart from this period, the Georgian kingdoms were occupied over and over again – by Arabs, Mongols, Persians and Ottomans – and from the fifteenth century they sank into a long, deep period of stagnation. Whereas in the Golden Age of Georgia the population was estimated at about two million (Kakabadze 1920: 40; Jaoshvili 1984: 49; Gachechiladze 1995: 22), by the eighteenth century there were only 623,000 Georgians left (Shevardnadze 1993: 8). When the Georgians were incorporated into the Russian Empire in the first decades of the nineteenth century, they were still ‘a divided, defeated, inchoate people, who, despite periods of unity and glory in the past, faced virtual extinction, the loss of their language, and possessed little sense of their own nationhood’ (Suny 1996: 109).
Many of the Armenians who throughout the centuries also lived on these Georgian lands largely controlled trade and the craft industry in the urban economy. Georgians mainly occupied positions in the feudal agrarian economy, either as lord or as peasant. Hence the division of labor within Georgian society coincided to a large extent with ethnic divisions, giving rise to a smoldering hostility among Georgian nobles towards the Armenian bourgeoisie in Georgia (Suny 1979: 65). As Jean Chardin noted when he visited Tbilisi in 1673 (1691: 191. In: Suny 1979: 65):

They [Georgians and Armenians] hate one another, and never marry into one another’s families. Particularly the Georgians condemn the Armenians with a more than ordinary scorn; and look upon ’em much about the same as we do the Jews in Europe.

Nevertheless, these ethnic tensions never turned into large-scale violent conflicts, probably because the social and geographical cleavages limited contacts between Georgians and Armenians.

With the abolition of serfdom in Georgia in 1864, however, ethnic tensions increased significantly and tipped the balance of power in favor of the Armenians. From the beginning of Russian rule in Georgia in 1801 up to that time, the Tsarist administration in Georgia had supported both the Georgian nobles and Armenian merchants and craftsmen; Georgians by enticing them into participation in the new order which transformed them from being a divided political elite into a self-confident united corporation, and Armenians by providing political stability which enhanced trade (Suny 1979: 53, 62). Yet, after the emancipation of the serfs, Georgians landlords lost their status and prestige, and in many cases also their income due to their inability to adapt to the radical changes in their way of life. The Armenian middle class, on the other hand, maintained its wealth and even increased its influence by acquiring land from or providing loans to Georgian landlords. Simultaneously, contacts between Georgians and Armenians intensified with the abolition of serfdom. The Georgian landlords were forced to commercialize their agricultural businesses and, thus, to deal directly with Armenian traders, and many Georgian nobles and peasants started to migrate to towns which had been dominated until then by the Armenian bourgeoisie. In his article on the emergence of political society in Georgia, Suny (1996: 120) argues that the increased inter-ethnic contact was a prime stimulant to Georgian self-definition. ‘From dispersed, insecure pieces of seigneurial Georgia with its various princely houses and distinct economies, one national political and economic unit was being formed, which fostered conditions for national reformation and ethnic confrontation.’

Georgians started to mobilize into political movements from about that time. The basis for a Georgian national intelligentsia had already been founded by then, as the political stability and unification of the Georgian lands under Tsarist rule led a group of Georgian aristocrats to provide images of a Georgian nation, thereby enhancing the interest in Georgian history and language (Suny 1996: 121-122).

By the 1890s, the Georgian working class had became a new force to be reckoned with, and being brutally isolated in the poorest sections of the cities while the Armenian

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1 Three years after its abolition in Russia (1861).
bourgeoisie flourished, they rendered the nationalist ideal of a unified and harmonious social order without class a wistful dream (Suny 1996: 139). Some Russian-educated Georgians provided a Marxist ideology to this new Georgian working class, which appealed to them as it was a non-nationalist ideology that at one and the same time was a weapon against their ethnic enemies, against Russian autocracy and the Armenian bourgeoisie. ‘To the Georgian working class, separated by language, culture, wealth, and power from the Armenian bourgeoisie, the Marxists exposed a stark world of capitalist exploitation and ethnic domination which they claimed could be overcome only by creating a national liberation movement based on class war.’ (Suny 1996: 140). By the beginning of the twentieth century these Georgian Marxists had become the de facto leaders of a massive national liberation movement.

With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 the overlap between social and ethnic tensions was reinforced: the war was genuinely unpopular among the largely pro-German Georgians who had felt hostility to Russian rule for decades. The deteriorating economic situation was exacerbated by a steady flow of Armenian refugees from Turkey into Transcaucasia (Suny 1994: 180). Although the February Revolution of 1917 initially provoked mainly class conflicts and relegated ethnic matters to the background in Georgia, after the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia and dispersed the Constituent Assembly on which Georgians had pinned their constitutional hopes for democratization and national self-determination, overt expression and manifestation of nationalist feelings began to dominate the political scene in Transcaucasia (Suny 1994: 190-191). This resulted in the establishment of a provisional political authority for Transcaucasia, which, stimulated by Central Powers such as Turkey and Germany, declared the Democratic Federal Republic of Transcaucasia independent in April 1918. A month later, however, this federation fragmented into three separate republics: ‘from its inception in the mid 1890s, the Georgian social democratic movement had accommodated within its ranks both dedicated internationalists and a variety of socialist nationalists, but the movement became so closely identified with one ethnic group, the Georgians, that its more “internationalist” leaders were never really included among the core leadership’ (Suny 1994: 194). The Georgian Menshevik leaders announced the independence of the Republic of Georgia on 26 May 1918.

Although the conditions for democratic developments in Georgia were anything but favorable – a deplorable economic situation, the threat of invasion and a corrupt civil administration – the Menshevik government managed to implement a democratic legislation, a quasi-independent judiciary and a special status for the ethnic minorities within the boundaries of Georgia. But after some revolts in non-Georgian areas – especially in Abkhazia and South Ossetia but also in Armenian-dominated Javakheti – ‘the Georgian socialists, fighting for their state’s physical survival, turned to Georgian nationalism as a source of legitimacy and political mobilization, which made the ethnic minorities beginning to fear that they would be locked into a position of permanent inferiority’ (Jones 1993: 290). The armed response of these minorities led the Georgians to view minorities as a potential fifth column, while the reaction of the government to these conflicts – occupation, military governors and military tribunals – reinforced the minorities’ alienation from the Georgian state (Jones 1993: 291). The fragile Georgian state was not able to stabilize the internal conflicts and to resist external pressures for a
long time. In 1921 Georgia was invaded by Bolshevik Russia, becoming one of the states in the Transcaucasian Federal Republic of the Soviet Union.2

3.2 The Soviet period: Institutionalization of Georgians as a dominant group and Armenians as a non-indigenous group in Georgia

Although independence of the Georgian state was forfeited, the political experience of the national republics [of Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and others] remained important, for the existence and popularity of the republics convinced the Communists to adjust their attitude toward national republics’ (Suny 1994: 208). To meet the serious challenges from the ethnic peripheries and also the doctrinal aspirations of self-determination, the Soviet nationalities policy took on an ethno-nationalist form from 1923 onwards. This, in turn, necessitated social engineering to put the idea into practice – in other words, to construct realities that could correspond to political myths and intellectual exercises. (Tishkov 1997: 30) Ethnic nationality became a compulsory and mainly ascriptive legal category, a key element of an individual’s legal status, and as such registered in internal passports and other personal documents, transmitted by descent and recorded in almost all bureaucratic encounters and official transactions (Brubaker 1994: 53). Ethnic federalism was introduced, endowing national territories with varying degrees of autonomy. At the top of this hierarchy were the Union Republics – Georgia being one of them – bearing the name of a particular national group, the so-called titular group – the Georgians. These titular groups had a privileged position within ‘their’ republic, based on the idea that ‘a necessary condition for the existence and development of a nation was the existence of an ethnic group declared to be an “indigenous nation” within their “own” statehood’ (Tishkov 1997: 29). All other ethnic groups in these republics, like the Armenians in Georgia, were considered non-indigenous groups. With this policy, the Soviet regime commenced institutionalizing ethnicity as ‘nationality’ and removed itself from connecting the concept of nationality to citizenship. Moreover, it created a hierarchy of ethnic groups, since not all ethnic groups were considered nations. This institutionalization of nationality at the sub-state level was a consequence of state action, yet not intended by state actors: the Soviet nationalities policy remained subordinate for a long period to the basic ideology of creating socially homogeneous nations which would, according to this theory, embody no mutual strife but would, on the contrary, begin a process of rapprochement (Tishkov 1997: 36).

