Uncertain divides: religion, ethnicity, and politics in the Georgian borderlands

Pelkmans, M.

Citation for published version (APA):
CONCLUSIONS

Borders in Time and Space

Borders are created, sustained and altered as much “from the inside out as the outside in” (Driessen 1998: 99). A view from the border highlights the contradictions and imperfections in the grand narratives of nation and state. It shows that the rhetoric of the state becomes problematic at its edges and that along borders nationalizing policies are regularly defeated, ignored or redirected. Border studies show that national identity does not simply expand “from the top down and from the center outward” to use Sahlin's phrasing (1998: 32), and have called attention to the critical role that borderlands and their inhabitants play in the construction and persistence of modern nation states. As students of borders have also noted, the fact that the ideals of the nation state are contested at its borders may also be the precise reason for vigorous attempts by the state to ‘tame’ its borders and to intensify the dissemination of its ideologies. The changing balance and interlocking of these characteristics – that borders tend to escape state control and therefore attract close attention of power centers – are crucial in understanding the nature of the divide between (Soviet) Georgia and Turkey as well as the social and cultural identities that formed around it.

From the perspective of Soviet authorities the border was a dividing line between socialism and capitalism, Georgians and Turks, and between atheism and Islam. But in the 1920s when the international border was delimited this was clearly not how things looked on the ground. At that time inhabitants of Ajaria defined their social identities in reference to locality, religion and family, often in flagrant opposition to ideas about the ‘Georgian nation’ of which they were considered to be a part. Well into the Soviet period the inhabitants of Ajaria paid little attention to the actual state border; they maintained close spiritual, economic, educational and marital ties with the population of neighboring regions in Turkey. The contrasting dimensions of the international border as perceived (and designed) in power centers were by and large absent in local social life. As Baud and Van Schendel argued, “Although [borders] appear on maps in deceptively precise forms, they reflect, at least initially, merely the mental images of politicians, lawyers and intellectuals” (1997: 211). However, the initial discrepancy between the projections of the state and the ideas and practices of border dwellers changed in subsequent decades. To a large extent the projected images of elites became reality for the people living in the Georgian border region.

Socialist rule transformed life along the border, often in unintended ways. The socialist ideals of state-atheism and Soviet modernity as well as the Soviet question of nationality obtained specific meanings when managed by national and
regional elites. In the Georgian border region state-atheism provided the means to combat ‘Muslim’ lifestyles of Ajarians, progress came to be equated with integration in Soviet-Georgian culture, and ‘the development of nations’ came to imply that Ajarians and Lazi had to denounce the ‘inauthentic’ elements of their culture and realign themselves with the larger Georgian nation. One would expect such ‘imposed’ ideas to have evaporated with the collapse of the Soviet state. However, the Ajarian case shows that the religious and ethnic dimensions of the Soviet border retained their relevance and even tended to become more rigid as they entered the postsocialist era.

In this concluding chapter I return to the issue of how state borders and cultural boundaries are related. Although cultural boundaries do not need to be spatially grounded and although identities cannot be framed by fences and border posts, these identities may form around and in reaction to the rigidities and opportunities posed by territorial borders. Here I will discuss the patterns observed in Ajaria. First, I will review how changes in the permeability and closure of the border came about and how this limited and shaped the possibilities for social and cultural identification. Second, I will discuss the effects of seven decades of Soviet rule on processes of identification, arguing that the complex relations that unfolded between border dwellers and the state resulted in the adoption of primordial views of culture, ethnicity and religion by the inhabitants of the region. Third, I will examine the fate of these primordial views after the demise of socialism and the opening of the border, arguing that the destabilization of socialist space and the new cross-border interactions tended to harden the ‘fixed’ identities. In short, this study shows that although the Soviet period is increasingly dismissed from local historical discourse, some of the ‘Soviet inventions’ have been reinforced as important identity markers in the unstable postsocialist environment.