The Soviet regime also introduced a so-called korenizatsiya policy3 to promote Georgian art, language and education, and increased the number of Georgians in civil administration and government positions in Georgia. Simultaneously, however, the

2 Together with Armenia and Azerbaijan.
3 Korenizatsiya means the ‘rooting’ or ‘nativization’ of the Soviet superstructure in non-Russian areas, in the socio-cultural, economic and political sectors, and the creation of national cadres and institutions (see, for example, Suny 1994, R.I. Kaiser 1994). As a result, Georgians started to dominate state as well as party institutions in Georgia. In 1929 Georgians made up 66 percent of the party membership, Armenians 12.8 percent and Russians 9 percent (Kommunisticheskaiia partiiia Gruzii v tsifrakh, 1921-1970 gg., 1971: 45. In: Suny 1994: 235).
political autonomy of Georgia was curtailed by the spilling of a lot of political as well as human blood to break the initial revolts in Georgia against Bolshevik rule – which constituted the greatest single crisis that Stalin had to face in his rise to the top (Blank 1993: 43). Subsequently, Georgia was firmly integrated into the Soviet system by the Stalinist policies of equalization such as agrarian collectivization, forced industrialization and compulsory primary education (although most instruction was in Georgian or other minority languages). In 1936, the Soviet powers perceived their control over Georgia to be strong enough to dissolve the Transcaucasian Federal Republic and to grant Georgia an individual status as a full-fledged Socialist Soviet Republic (SSR) but not without further limiting the sovereignty of the Georgian Union Republic by establishing three autonomous areas within its borders – Abkhazia, Ajaria and South Ossetia (see Map 2.1).

Even though Georgia suffered just as much as other national republics during the Great Purges of the 1930s when in total about one million ‘enemies of the state’ were killed in the whole of the Soviet Union (Suny 1994: 275), it continued to have a special position within the Soviet Union. Not only were Georgians allowed to preserve their unique alphabet, (Azeri, for instance, was forced to introduce a Cyrillic script), but the old Georgian culture was never concealed from official history and the political elite in Georgia remained predominantly Georgian, while in most of the non-Russian Soviet Republics the indigenous cadre had been partly replaced by Russians (Stam 1992: 29). In the Second World War, besides Soviet patriotism, Georgian nationalism was used in the cause for war, resulting in literature, plays and a film on Georgian history, and in the restoration of the autocephaly of the Georgian Orthodox Church in 1943 (Lang 1969: 178-179; in Suny 1994: 284). One of the reasons for the special treatment of the Georgian Republic may have been that Stalin himself was Georgian, as was his chief assistant Beria, “who managed Georgia as his own ‘fiefdom’”, and, as one analyst has concluded, his authority over Transcaucasia allowed the Georgians ‘to escape the degree of Russian supervision that was normal in the other Union Republics and procured for Georgia, at least, special consideration in the allotment of scarce goods’ (Fairbanks 1978: 156. In: Suny 1994: 287).

Although limited by the totalitarian Soviet regime with its highly centralized power structure, the special cultural and political position of Georgia, in combination with the legacy of the korenizatsii policies, and especially with the Soviet nationality policy that favored the titular Georgians, enhanced the salience of Georgian ethnicity. ‘By the early 1950s more people spoke, read, and were educated in the Georgian language than ever before; Georgian national culture was institutionalized in state-sponsored folk dance companies, operas, Georgian-language films, and officially sanctioned literature; and the nativization of schooling, courts, governmental institutions gave Georgians the dominant role in [and sense of ownership of] the Georgian Republic that still possessed significant non-Georgian minorities’ (Suny 1994: 281).

As a result of this enhanced Georgian ethnicity and the Georgian dominance in Georgia, Armenians and other minorities found themselves more and more restricted. While Armenian ethnicity continued to be emphasized by the Soviet regime through registration in passports and through cultural autonomy – for example, Armenian instruction in primary schools was still allowed, Armenian theaters remained in operation

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4 The official korenizatsii policy had ended by the late 1930s.
Armenian newspapers published – Armenians intellectuals were pressured to move to Armenia, Armenian monuments in Georgia were closed and relatively few Armenians occupied high-level political positions in Georgia. This dual and non-congruent institutionalization of nationhood caused fundamental tensions between Georgians and Armenians, which were only attenuated by the strict limits the Soviet regime placed on nationalism (Brubaker 1994: 57).

According to Suny, however, the development of Georgian society after Stalin’s death in 1953 ‘has not been shaped to any great extent by the twists and turns of official nationality policy, but, while evolving under the influence of general Soviet policy, was rather the product of indigenous social and political developments, and local resistance to imperatives from the center’. In his view, the nationalism that developed during the last thirty years of Soviet Georgia was not determined but only influenced by the Soviet nationality policy, and can be mainly explained by the long-term gradual re-establishment of political control and ethnic dominance of Georgians over their historical homeland that resulted from various developments which were either initialized primarily for other purposes or not intended at all. This so-called renationalization occurred in spite of the modernization of the republic – increasing industrialization, urbanization, collectivization and education – which would generally be expected to make traditional ethnic allegiances less relevant. The Georgian Republic ‘Georganized’ both as a result of the increased relative weight of Georgians in Georgia’s population – primarily as a result of the migration of Russians, Armenians and Jews from Georgia – and of the fact that Georgians had become a cohesive nation with an extremely high percentage of all Georgians in the USSR living in Georgia, a low rate of intermarriage between Georgians and people from other ethnic groups (although a third of the population in Georgia belonged to another ethnicity), and a high percentage of Georgians with Georgian as their first language and no fluency in Russian. This position strengthened after the death of Stalin in 1953 when Khrushchev’s decentralization policy of political and economic decision-making, aimed at improving regional support for the party, gave Georgians the opportunity to further increase their power within Georgia. ‘The post-Stalinist clique in Georgia was given an almost completely free hand within the Georgian Republic, and

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4 "Only an unquestioning acceptance of the outdated totalitarian model of the USSR would permit a researcher to make the facile conclusion that the writ of the Kremlin always ran without resistance in outlying areas. Recent work on Soviet nationalities has already indicated clearly that their recent history has been sufficiently diverse to preclude many all-inclusive generalizations about the non-Russian half of the Soviet population" (Suny 1994: 293).


combined with the Caucasian reliance on close familial and personal ties in all aspects of life and the reluctance to betray one’s relatives and comrades, this led to an impenetrable system of mutual aid, protection, and disregard for those who were not part of the spoils system’ (Suny 1994: 297-307). The latter consisted in any case of the central Russian authorities as well as ethnic minorities – including Armenians – within Georgia.

In the 1970s, besides the pervasive and growing national consciousness among Georgians that operated within the Soviet system, an illegal dissident nationalism started to develop on a small scale among Georgians who wanted a significant democratization of the political structure and who manifested a revival of religious enthusiasm, anxiety about the demoralization of the Georgian people, and a clear dislike for Russians and Armenians (Suny 1994: 308). The strength of Georgian nationalism among these dissidents became apparent in 1978 when their demonstration against the plan to restrict the use of the Georgian language within Georgia resulted in a concession from the government even though concessions to public opposition were highly unusual for the government at that time. It can be concluded from this that the ultimate goal of the Soviet policy to merge ethnic groups in Georgia in the 1980s was more removed from realization than at any other time in Soviet history. ‘Georgian society remained a network in which family and kinship ties, ideas of honor and trust, nepotism, and patron-client alliances provided informal links within the population and prevented penetration of outsiders, whether members of other nationalities [ethnic groups] or representatives of state power’ (Suny 1994: 316).

3.3 Transition and independence: National minorities perceived by Georgians as ‘guests’

The turning point in Soviet history, and also in Georgian society, was the restructuring program – Perestroika – initiated in 1985 by the newly elected leader of the Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev. Based on the assumption that a united Soviet people existed, Gorbachev was convinced that unleashing the creative potential of this loyal citizenry through glasnost (‘openness’) and democratization would allow the Soviet Union to move forward out of the period of stagnation and towards a brighter communist future (Gorbachev 1987: 233, 241. In: Kaiser 1994: 345). It turned out to be a miscalculation: increased freedom within the Soviet Union encouraged the nationally aware communities to raise their nationalist ethnic demands. When the Soviet central power was still strong enough to control local administrations and, at the same time, suppress any attempt at organized nationalist movements, it was also in a position to secure the tolerance and consent of key social actors through the notion of a single multi-ethnic state. But as soon as the power and unified ideology weakened, ethnicity as a basis of group solidarity and ethnic nationalism as political doctrine challenged the status quo (Tishkov 1997: 42).

Powerful opposition to the Soviet structures rapidly developed in Georgia and, in line with the already existing tolerance for ‘official’ nationalism favoring Georgians over other peoples, these opposition groups chose a Georgian nationalistic position through which they exacerbated ethnic cleavages in Georgia. Besides issues of independence, market economy, multi-partyism and guarantees of civil rights, central to the programs of these opposition groups were the Georgianization of the republic’s administrative and
cultural institutions, the promotion of Georgian history, the institutionalization of previously unofficial Georgian national holidays, the abolition of Russian as the state language, the creation of republican military units comprising only Georgians, and the resettlement of Georgians in areas dominated by minorities (Jones 1993: 294-295). In 1990, a draft citizenship law was proposed by Georgian nationalists stating that membership should be restricted to citizens of the first independent Republic of Georgia and their descendants, thereby curbing the political rights of the non-indigenous who had migrated to Georgia since 1921\(^\text{10}\) – as stated before, hardly any Georgians had left Georgia since that time. In the end, a less discriminatory law was adopted granting Georgian citizenship to all permanent residents of Georgia but a nationalistic atmosphere was created around the concept of citizenship.

After Gamsakhurdia’s political party ‘Round Table-Free Georgia’ won the first multi-party elections in Soviet Georgia in 1990,\(^\text{11}\) it soon became clear that the new Georgian government was heading towards separation from the Soviet Union and towards a nationalistic way of settling tensions with ethnic minorities within the republic. With arguments of prior settlement, history or by dint of numbers, the new Georgian regime virtually eliminated minority access to economic and political power. The first multi-party parliament contained almost no minority representation – except through the opposition Communist Party – and attempts by ethnic minorities to establish some degree of cultural or economic sovereignty were perceived by the Georgian government as a challenge to its people’s spatial and social homogeneity (Jones 1993: 295). ‘Though Georgians conceived of themselves as the most hospitable of nations,\(^\text{12}\) welcoming other people into their country, they viewed the national minorities in Georgia as stumrebi (guests), there at the tolerance of the majority population, and were convinced that the fears and aspirations of the non-Georgians were artificial, illegitimate, and influenced by sinister forces from Moscow’ (Suny 1994: 325). With this ethnic homogenization and the promotion of Georgian hegemony in Georgia, the government alienated the non-Georgian and also the non-Christian population within the republic, and both the Ossetians and Abkhaz started to mobilize. At the end of 1990, when the Georgian government abolished the autonomous status of South Ossetia – justified by the argument that Ossetians were not ‘indigenous’ but ‘settlers’ (Jones 1993: 295) – the first bloody ethnic conflict and civil war broke out in Georgia.

In April 1991, the Georgian Republic was declared independent and a month later Gamsakhurdia was elected president by an overwhelming majority of the population.\(^\text{13}\) However, he still had many opponents who rejected his extreme nationalism, accused

\(^{10}\) The Georgian nationalists also raised the possibility of establishing 1801 as the cut-off date for citizenship, since this was the year that Georgia was incorporated into the Russian Empire (Kaiser 1994: 182).

\(^{11}\) In these elections, the Round Table-Free Georgia bloc received 54.3 percent of the votes for party list and the Communist Party 29.4 percent. Since only half of the 250 seats in the Supreme Soviet were assigned by a proportional lists system and the other half by a majority district system, the Round Table-Free Georgia now held 155 seats, the Communist Party 64 seats, and the remaining 31 seats were divided among other parties (Aves 1992. In: Hosking, Aves & Duncan 1992: 171).

\(^{12}\) Hospitality is regarded as one of the main pillars of Georgian culture.

\(^{13}\) In the elections, which were held in a relatively free atmosphere, Gamsakhurdia won with a massive 86 percent of the vote (Aves 1992: 173).
him of being a dictator and sabotaging democracy through his complete hold on parliament and the media and of letting the country slide into ethnic and civil war. His ambivalent response to the August military putsch in Moscow – without unequivocal support for the reformers – and his subsequent order to disband the National Guard in Georgia marked a turning point in his presidency. The parliamentary opposition mobilized a coalition, including members of the former National Guard, and, after two weeks of fighting on the streets of the capital Tbilisi, was able to oust Gamsakhurdia at the beginning of 1992.

The Gamsakhurdia government was replaced by a Military Council, which, in order to strengthen its dubious legitimacy, invited the former leader Shevardnadze to return to Georgia from Moscow and appointed him as chairman of the newly established State Council. Shevardnadze’s role in Georgia became one of complicated mediation and reconciliation, since ‘he inherited a state, that, in the strict Weberian sense of the word (‘an organization which monopolizes the means to use legitimate violence over a given territory’), no longer existed. With one war going on with South Ossetian secessionists and another with Gamsakhurdia supporters in western Georgia, both autonomous republics Abkhazia and Ajaria beyond Tbilisi’s control, the Armenian- and Azeri-populated regions on the republic’s southern borders effectively running themselves, and with a number of competing paramilitary groups, and the absence of an army responsible to a legitimate executive power’ (Jones 1996a: 305), the Georgian state was hardly more than an official piece of land on a map without substantial content. Moreover, Shevardnadze also had to seek popular and international legitimacy since his leadership had not been established democratically, but his enormous international prestige contributed to the growing sense that he alone could bring peace to Georgia.

While Shevardnadze’s realism and willingness to compromise did indeed, soon after his coming to office, lead to a cease-fire agreement and an end to the conflict in South Ossetia, a few months later in the summer of 1992, another ethnic conflict broke out as a result of an apparent unauthorized military action by Georgian troops in response to Abkhazia’s declaration of independence. In spite of this civil war, Shevardnadze was able to establish a newly elected parliament and a temporary power structure within Georgia in the autumn of that year, with himself popularly elected as head of state. In March 1993, a law was introduced guaranteeing citizenship to all those currently living on Georgian territory and willing to sign an oath of loyalty. At the same time, Abkhaz was recognized as a state language equal to Georgian in Abkhazia (Suny 1994: 331). Peace did not return to Georgia until the end of 1993 and then it was at the expense of the virtual loss of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and of renewed Russian influence in Georgia. Shevardnadze had realized that in order to shift the balance of forces in Georgia – to appease Gamsakhurdia’s followers and to play the paramilitary leaders off against one another – a close, effectively subordinate and strategic relationship with Russia had to be

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14 The State Council was a provisional civil body to which the Military Council conceded its authority. However, the military leaders of the two victorious militias – Kitovani and loseliani – retained veto powers in the State Council, which consisted, in addition to these two figures, of Shevardnadze and Prime Minister Sigua (CIPDD 1995: vi).