The rigidity of the Iron Curtain

Even when state borders are territorially fixed, their borderlands remain in a state of flux (Driessen 1998: 101; Douglass 1998: 88). These fluctuations in the wider border region have an impact on the nature of the state border both with regard to its physical permeability and ideological rigidity. Border regions are often described as places where national rhetoric is challenged and where the political penetration of the state is limited. Moreover, according to this view, state borders tend to be permeable despite efforts of the state to strictly control movement across it. The processes on the Soviet border have, however, been markedly different from such depictions. Here the collision of two opposing states and the interaction of state representatives with the border dwellers unleashed powers that made the border virtually impermeable and local life subject to strict control by the state. Consequently, the currently fashionable approach to treat the two sides of a border as an organic whole that differs from the respective centers (Baud and Van Schendel 1997:
216), has only limited applicability to the border that is discussed here. To clarify the specifics of this particular divide I will briefly reiterate border characteristics that are often mentioned in the literature.

Border studies have rightly challenged static depictions of national borders by drawing attention to the discrepancy between the rhetoric of central authorities and the actual practices of border dwellers. Whereas central authorities usually present their borders as inviolable dividing lines border dwellers frequently defeat the geographical and ideological dimensions of borders. This suggests that it may be more fruitful to speak of a “zone of interaction rather than a divide” (Driessen 1992: 190). The discrepancy between border rhetoric and actual behaviour can be detected within state structures itself as well. State authorities may claim to control movement across the border, but in practice often abstain from exercising such control because of economic or strategic interests (Kearney 1998).¹ In short, whereas national authorities promote the view that the border is a line where different nations, states or civilization face each other, in depth studies reveal that the border is rather a zone where these ‘entities’ overlap. Related to this discussion is the argument that political penetration is often relatively weak at the edges of the state. In the words of Kopytoff there are limits to the “political penetration that the center could achieve both in geographical extent, and locally, in depth” (1987: 29). In some cases this weak hold of border regions may be simply due to their marginal economic relevance or geographical distance, in other cases it is the existence of lines of political demarcation that make border regions almost per definition difficult to ‘tame’ (Carsten 1998: 232). Effective control of the authorities in border regions is often hindered, because its inhabitants can manipulate and lean upon networks that crosscut official borders (Blok 1995). The inhabitants can escape state forces by crossing the border or can shift allegiances to get the best out of the respective states.

The often observed ambiguity of state policies concerning border maintenance, the discrepancy between border rhetoric and everyday practice, and the contested nature of state influence hardly applied to the (Soviet) Georgian – Turkish border. Here, the subversive actions of border dwellers prompted further fortifications of the divide and motivated the state to intensify attempts to mold the region into its own image. The ability and willingness of the Soviet state to exercise brutal force against its citizens was one reason why this border lost the flexibility and Janus-faced nature often ascribed to borders. It is important to stress though that this border closure was not a straightforward and one-sided exercise of power. The actions and reactions of border dwellers played a crucial role in developing the ultimate rigidity of the border.

When the border was initially delineated in the 1920s, the people living in its vicinity were not deeply affected by it. Up to the late 1930s the Ajarians maintained

¹ Kearney discusses the discrepancy between state rhetoric of border containment and the de-facto practice of keeping the Mexican-American border open to ‘illegal’ migration. This contradiction, he explains, stems from the fact that while cheap labor is desired, the persons in whom this labor is embodied are not desired (1998: 125).
extensive ties with economic and religious centers in Turkey. The Lazi of Sarpi continued to marry Turkish citizens, to work their land across the border and to engage in small-scale cross-border trading. In some ways at least the border dwellers managed to make use of the differences between both sides of the political divide. The possibility to do so stemmed partly from the ambiguous attitudes of the state towards the border and its inhabitants. The Soviet leadership had ambitions to reclaim the territory which the Czarist Empire had lost to Turkey after World War I and had therefore an interest in keeping the border permeable for propaganda and intelligence activities. Even after the border was closed by the authorities in 1937 the villagers in Sarpi employed various strategies to maintain contact with the other side. Turkish citizens who married into Sarpi retained their Turkish passports, others tried to maintain contact by singing and wailing. But these activities backfired on the villagers. Paradoxically, through their subversive actions the border dwellers further defined the limits of the possible.