15 An official settlement of the political status of South Ossetia has still not yet been reached.

16 No less than 89 percent of the electorate voted in favor of Shevardnadze, but then again he was the only candidate (Fuller 1992: 1-4. In: Suny 1994: 330, Aves 1996: 9).
established by allowing Russian troops into Georgia and by having Georgia enter the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

But while internal strife was largely under control by the end of 1993, the Georgian state was on the verge of total collapse. The economy had been devastated after the declaration of independence because of the interruption of supplies from the former Soviet Union, but after three civil wars it was completely ruined. Parliament was barely functioning because the laws determining its powers had resulted in a representation of power by many weak, smaller parties lacking any disciplinary control. Moreover, the Georgian political culture of parties was based on patron-client networks – a Georgian tradition reinforced by the Soviet system, which led to ineffective and undisciplined parties without grass-roots support among the population (Jones 1997: 253). And even though Shevardnadze made full use of his prerogative to issue decrees and states of emergency, his authority in the country, particularly in the regions, was only limited: Abkhazia and South Ossetia were *de facto* separated from Georgia, the former autonomous region of Ajaria as well as the southern regions with a mainly Armenian and Azeri population were still virtually beyond the control of Tbilisi, the western region of Mingrelia was still deeply resentful of the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia’s regime, and even the streets of Tbilisi had been largely abandoned to criminals as a result of a total breakdown of law and order.

In the autumn of 1993 in order to establish a firmer political base and to create order in the fragmented and inefficient parliament, Shevardnadze established a political bloc, which later turned into the Citizens’ Union of Georgia political party (CUG) that united a majority of parliamentary members around one issue: support of Shevardnadze’s power. Although parliament is said not to have become very productive after these measures and most regions remained outside the control of the regime, it managed, until the next elections, to launch a relatively successful crusade against organized crime, to adopt a new election law which would make future parliaments less fragmented, and to adopt a new constitution which ensured a strong presidency. An attempt to kill Shevardnadze in August 1995 threatened to destabilize the whole country once again. But Shevardnadze himself rapidly moved to make political capital out of the event, and turned the assassination attempt in a rather dubious fashion against his presidential rivals in the upcoming elections (Aves 1996: 12).

The parliamentary and presidential elections of 1995 were the first elections in the independent Republic of Georgia to take place in an environment in which no extra-governmental or criminal militias laid claim to state power, and in which the so-called ‘power agencies’ – the police, army and security forces – displayed loyalty to the central authorities (CIPDD 1995: ix). Shevardnadze won the presidential election very comfortably. In the parliamentary election, the main winner turned out to be the CUG, Shevardnadze’s political party that, besides state-building and economic reform, had put forward guarantees for ethnic minorities as a main issue in their electoral campaign.\(^\text{17}\)

\[\text{17}\] In the presidential election, 72.9 percent of the votes were in favor of Shevardnadze (Aves 1996: 13).

\[\text{18}\] Only three parties surpassed the five-percent barrier which enabled them to have a share in the 150 seats to be elected according to the proportional representation system: the CUG received 23.25 percent of the votes, the National Democratic Party (a moderate nationalist, conservative party) 7.95 percent, and the

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However, since under the proportional representation system the people could only vote for a party and not for an individual candidate on the party lists, ethnic minorities were unable to vote specifically for a candidate of their own ethnicity. Only in the majority system, through which the remaining 85 seats of the 235 parliamentary seats were assigned, were locally concentrated ethnic minorities able to elect a candidate of their own ethnicity – and in fact the Armenians in the southern border region voted by the majority system for candidates of Armenian ethnicity.\(^\text{19}\)

From 1995 onwards, considerable progress in political and economic stability occurred: executive power was strengthened, parliament became more efficient, and proposals were made to improve the judiciary system and to introduce an effective system of regional administrative divisions and governance. It was said that, albeit still very superficially, ‘the era of Shevardnadze, along with the frustration caused by the nationalist romanticism of the previous period, brought more rationalism to the scene’ (Human Development Report 1997: 29).\(^\text{20}\)

Nevertheless, a high level of uncertainty among the citizens of Georgia with regard to state institutions and their civil rights remained, as corruption and crime remained widespread in the country. According to the ranking of ‘Transparency International’ for levels of corruption among 99 countries in the world in 1999, Georgia was at the bottom end of the list – number 84 – making the level of corruption there comparable to that in countries such as Ecuador, Russia, Albania, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uganda. A World Bank study also states that ‘bribes to public officials in Georgia exceed eight percent of the revenues of companies doing business in Georgia, which places Georgia dead last in the post communist world’ (Boylan 2000). Corruption in Georgia is to be found at all levels of the state structure, from large-scale embezzlement by high-level officials to small-scale extortion of bribes by traffic policemen, and with nepotism dominating all state institutions, including those that should be guaranteeing the civil rights of citizens. Besides the role of network structures and patron-client relations within state institutions – which both support inequality and corruption – citizens have to pay illegal taxes in the form of bribes for every public service. There is no way to avoid them as these services cannot be obtained elsewhere (Stefes 2000). A survey of public attitudes in 1998 by USAID and the World Bank stated that the average amount of unofficial payments made by each household in Georgia has been about 109 lari in 1998 (about $85), which, given the level of incomes\(^\text{21}\) and the fact that in many rural areas government is largely non-existent, is an extraordinary amount (Human Development Report 1998: 21). The same survey revealed that the people of

\(^{19}\) In total, four parliamentary seats were assigned to Armenians – two elected by the majority system in districts in the southern border region, and two from the CUG list. This amounts to 1.7 percent of the seats, while Armenians make up more than 8 percent of the population.

\(^{20}\) Optimism about Georgian state-building has chilled again since 1998 after another attempt was made to kill Shevardnadze, the war in Abkhazia briefly resumed, relations with the Ajaria region deteriorated while negotiations on the solution of the Abkhaz conflict stagnated, and the Georgian currency – the lari – decreased sharply in value due to the Russian financial crisis. But, as stated before, this research on Armenians was mainly conducted between 1996-1998, before this economic downturn.

\(^{21}\) The average monthly income in Georgia in 1998 was 126 lari (Human Development Report 1998: 62).
Georgia perceives the police and customs as the most corrupt institutions in the country, whose officials together with prosecutors and those working in local courts demand the most frequent and the largest bribes (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1: Frequency and average size of payments demanded in 1998
(USAID/World Bank Survey 1998)


Besides corruption, crime in Georgia is still widespread. According to Glonti (2000), an expert in studies on crime in Georgia, the most significant organized crime includes the drugs business; arms trade; human trafficking; smuggling; black-market trade (on which 60-70% of the Georgian market is dependent); and other illegal activities such as racketeering, gambling and forgery. Unorganized crime includes, among other things, the theft of state property, tax evasion and avoiding conscription. And while the political-crime societies, which were united behind Gamsakhurdia and behind the leaders of the paramilitary groups that ousted Gamsakhurdia, have decreased since the strengthening of the Georgian state from about 1995 onwards, various guerilla groups are still active on the territory of Georgia, for instance around the border with the breakaway region of Abkhazia.

In spite of renewed stability under the leadership of Shevardnadze, Georgia must be seen as a weak state in the sense that its regime does not have total control over its state institutions – with corruption and crime being widespread – and, therefore, cannot guarantee its citizens basic security. Moreover, with the citizens of Georgia already having a general distrust of state institutions due to historical factors, and networks and ethnic cleavages still being crucial in the division of
power, the current situation is not positive for the development of a civic identity among the population of Georgia as a whole.

3.4 The geographical position of Georgia

Besides the historical background of Georgia, the country’s geographical position also has had an enormous effect on ethnic relations within Georgia and on the process of state building. First of all, Georgia has for a long time been of interest to Russia for economic reasons such as its oil pipelines and the harbor of Batumi on the Black Sea coast, for geopolitical and strategic reasons as a buffer zone between its old Muslim rivals, for containing centrifugal tendencies within Russia such as in Chechnya, and for the maintenance of its former Soviet sphere of influence (Fuller 1994: 6). Although the actual degree of Russian involvement in Georgia nowadays is difficult to assess, the facts strongly suggest that Russia supported the Abkhaz side during the civil war and facilitated Gamsakhurdia’s return to Georgia and his subsequent occupation of villages in western Georgia (Fuller 1994: 22-31). There is also evidence of the Russian army backing the Ajarian regime,22 and Russia is suspected of involvement in the assassination attempt on Shevardnadze in 1995.23

As already mentioned, Shevardnadze realized that without the support of Russia it would be impossible to establish a stable Georgian state since ‘nowhere in the entire former Soviet Union have more Russian players sought to manipulate events than in Georgia, and nowhere has this intervention had such ruinous consequences, both in terms of economic collapse and suffering inflicted on the civilian population’ (Fuller 1994: 25). Shevardnadze therefore agreed to the maintenance of some Russian military bases on Georgian territory for the time being, to Georgian membership of the CIS, and to Russian UN peacekeeping troops being stationed on the border with Abkhazia. With this, probably unavoidable, step, he accepted Russian influence within Georgia, especially on the periphery where ethnic minorities reside. For instance, Russian peacekeeping troops on the border with Abkhazia are continuously accused of being biased. But also the Russian military base in Javakheti has extensive influence on the largely Armenian population of this southern border region since it is the main employer in the region and, according to hearsay evidence, the Russian army at the base provides weapons to local

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22 ‘While relations between the authorities in Tbilisi and the Russian military in Georgia were deteriorating in 1991-1993, Abashidze [the leader of Ajar[a] forged a close relationship with General Gladyshev, the local Russian commander [of the Russian military base in Ajar[a]]’ (Aves 1996: 42). The Russian military commanders in Batumi were quoted as stating that they were ready to defend the lives of the population at large in Ajar[a] (Fuller 1993: 25). The ‘distribution of registered arms to support militia brigades taking part in raids’ (Adzharii 1992) – as Abashidze stated about the establishment of his people’s army – could very well have been supported by the Russian army. There is hearsay evidence that in total 2500 guns were distributed among the population of Ajar[a] to defend the region against Georgian militant groups (Masalkin, interview). The Russian Defense Minister Grachev stated in an television interview that ‘Georgia’s Black Sea coast is an area of strategic importance for the Russian army; we … must take every measure to ensure that our troops remain there, otherwise we will lose the Black Sea’ (Reuters 1993; in Fuller 1993: 25)).

23 Moscow refuses to extradite the key suspect in this case, former security chief Igor Giorgadze (see, for example, OMRI Daily Digest 1996, RFE/RL Newslie 1997).
Armenian movements. And, as stated before, in the autonomous region of Ajaria, the Russian military base supposedly backed the local leader, thereby ensuring the independent status of the region from Tbilisi.

In order not to become totally dependent on Russia again and to contain its influence on ethnic relations and state building in Georgia, Georgia is fiercely lobbying to become the gateway to world markets for the enormous Caspian Sea oil reserves. Besides the economic gains from such an oil pipeline in terms of employment and transit fees, it would make the Georgian state of strategic interest to Western powers, thereby reducing Georgia’s dependency on Russia. Since Russia aims at continuing influence in the Caucasus and is Georgia’s main rival in the competition for the pipeline contract, Russia is trying to prevent the Georgian pipeline project by all means possible. In the most extreme case, Russia might even use its military presence in Georgia to destabilize the state by encouraging already existing ethnic tensions, although this would be a final option as Russia would be very careful to avoid triggering further escalations in the northern Caucasian Republics, like in Chechnya. The Georgian regime, for its part, is trying to prevent such a scenario by strengthening its ties with other states of the Eurasian transport corridor. It established an alignment with Azerbaijan and Ukraine in 1996, later enlarged to include Moldova (GUAM), “on the basis of a shared pro-Western orientation, mistrust of Russia, and the desire to profit jointly from the export of part of Azerbaijan’s Caspian Sea oil via Georgia and Ukraine”. Eventually, although it is a long shot, Georgia would even like to become part of the European Union and NATO one day to decrease its dependence on Russia.

As well as Russia, Armenia also has influence in Georgia because of the significant Armenian ethnic minority in the country. With regard to the oil pipeline, for instance, the Armenian president has already proclaimed that until the independent status of Nagorno-Karabakh is acknowledged, “not a single barrel of Azeri oil will reach the world markets” (Cohen 1998: C03). With a substantial Armenian minority in Georgia, this might be a real threat to the Georgian oil pipeline, although the Armenian president has stressed time and time again that Armenia would not support any destabilizing actions by Armenians in Georgia. Another sensitive matter between Georgia and Armenia that is influencing internal ethnic relations in Georgia is the concept of a ‘Greater Armenia’, which is said to have adherents in mono-ethnic Armenia as well as among the Armenian diaspora the world over. Besides a considerable part of eastern Turkey, a ‘Greater Armenia’ would include the southern part of Georgia – Javakheti – where the overwhelming majority of the population is Armenian but which is perceived by Georgians to be a part of their territory historically. On the other hand, however, Armenia cannot afford another war, especially not with their only friendly and Christian neighbor that provides them with access to the sea.

Besides these former Soviet Republics, Turkey’s interests in the Georgian state also influence ethnic relations and identification in Georgia. Since the collapse of the USSR, Turkey has surpassed Russia as Georgia’s primary trading partner, and Ankara and Tbilisi have established a strategic relationship. This relationship will be additionally

24 Uzbekistan has been a member for some time as well but withdrew again in June 2002.
25 In the case of Azerbaijan and Georgia, dissatisfaction with Russia’s track record as a mediator in the Karabakh and Abkhaz conflicts has provided additional motivation (Fuller 1997; Boble 1999).
strengthened by implementation of the TRACECA project to build a network of road, ferry and rail links from China across Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey to Europe, and for plans to route the main export pipeline for Azerbaijan’s Caspian Sea oil through Georgia to Turkey (Fuller 1998). Since Turkey is Georgia’s major economic trading partner, it can use its influence in the country to enforce supportive policies for ethnic groups which have its sympathy such as the Ajarians (Muslim Georgians in Ajaria) and the Meskhetians (the Muslims deported by Stalin from Georgia to Uzbekistan who are often called ‘Turks’ and who would like to return to Georgia).

Figure 3.2: The population of Georgia (N=5,400,841)
Not only the geographical position of the state but also the geographical position of ethnic groups within Georgia have affected ethnic relations in Georgia and the process of state building. According to the last Soviet census in 1989, the population of Georgia was 5.4 million people among whom Georgians made up the majority (70%), while substantial minorities were Armenians (8%), Russians (6%), Azerbaijanis (6%), Ossetians (3%) and Abkhaz (2%) (see Figure 3.2). Georgians live in all regions of the country and they form the majority of the population in most of them. Apart from the former autonomous regions/oblasts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – from which almost all Georgians fled during the civil wars – Georgians are nowadays only a minority in the regions of Kvemo Kartli, where the majority of the people are Azerbaijani, and in Meskheti (Samtskhe)-Javakheti, where the majority of the population is Armenian.

Figure 3.3: Population in the administrative regions of Georgia according to the territorial division since 1995

Note: South Ossetia is officially no longer a region

²⁶ It is interesting to note that with the change of the administrative division of Georgia by a decree of the head of state in 1995, the region of Meskheti-Javakheti was enlarged by the addition of the district of Borjomi (which used to belong to Kartli). This reduced the clear majority of Armenians in the regional
As becomes clear from Figure 3.3, besides being the majority in the region of Meskheti (Samtskhe)-Javakheti, Armenians also form a large sector of the regional population (>10%) in Tbilisi and the breakaway region of Abkhazia. In all other regions, Armenians comprise only a very small proportion of the regional population.

Besides the proportionality of Georgians and Armenians in the population of a region and their history there, the characteristics and historical background of a region and its relative location vis-à-vis the borders and the capital are geographical factors affecting identification and, thus, the legitimization of the state. With regard to the five research areas, these factors are elaborated on further in the following sections.

### 3.5 Urban research areas: Tbilisi and Batumi

The capital, Tbilisi, is nowadays a multi-ethnic city where a minority of Armenians live among a majority of Georgians (see Figure 3.4). However, this has not been the case throughout history. As stated before, Armenians have lived in the city for centuries and until the second half of the nineteenth century the urban culture and urban economy were largely in their hands. The majority of the population of Tbilisi was Armenian,\(^\text{27}\) Armenians held the prominent positions in the economic and political structures of Tbilisi,\(^\text{28}\) and the town was an island of Armenian culture and literature. Even after the demographic shift in the mid-nineteenth century\(^\text{29}\) as a result of the continuous influx of Russians and Georgians (the latter especially after the abolition of serfdom), Armenians continued to dominate the economy and the city’s political structure. In the 1890s they still held the majority of the seats in the Tbilisi city Duma, and, as Luigi Villari declared after his visit to Tbilisi in 1905, ‘Armenians control all the commercial activity of the town: one has only to walk down the main streets to see that the names over all the major shops and of the most important firms are Armenian...’ (1906: 109-110. In: Jones 1996b: 446).