The local population was simultaneously instrumental to, and deeply suspected by, state authorities. This combination of instrumentality and suspicion resulted in extreme anxiety of central authorities about its border and the ongoing surveillance of the local inhabitants. When ambitions to reclaim part of Turkish territory were abandoned after World War II, the state no longer had any interest in keeping the border permeable. The border changed from a contact zone where the influence of the state was contested and where the local population retained some negotiating power into an ideological divide which was fortified with military personnel, controlling mechanisms and check points. This border impermeability was not simply achieved by decisions made from above. Instead it was a combination of state force, a culture of secrecy and fear, and the actions of local inhabitants that sealed the border. The unpredictability of the deportations and executions carried out by the state eventually had the result that villagers turned away from the border. The border dwellers literally avoided looking in the direction of Turkey and were active in civilian border militias that tried to detect and detain illegal border crossers. The villagers cooperated closely with the military, who in turn were equally anxious to show complete control over the border by placing new fences and detection systems. The system of surveillance functioned, much like Foucault’s depiction of Bentham’s panopticon, as a as a network of relations that worked from above and below as well as laterally, a network “that ‘holds’ the whole together and traverses it in its entirety with effects of power that derive from one another: supervisor, perpetually supervised” (1979: 175).

Between the 1950s and 1980s the border was, at least from the perspective of local inhabitants, no longer a place where two worlds met, but a region where two worlds ended. The physical impermeability was accompanied by the active involvement of the state in the process of rewriting and reshaping the history and culture of the region. Moreover, these ‘impositions’ did not remain external schemata detached
from actual life but instead entered local life. The grounding of these ‘impositions’ provides answers to why identities remained fixed after the socialist collapse.

Frozen histories and fixed cultures

A persistent view in Western discourse, in the media as well as academia, is that Soviet rule held pre-Soviet identities in cold storage. In essence, this ‘cold storage’ view asserts that previously held religious, ethnic and national identities were repressed – but not eradicated – by communist rule and that as soon as the ‘Soviet freeze’ ended the pre-existing loyalties and tensions returned with renewed force. For example, Manuel Castells writes that “Soviet experience is a testimony to the perdurability of nations beyond, and despite, the state” (1997: 41). Another social scientist wrote in *Annual Review of Anthropology* that state policies “may have changed the physical circumstances of people’s lives, but they appear as a veneer above something one might describe as more profound and enduring.” He continued by indicating that the current cultural activity that is witnessed throughout the former Soviet Union suggests “the reappearance of a culture that lay buried beneath generations of Sovietization” (Wolfe 2000: 200). The problem with such a primordial perspective is that, as many others have already argued, it attributes immutable cores to culture and ethnicity that operate almost out of time, unaffected by historical processes.

Partly in reaction to the ‘cold storage’ view, several social scientists have argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union left behind a cultural, social and political ‘vacuum’ that was filled with invented or reinvented histories. These social scientists see the rise of the primacy of cultural identity in the former Soviet Union as a way to ‘overcome socialism,’ and the involved ‘inventions of histories’ as strategic responses of elite groups to create and promote new national identities (Rupnik 1996: 53-54). The attraction of the pre-Soviet past is thus explained by the ‘ideological vacuum’ that arose after communism. The danger in this kind of explanation is that it presents the new era as an absolute new beginning, a view that violates the complex flow of memory, community and culture in which people live their lives (cf. Lampland 2000: 210). Instead of assuming or denying continuities between pre-Soviet and post-Soviet forms of identity, as the ‘cold storage’ and ‘vacuum’ theories do respectively, it is crucial to analyze how these forms of identity were shaped and modified to fit changing social and political contexts.