From 1897 to 1915 many more Armenians came to Tbilisi as refugees from the Ottoman Empire.\(^\text{30}\) Only with the Marxist revolution in 1917 were the Armenians effectively excluded and the Georgians gained control of the city government of Tbilisi. When Georgia was declared independent in 1918, many ambitious Armenians left for the new Republic of Armenia that had just become independent as well. This stimulated ‘the Georgian social democratic government, ideologically hostile to big business, to share the Georgian nationalist suspicion that the Armenians were primarily loyal to the new Republic of Armenia’ (Jones 1996b: 449). In addition to the ‘governmental

\(^{27}\) In 1834, 84 percent of Tbilisi’s population was Armenian and 14 percent was Georgian (Kameral’nov Opicanii Makalakam gorod Tiflisa, 1834).

\(^{28}\) In the 1860s approximately two-thirds of the commercial-industrial class was Armenian (Suny 1996: 114). And due to the electoral system based on property qualifications, Armenians played a dominant role in local government (Jones 1996b: 441-460).

\(^{29}\) In 1864, the percentage of Armenians in the population of Tbilisi had dropped to 47% (Ckhetia 1942: 161. In: Mamulov 1995), and in 1876 had decreased to 36% of the city’s population (Suny 1996: 113).

\(^{30}\) In the period 1897-1910, the Armenian population in Tbilisi increased from 46,700 to almost 125,000 (Jones 1996b: 444).
nationalization and requisition policies, confiscation of Armenian property by Georgian officials and mistreatment by the police deprived Armenians of their former economic and political privileges in Tbilisi’ (Jones 1996b: 450). With the incorporation of Georgia into the Soviet Union in 1921 the position of Armenians only worsened: the continuous nationalization of private property deprived the Tbilisi Armenians of their wealth and the Soviet nationality policy impeded Armenians, as non-indigenous nationals, from becoming politically active. The public sphere in Tbilisi – political, economic and cultural – became predominantly Georgian, while Armenians were granted only some degree of cultural autonomy. Although many Armenians were descendants of families that had lived in Tbilisi since the Middle Ages – only some were recent settlers from the Ottoman Empire – numerous Armenians left their ‘home-town’ of Tbilisi for Armenia as a result of these policies. It was not, however, until 1970 that Georgians formed the majority of Tbilisi’s population (The National Composition of Georgia 1991).

Figure 3.4: The population of Tbilisi (N=1,243,150)

After Georgia became independent again in 1991, another wave of Armenians left Tbilisi to emigrate to the West and to the newly independent state of Armenia, especially during and shortly after the period of the nationalistic president Gamsakhurdia. Being the capital and political center of Georgia, it was in Tbilisi that Georgian nationalists mobilized in the early 1990s, chanting slogans like ‘Georgia for the Georgians’, and acting accordingly. While all the ethnic minorities in the capital were confronted with the consequences of this Georgian nationalism, Armenian-Georgian relations in particular soured at this time, as a result of the historical role of anti-Armenian feeling in Georgian nationalism. This was all the more painful for Armenians, as most of their families perceived Tbilisi as their native town. When subsequently the Abkhaz war broke out in 1992 and the Armenians in Abkhazia supported the Abkhaz side against the Georgians, relations between Armenians and Georgians reached their nadir. Especially in Tbilisi, where of all regions in this research, the consequences of the Abkhaz civil war were most directly perceptible with thousands of Georgians from Abkhazia streaming into the city as refugees and being crammed into small rooms of former prestigious hotels in the
center of the capital. Armenian-Georgian relations in Tbilisi deteriorated as a result of this direct confrontation with the consequences of this war in which local Armenians had fought on the side of the enemy. Inter-ethnic relations worsened because these traumatized Georgians from Abkhazia, living in distressing conditions in the heart of the city, had been turned against Armenians. The Abkhaz conflict has been in a state of deadlock ever since the beginning of the early 1990s, and the negative situation has yet to be resolved. According to many Armenians, another factor that adds to the deterioration of inter-ethnic relations in Tbilisi has been the substantial influx of Georgians from the countryside. In their opinion, they show less inter-ethnic tolerance and reduce the cosmopolitan character of the city. Moreover, as with most emigrants from Georgia, the Armenians who have left the country since the early 1990s are predominantly the wealthier and better-educated Armenians and this has caused a real brain drain within the city’s Armenian community. Since no population census has been conducted since Georgia became an independent state, there is no reliable figure of the number of Armenian emigrants leaving Tbilisi.

In spite of this brain drain, the possibilities for the ethnic mobilization of Armenians in Tbilisi are relatively advantageous compared to Armenians in other parts of Georgia. Although Armenians are not predominantly concentrated in their own neighborhoods anymore, opportunities to establish and maintain ethnic institutions are favorable as a result of their large absolute number in the city – 150,127 Armenians according to the Soviet Census of 1989 (The National Composition of Georgia 1991). Moreover, Tbilisi is an urban environment, centrally located in Georgia, and the capital of the Georgian state. Its central location with better possibilities for communication, transportation and education, and the capital function of the city providing access to governmental bodies, international organizations and foreign investors, facilitate the mobilization of interest groups and the utilization of cultural autonomy.

Yet, from an economic point of view, the urban environment is not necessarily advantageous. Although relatively numerous income opportunities are still available thanks to the capital function of the city, the economic depression has resulted in high unemployment figures and considerable poverty among Armenians in Tbilisi. Unlike Armenians in the countryside, unemployed Armenians in Tbilisi cannot be self-sufficient in terms of growing food and keeping livestock.

Batumi, the capital of the autonomous republic of Ajaria on the Black Sea coast, is a multi-ethnic city where Armenians live as an ethnic minority among a majority of Georgians (see Map 3.2 and Figure 3.5). Unlike Tbilisi, however, Georgians in Batumi have always been the main population group, even during the incorporation of the city into the Ottoman Empire from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards and into the Russian Empire from 1878 onwards. After the later takeover, many Georgians left the

\[31\] This is not true for Georgia as a whole: there are many refugees in other parts of Georgia as well, especially in West Georgia close to Abkhazia.

\[32\] However, the proportion of Armenians in the ‘Armenian’ neighborhoods of Avlabari and Solalaki is still significantly higher than in other neighborhoods in Tbilisi.

\[33\] Actually the whole region Ajaria, of which Batumi is the capital, was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire.
city for the Ottoman Empire in the so-called Mukhadjirstva, which was not only the result of agitation by the Ottomans but also of pressure from the Russians. The Russians perceived Ajarian Georgians, who had gradually converted to Islam during the Ottoman period, as a potential fifth column loyal to the Ottoman enemy. In their place, Armenians from the Ottoman Empire, fleeing the repression, were invited to settle in the region of Ajaria and its capital Batumi because they were Christians. That the Georgians nevertheless maintained their dominance among the population of Batumi was the result of a huge influx of Georgians from the densely populated, land-hungry villages of the adjacent Georgian region of Guria. They were drawn by Batumi’s booming economy and the city developed at the end of the nineteenth century into an important industrial and trading center, not least because of the transshipment of oil from Baku (Azerbaijan) but also because of the introduction of new cash crops, such as citrus, tobacco and tea into the region. Since these Georgians from Guria were not Muslim, the city of Batumi became predominantly Christian, while the rest of Ajaria remained primarily Muslim. As the Georgians have always been the majority population in Batumi, the political, economic and cultural life of the city is mostly Georgian although Armenians have always had their own, mainly cultural, institutions.