The Ajarian paradox is that its inhabitants did not on the whole ‘return’ to pre-Soviet identities, yet at the same they mobilized pre-Soviet history to give meaning to the present. Many inhabitants of Khulo did not ‘return’ to Islam – the

---

2 Phrases like “the question of identity is clearly the most insistent to have surfaced after the long freeze” (Hooson 1994: 140), or arguments that describe conflict in the Caucasus as the “opening of old ethnic wounds” (Zverev 1996: 13) also clearly point to aspects of the ‘cold storage’ view.
religion of their parents and grandparents – but instead converted to Christianity and partly justified this action by presenting it as a continuation of the missionary work that Saint Andrew commenced in the first century AD. The Lazi of Sarpi did not attempt to reconstruct how their community looked like before Soviet rule, but resorted instead to much deeper pasts. Their ‘Colchian origins’ and the presumed union of Lazi and Georgians in classical times were crucial aspects in their discussions about what being Laz entailed. In Batumi, the ruling elite drew credibility for its claims to build a future of abundance by bolstering images of a 19th century European Batumi. These ‘European’ images draw attention away from the economic and political asymmetries at least partly produced by the ruling elite and moreover, they fed on the dream of the region’s re-connection to Europe. The ‘inventions of tradition’ indicate the richness of the past as a source for creating a meaningful present, but this should not prevent us from exploring how past and present are connected.

The ‘pre-Soviet’ referents for identity had their own genealogies; they were, more often than not, actively produced and popularized during the Soviet period. Indeed, I suggest that the pre-Soviet is important as a reference for identity not despite Soviet rule but, on the contrary, because of the Soviet need to classify, categorize and construct its population along historical and territorial lines. To reiterate an argument that has been developed in earlier chapters, the attitude of the Soviet state to questions of culture and ethnicity reverberated between two trends – one to diversity, the other to uniformity. In public speeches, communist leaders rarely failed to pay lip service to the Leninist expectation that Soviet rule would result in the creation of a distinct Soviet people, but it was clear with time that the government was not looking to erase all ethnic or cultural differences. ‘Cold storage’ theories misrepresent the Soviet state by taking at face value its stated intent to create Homo Sovieticus and by ignoring that this intent existed within a plethora of other official ideals and policies. Thus, Castells (1997) argument that the “most powerful state” failed in constructing a homo sovieticus and that therefore ‘nation’ and ‘state’ are separate entities, is close to meaningless. Instead of fighting nationalism and ethnicity as organizing principles, Soviet rule attempted to mold cultural expressions and referents in specific ways. As Chris Hann argued, “the discourses and practices of socialism and nationalism have often proved compatible” (1993), not least because the involved identity politics were modified and changed while traveling from the federal center to local settings.

The stated intention of many cultural policies of the Soviet regime was that cultural manifestations could be “national in form” while being “socialist in content.” That is, new rituals and ceremonies as well as literary and scholarly publications were allowed to express ‘national’ or ‘ethnic’ characteristics, but these characteristics should be imbedded in the more important moral messages about the ‘universal’ laws of history, the brotherhood of nations and the leading role of the working class. This combination of ‘nationalist’ and ‘socialist’ rhetoric materialized in at least two different ways. As was pointed out in the discussion of the Colkhoba festival, local
actors could appropriate ‘socialist’ aspects to dress-up expressions of ethnic and national identity. In hindsight, they described the socialist aspects as obligatory formal procedures that had corrupted the ‘authentic’ traditions. But whereas in some instances the combination of ‘nationalist’ and ‘socialist’ was employed to enhance local expressions of cultural identity, this same combination was also instrumental in the enforcement and legitimization of nationalist assimilation policies. The Soviet ideal of state atheism was frequently used by regional and national authorities to combat cultural forms or expressions that were perceived as incompatible with Georgian nationality as well as to rewrite the region’s history along explicit Georgian lines.

In short, the ‘nationalist forms’ did not reappear from a Soviet freeze, but were actively shaped during the seventy years of socialism. The point I wish to make is that although the inhabitants of Ajaria created their identities they did so under the constraints posed by socialist rule and the limits set by an impermeable Iron Curtain. When, in the wake of the Soviet collapse, people reached back to images of a pre-Soviet past, they drew on messages of ethnic and cultural primordiality with which they were thoroughly familiar. People’s dismissal of the Soviet past and the return to ‘pre-Soviet identities’ then, does not illustrate as Castells claims that “national identity and state are historically and analytically distinct” (1997: 33), but instead that they act upon each other in intricate and unexpected ways.

As the Soviet Union recedes into the past and its messages are increasingly dismissed as a historical anomaly by local elites and Western observers alike, the impact of the Soviet period on cultural formations remains poorly understood (cf. Bonnett 2002). This dissertation tried to show how life went on along the Soviet border, and moreover how the inhabitants shaped their lives in interaction with the policies and ideals of the state. As such it drew attention to the ‘hidden histories’ of people who lived on the edge of the Soviet Union, histories that are now increasingly obscured by the need to ‘freeze’ or ‘forget’ the Soviet past. What this means is that although this dissertation aimed to show that people are as much products as producers of history, it did so cognizant of the fact that being a product of Soviet history – to whatever degree – is not something inhabitants of Ajaria will easily admit to.

In Ajarian publications that appeared after 1991 the period between the 1920s and 1980s is absent. Historical textbooks, political pamphlets, clerical histories, as well as books on urban development and architecture, by and large omit the seventy years of socialist rule. Soviet history is left out and ignored, reduced to a few sentences that textually bridge seven decades. One reason why the Soviet past is dismissed has just been mentioned – the Soviet past shows too clearly the limits and incongruities of primordial ideas about identity. Freezing the socialist past is not, however, something that is limited to discourses of ethnic and cultural identity. As Verdery has argued, the process of “writing the communist past out of history” is part of the political project to put local history back on the ‘progressive track’ of capitalism (1999: 112; 1996). Socialism is often understood as a deviance of ‘natural’
western history, as a case of ‘misdevelopment’ running into a dead end (Wedel 2001:21). The logical consequence of this perspective is, as also noted by Verdery, that the societies involved first have to move backward, to rid themselves of socialism in order to return to the ‘progressive’ road to capitalism (1996: 204-205). The practice of the political elite and the Christian clergy of presenting the 1990s as a period of ‘resurrection’ and ‘revival’ reveals that they see it as a period that will reconnect the region and its inhabitants to the ‘normal course of history.’ This normal course of history ties in with dominant ideas about the pre-Soviet – it connects the region tightly with Christian history and implies a ‘return to Europe.’

Because the communist past can no longer be presented as a stage in the ‘development’ of the region, it is left out of historical narratives. The Soviet past is also potentially destabilizing. Put simply, the Soviet past can not be presented as an unambiguous period of repression, because the memories of compliance are still too fresh. This is true for elite groups as well as for many ordinary citizens. People adjusted to the rigidities of the Soviet regime and developed their own ways of dealing with its structures. In other words, they were not ‘outside the system’ but tightly embedded in its structures. Present-day leaders used to have significant positions in the Soviet state apparatus, but now have to legitimize their rule by stressing difference with Soviet rule. Villagers in Sarpi actively participated in the maintenance of the border, but now feel the need to present their experience as instances of unambiguous victimhood. The Soviet past is discomforting. It needs to remain frozen until it has become ‘a foreign country’ which can be studied and analyzed without undermining the sense of self.

**Distant neighbors and immediate dangers**

Soviet rule did not simply repress ‘culture’ or hold identity in a grip of permafrost, but instead provided tools to fix and channel ideas about culture in ways that remain influential after the collapse of the Soviet state. The discussion so far has illustrated how peoples’ frames of reference changed. It has shown why Ajarians were thus likely to adopt Christian-Georgian identities, why Lazi stressed similarities with the Georgian nation and why inhabitants of Batumi perceived their city as European.