Figure 3.5: The population of Batumi (N=136,930)

![Population Pie Chart]

**Source:** The National Composition of Georgia, 1991

During Soviet times, Batumi lost its prominence as an international port because the Soviet economy grew autarchic, and since the Soviet-Turkish border was turned into a closed and strictly guarded zone, city suddenly found itself in a rather isolated position. Instead Batumi developed as one of the main resorts on the Black Sea coast. However, after the declaration of Georgian independence, Batumi immediately started to develop

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34 It is difficult to estimate the exact number of people emigrating from Ajaria since official documents give various figures. But it is said that about 10,000 people went to Turkey, of whom 6,000 were Muslim Georgians and most of the others were Abkhaz (Dat’unashvili 1989: 14. In: Sanikidze 1999: 14).

35 Like Christianity, Islam managed to survive the seventy years of Soviet atheism in spite of the fierce repression in Ajaria of Muslim institutions such as mosques, theological medreses (colleges) and the religious administration (mupta); of the forced change of Islamic names into Georgian ones; and of the compulsory removal of women’s veils.

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its function as transshipment point and trade center once again. This, together with the profitable border crossing into Turkey in Ajaria, has resulted in the population of Batumi being slightly better off economically than people in other parts of Georgia – as mentioned earlier, Turkey is nowadays Georgia’s main trading partner.

Yet, most of the economic profits end up in the pockets of the authoritarian leader Abashidze, who was put into power by Gamsakhurdia after Georgian nationalism caused severe tensions in Batumi in the early 1990s. These tensions were not so much between the various ethnic groups within the city but between Georgians in the autonomous region of Ajaria (of which Batumi is the capital) and nationalistic Georgians from the rest of Georgia. While Georgian nationalists claimed Christianity to be an essential characteristic of Georgian ethnicity and autonomy of regions to be an ‘alien imposed redundancy’, Georgians in Ajaria not only had a Muslim instead of a Christian background but also had a vested interest in the autonomous status of their region. The tensions were largely settled when the Georgian Aslan Abashidze was appointed chairman of the local Soviet, as he was a member of a local aristocratic Muslim family with an influential history in Batumi, which had already demanded autonomy for the region of Ajaria in the first Georgian Republic. On the other hand, Abashidze was loyal to the central Georgian government and, apparently, made a secret deal with Gamsakhurdia to help him abolish Ajarian autonomy in the long term. When Gamsakhurdia was ousted as president soon after, Abashidze used the opportunity of complete chaos in Georgia to firmly establish his power base in Ajaria and was able to keep the raging militias that controlled the country out of the region. This was largely financed by income from the important and only border crossing with Turkey and, as explained before, probably supported by the Russian military that has a base in the region. When peace returned to Georgia, the central leadership of Georgia had its hands full with conflicts in the other regions of Georgia, and, happy that the political situation at least was stable in Ajaria, left Abashidze to rule the region as his personal fiefdom, which is still the case today. Internal opposition in the region has been (forcefully) silenced and the new governing clan is predominantly made up of his own (Georgian) kinsmen.

As a result of this authoritarian regime in Ajaria, the advantages of an urban environment for Armenians to mobilize themselves and gain access to state institutions is not fully applicable in Batumi, in spite of Batumi having many state institutions as the capital of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria and the absolute number of Armenians being extensive – 13,394 Armenians according the Soviet Census of 1989 (The National Composition of Georgia 1991). Although Abashidze later started to promote himself as a tolerant leader to all ethnic and religious minorities in the region, his repressive manner of ruling Batumi has resulted in serious inequalities not only but certainly also for Armenians in the city.

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36 Officially elected but in fact appointed or, in the words of a former leader of the local opposition at that time, Mr. Berdzenishvili, by ‘illegally’ forcing the Ajarian Supreme Soviet to chose Aslan Abashidze as their chairman (interview 1999). Indeed, the Soviet constitution, still functioning at that time, stated that only deputies could be chosen as chairmen of Supreme Soviets, and Aslan Abashidze had never been a deputy (Darchiashvili 1996).

37 A fact which Abashidze himself stresses all the time. A statue of his grandfather has been placed in Batumi and a book on the history of Ajaria until 1921 seems to have been written based on the Abashidze family tree and even includes pictures of Aslan Abashidze with his grandchildren (Abashidze 1998).
3.6 Rural research areas: Sighnaghi, Akhaltsikhe and Javakheti

Sighnaghi is a district in the region of Kakheti in east Georgia (see Maps 3.1 and 3.2) where a small minority of Armenians lives among an overwhelming majority of Georgians, as shown in Figure 3.6. Sighnaghi has traditionally been inhabited by Georgians but at the end of the eighteenth century Armenians were encouraged to settle in the region by Georgian King Irakli II to compensate for its underpopulation and to develop Sighnaghi’s economy as Armenians were well known as merchants and artisans. According to an 1821 census of the clergy, the overwhelming majority of households in the city of Sighnaghi – the region’s main urban area – were Armenian: 2951 households were Armenian and 417 Georgian, and Armenian institutions were functioning in the region (Mamulov 1995). However, over time, the number of Armenians in Sighnaghi decreased, especially, as in Tbilisi, after the abolishment of serfdom. The public life of the region became completely Georgian and there are no Armenian institutions in Sighnaghi nowadays since their absolute number is small – just 746 according to the Soviet Census of 1989 (The National Composition of Georgia 1991).

While the region, and especially the fortified city of Sighnaghi, used to be a transit center for east Georgia in former times, ever since its incorporation into the Soviet Union the regional economy has been mainly based upon agriculture – viticulture, cereal production and animal breeding – winemaking, and some processing industries. However, as a result of the general economic depression in Georgia, only small parts of these sectors remain and have often become less productive; with most people in the region nowadays surviving on homegrown vegetables and livestock, as in the rest of rural Georgia.

Figure 3.6: The population of Sighnaghi (N=49,151)

![Pie chart showing the population of Sighnaghi]

Source: The National Composition of Georgia, 1991

The district of Akhaltsikhe is located in the south of Georgia in the region of Meskheti (Samtskhe)-Javakheti on the border with Turkey (see Maps 3.1 and 3.2). It is inhabited almost entirely by Georgians and Armenians, both making up about half of the

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38 The city of Akhaltsikhe is also the capital of the Meskheti (Samtskhe)-Javakheti region.
population (see Figure 3.7). This has not always been the case. Most Armenians settled in this region after 1828, when Russia captured Akhaltsikhe from the Ottomans. As the Russians did later in Batumi as well, after annexing Akhaltsikhe to their empire they persuaded the mostly Georgian-speaking Muslim population to leave the region and invited Armenian refugees from the Ottoman Empire to settle there instead.

The Armenians have been a major population group in Akhaltsikhe since then, and in 1944 became almost the only major ethnic group in the regional population besides Georgians as a result of the deportation of thousands of Meskhetians (Muslims who are perceived by some as Georgians and by others as Turks) to Uzbekistan. The overwhelming majority of the Armenians in Akhaltsikhe are adherents of the Orthodox religion as in the rest of Georgia but there are small communities of Catholic Armenians in the region too. These communities came into existence during Ottoman times after the French government convinced the Ottoman regime to spare Catholic subjects from forced Islamization – which was the normal fate of Christian subjects in the Ottoman Empire.

Figure 3.7: The population of Akhaltsikhe (N=54,822)

Since Akhaltsikhe was a rural area predominantly inhabited by peasants and, was also an important military-strategic region for the Russian Empire in their various wars against the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century, political life in Akhaltsikhe was largely in the hands of the Russian army, while the economic and cultural spheres were Georgian and Armenian. When Georgia became independent and was subsequently incorporated into the Soviet Union, all aspects of public life in Akhaltsikhe were ‘Georgianized’. Armenians played no particular role in the economic or political life of the region but as a result of their large numbers in the population had great cultural influence. This also describes the situation today. Since Akhaltsikhe is a rural area and living conditions are comparable to the situation in Sighnaghi – although recently a small and difficult accessible border crossing to Turkey has opened which will bring some economic advantages – Armenians as well as Georgians have few opportunities to

39 In total 92,307 Meskhetians were deported from Georgia (CIPDD 2002: 42), many of whom lived in Akhaltsikhe.
40 To this day, both Georgian and Armenian Catholics in Georgia are called ‘Francs’.
mobilize themselves. Only the proximity of Armenia might bring some advantages for the Armenians of Akhaltsikhe to organize as an ethnic group, although the road through Javakheti to the border with Armenia is in a deplorable state. (This is discussed further in the next section.) But their absolute number of 23,469 according to the 1989 Soviet census (The National Composition of Georgia 1991) is enough to set up ethnic institutions and they have extended control in the villages as these are separated by ethnicity and even religion. 41

Javakheti is also located in the region of Meskheti-Javakheti in the south of Georgia (see Maps 3.1 and 3.2) 42 but unlike the district of Akhaltsikhe, it actually borders Armenia and Georgians form only a small minority among the overwhelming majority of Armenians in the population (see Figure 3.8). Like Akhaltsikhe, the region of Javakheti was also incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1828 after a few centuries of Ottoman rule, and most Armenians came to the region as refugees from the Ottoman Empire, 43 including a small Catholic community.

Figure 3.8: The population of Javakheti (N=107,003)

![Pie chart showing the population of Javakheti](chart.png)

Source: The National Composition of Georgia, 1991

When the Meskhetians were deported from this region in 1944, the Armenians became almost the only inhabitants of Javakheti, apart from a small Georgian minority and a small Russian sectarian group. 44 Since Georgian independence, however, the

41 This is a common feature in Georgia. For example, there are Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, Georgian Orthodox and Georgian Catholic villages in Georgia.
42 It is actually made up of two districts: Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda. The town Akhalkalaki is considered its capital but as Javakheti is no separate administrative region, Akhalkalaki is not an official seat of regional government in Georgia.
43 There are still Turkish-speaking Armenian villages in Javakheti.
44 This Russian religious sect of ‘Dukhobors’ (which means ‘fighters for spirit and the truth’) originated in Russia at the end of the eighteenth century as a result of their opposition to the official authoritarian Russian Orthodox Church and its doctrine, as well as the dominant church institutions. They were persecuted by the church and the state, exiled to the steppes in southern Ukraine, and in 1839 relocated to Transcaucasia. In total 4097 Dukhobors settled in Javakheti at that time. (CIPDD 1999: 25-28, 63). In the Soviet Census of 1991, in total 3161 Russians were counted in the district of Ninotsminda, where all
majority of this latter group has emigrated to Russia. Public life in Javakheti, therefore, has always been almost entirely Armenian with many Armenian organizations and cultural institutions. Armenians control the economy and have considerable authority in local politics. In fact, the region is not under the full control of the central government in Tbilisi.

During the regime of the nationalistic Gamsakhurdi in the early 1990s, tensions mounted because Georgians perceived Javakheti as one of the ancient regions of Georgia, while Armenians in Javakheti not only oriented themselves towards their motherland Armenia, but also started to mobilize themselves in favor of autonomy for their region, while some were even in favor of uniting Javakheti with Armenia. Simultaneously, fierce competition emerged between Armenians and Georgians over the possession of houses and land in Javakheti. The Georgian societies of ‘Foundation of Merab Kostava’ and ‘Revival of Javakheti’ actively campaigned to relocate Georgians from the rest of Georgia to Javakheti, while the local Armenian societies of ‘Parvana’ and ‘Javakkh’ bought houses in the region for Armenian families arriving from Armenia and Russia, or coming from the region itself (Melikishvili 1996: 12). Both sides claimed to act out of humanitarian motives – helping people from regions afflicted by severe landslides, earthquakes or land shortages – but in fact it was clear that these actions were mainly motivated by ethnic arguments, since both Georgian and Armenian organizations only supported people of their own ethnicity. Ethnic tensions in Javakheti ran high in the first years of Georgian independence and even resulted in several serious incidents in the region. For instance, Armenians in Javakheti physically prevented three consecutive prefential candidates sent from Tbilisi from entering the region because they were Georgian; armed Armenians prevented the Georgian National Guard from coming on to their territory; and Georgian units loyal to the (then) former president Gamsakhurdi were disarmed in Javakheti (Guretski 1998: 5). Moreover, the situation in Javakheti was exacerbated by the war in Abkhazia in the early 1990s: firstly because anti-Armenian sentiments were provoked by Armenians in Abkhazia supporting the Abkhaz, and, secondly, because Georgians feared that Russia, which supported not only Abkhaz but also Ossetian separatism, could instigate an analogous conflict in Javakheti (Guretski 1998: 5).

The severe tensions started to ease when the general situation in the country began to stabilize from 1995 onwards, with the civil wars in Georgia coming to a halt, the central authorities starting to regain control – especially after the presidential and parliamentary elections of that year – and a liberal government beginning to develop. The struggle for power in Javakheti subsided: forced attempts on the part of the Georgians to incorporate Javakheti into the country diminished and Armenian demands for Javakheti autonomy became less manifest.

Life in Javakheti is difficult. Besides the general problems presented by the economic depression and the bad conditions for production that all peripheral rural areas in Georgia have to deal with such as long distances to a market and the lack of transport, good roads and other means of communication, the situation in Javakheti is complicated by its harsh climate and the postponement of privatization. The central government has long put off the privatization of the border lands, fearing that they would fall into the

Dukhobor villages are located (National Composition of Georgia 1991).
hands of ‘foreigners’ (members of ethnic minorities who make up a large part of the population in many of the border regions in Georgia). As a result, the kolkhoz farms have fallen apart while hardly any private farms have been established, a fact which is especially disastrous in a region with a climate that is only marginal for agricultural production. Javakheti is on a plateau at an altitude of 2000 meters with long and severe winters during which many villages are cut off from the outside world for several months. As in other rural areas, most people in Javakheti survive on the products from their own garden and livestock, although income is generated as well by temporary work in Russia and by the Russian military base in the region.

However, Armenians have relatively good opportunities for mobilizing themselves in Javakheti since they live compactly as an ethnic group; are concentrated in their own villages; are the overwhelming majority of the population in the region; are a large group in absolute terms – 97,056 according to the Soviet census of 1989 (The National Composition of Georgia 1991) – and, maybe even more importantly, they are close to their motherland Armenia which is willing to support them. In fact, the focus of Armenians in Javakheti is mainly on Armenia: most buses from the region go to Armenia, most children go to Armenia for their studies, the closest and most frequently used hospital and airport are in Armenia, and many Armenians even call Yerevan their capital, while speaking of ‘going to Georgia’ when they travel to Tbilisi.

3.7 Conclusion

Armenians have a long history on the lands that currently belong to the Georgian state, having lived for many centuries in the capital Tbilisi as a (former) economic and politically dominant bourgeoisie, and in the other regions of this study as more recent settlers from the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century. Yet the Armenians in Georgia have become a powerless and non-indigenous ethnic minority, often even looked upon as ‘guests’ in Georgia, as a result of the growing national consciousness among Georgians during the Tsarist rule; the mainly Georgian nationalistic rule in the first independent Republic of Georgia; the institutionalization of Georgians as the dominant group in Georgia during the Soviet era; and the triumph of Georgian nationalism after the declaration of independence in 1991. This has been aggravated by the weakness of the current Georgian state, with high levels of crime and corruption, and the political system being largely based on networks and nepotism.

There are significant differences with regard to the various regions of Armenian residence in Georgia, five of which are included in this research project. Armenians in the cities of Tbilisi and Batumi are just one of the various ethnic minorities living there among a majority of Georgians. Armenians in the three selected rural regions, on the other hand, make up the regional population with mostly Georgians but in varying proportions. From accounting for an extremely small part of the population in Sighnaghi (smaller than the Armenian groups in the cities), they form about half of the population in Akhaltsikhe and the overwhelming majority of the population in Javakheti. These last two rural regions are close to and bordering their motherland, Armenia (see overview in Figure 3.9).
### Figure 3.9: Overview of the research regions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Regional Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Armenians</td>
<td>Georgians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tbilisi</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batumi</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sighnaghi</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akhaltsikhe</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Javakheti</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>