However, this historical analysis does not explain why, *in the border region*, these ideas are now so vigorously defended. I suggest three reasons that may explain why the ideas that had become dominant during socialism were reinforced after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of the border. First, the recent changes made the coexistence of different identities problematic. Second, the new cross-border contacts involved confrontations with unexpected ‘difference’ and unwanted ‘sameness’ which reinforced the need to set boundaries between self and other. Third,
the dominant ideas were reinforced to preserve the dreams of modernity that were challenged by the realities of postsocialist change.

Although public life in Ajaria had become well attuned to Soviet Georgian ideals, ‘hidden ambiguities’ remained. For example, though Islam disappeared from the public domain it remained important as a personal haven. Similarly, the Lazi of Sarpi were effectively integrated in the wider Georgian society but at the same time they continued to value their ties to the Lazi in Turkey and they looked forward to times when contact could be reestablished. After the collapse of the Soviet Union these ‘hidden ambiguities’ initially seemed to enrich the available options to combine and construct new forms of social and cultural identity. Indeed, the serial conversions of Ajarians in the early 1990s, the numerous visits between cross-border relatives right after the border opening as well as the initial opportunities for transnational trade, all seemed to point to hybridizations of culture that transcended the rigidities of the Soviet border. But with time, instead of a hybridization of cultures a hardening of cultural and social boundaries came about. The dominant ideas that had crystallized during the preceding decades were challenged by the new visibility of ‘hidden ambiguities,’ as this confrontation undermined their cultivated naturalness.

As Stuart Hall wrote, “the concept of identity does not signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change; the bit of the self which remains always-already ‘the same’, identical to itself across time” (1996: 3). Nevertheless, cultural, religious and ethnic discourses derive their strength from the belief that such stable cores do exist. The return of hidden ambiguities in the 1990s posed a threat to religious, ethnic and national identities because it drew attention to the absence of these ‘cores.’ The imperfections and ambiguities of the Iron Curtain brought unwanted connotations to the center of attention. This demanded clarification on what it meant to be a Muslim or a Christian, what the difference was between Turks and Lazi, and how a category like ‘European’ connected to Ajaria. The construction of new boundaries can consequently be seen as efforts to purify identity and to conceal those aspects of identity that do not possess a stable and timeless core.

Cultural identity is threatened most severely when challenges are unexpected and come from what is near (Blok 2001: 123). This study showed that it is not difference per se, but the social context within which people confront difference or sameness that matters. With the reappearance of Islam in the public domain, the assumed differences between Ajaria and Turkey turned out to be blurred. This provoked the intelligentsia and political elites of Ajaria to intensify its claims about the Christian and Georgian roots of the region. When the inhabitants of Sarpi re-established contact with their cross-border kin the assumed shared ‘Laz identity’ turned out to be absent, which motivated the Sarpians to reinforce their ideas about a ‘pure’ Laz identity different from ideas that existed across the border. The changes in the relationship between social actors made the experienced difference and resem-
blance immediate and problematic, activating mechanisms that triggered new social tensions.

The ambiguities also tended to endanger ideas that people had about their future. Before the Soviet collapse inhabitants of Ajaria saw themselves as more ‘developed’ than their Turkish neighbors and Batumians thought of their city as a typical European town. The breakdown of the local economy and the realization that living standards across the border were higher was frustrating and problematic because it undermined the ideas Ajarians had of themselves in relation to Turkey. The discrepancies did not automatically mean that people abandoned their dreams. The dream about modernity and progress was too precious to be abandoned. Indeed, the dream was vital in dealing with impoverishment and economic insecurities. Moreover, the dream was used by local elites to legitimize their rule. In order to rectify the disparity between ‘dream’ and ‘reality,’ the dislocations of postsocialism were often blamed on the ‘immediate other,’ notably Turkey.

Though identity is always multi-layered, the possibilities for combining identities depend to a large extent on the social and political environment. Certain aspects of identity may gain primacy and thereby have repercussions for other aspects of identity. Moreover, since identities are mutually constitutive, changes in the definition of one aspect of identity will have repercussions on other aspects of identity. The renewed importance of cultural identity creates its own contradictions and rigidities. After socialism people had to reposition themselves vis-a-vis religion and ethnicity and straddle the connection between those categories. My informants often needed to make unambiguous choices concerning where they did and did not belong. In elaborating on perceived and experienced differences they also set new social and cultural boundaries.

The ideas that were so vigorously defended – the dreams about the west, the Georgian national ideal, Christian roots – had not been part of communist ideology, but they had developed as a consequence of Soviet rule. The ideas had become part and parcel of everyday life, of how people went about defining themselves and others. The disappearance of these ‘Soviet certainties’ meant that people were forced to reconsider the very basis of self. When religion returned in the public sphere, when ethnic kin from across the border appeared on one’s doorstep and when ideas about progress were challenged by the realities of post-socialist change, combinations of identities became increasingly problematic. The imagined primal unity of Georgian nationality and Christianity was challenged by a renewed visibility of Islam in Ajaria. The Laz identity that developed throughout the Soviet period tended to be ‘contaminated’ by Turkish influences. The ideas about modernity were shattered with the actual opening of markets and the disillusion about goods and economic opportunities. Answers to these challenges have been found by suppressing or denouncing certain layers of identity. What happened in all three cases was that the imperfections or incongruities of previous identifications were brought to the center of attention, thereby challenging previously held notions and moral maps.
Uncertain divides

The nature of the Georgian – Turkish border has changed over the last decade. The oppositions between Islam and state-atheism, between capitalism and socialism, and between NATO and Warsaw Pact have disappeared from official rhetoric and political practice. Instead the governments of Georgia and Turkey display a favorable attitude towards each other and repeatedly express the need for cooperation in the new transnational economy. Changes in government rhetoric and renewed border permeability do not mean, however, that the contrasting dimensions have simply evaporated. Although the border is easier to cross than before, it continues to regulate movement and communication in ways that could not have been anticipated beforehand. In the midst of new perceived dangers the inhabitants create new divides, fortify them with stereotypes and solidify them with ethnicized versions of culture and religion. These processes have the paradoxical effect of making various dimensions of the Iron Curtain even more impermeable than during the Soviet period.

The fortification of identity offers an important antidote to views of hybridity and intermingling on and across state borders. It suggests that in a world that is characterized by transnational contact and the absence of grand ideological divides between states, it may be cultural boundaries which become more rigid and less permeable. This study thus confirms the hypothesis of Gupta and Ferguson who noted that when “actual places become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient” (1992: 10). Ironically in a situation where the border regime has relaxed and Cold War enmities ceased to exist, the inhabitants have not been able to manage the differences that arose between them. Instead, the Cold War border has now more truly become a divide between Islam and Christianity, Georgians and Turks, and Asia and Europe. I suggest that the largest paradox of the Soviet border is exactly this – the Soviet Union did not effectively erase its borderland ambiguities, but its fall has sparked incentives to fortify and essentialize the cultural boundaries it produced.

Instead of seeing the situation that emerged after the Soviet Union collapsed as a ‘vacuum’ in which new ideologies could freely compete, it is more useful to see the 1990s as a phase in which the restructuring of ideology and power allowed for specific ways of identification. The ‘imposed’ national, cultural and ethnic dimensions are, at least for the moment, instrumental in defending identities and in holding on to the dreams of a better future. Moreover, the prevailing ideas about Christianity, Georgian nationality and modernity tie in with the ideals and the interests of the state. But as the nature of the state itself is changing it is uncertain how stable the cultural divides will prove in the future. As people’s lives are increasingly detached from the structures of the state, loyalties and frames of references may shift and new borders of identity will consequently be drawn.