

NUMBER 64

SOVIET GEORGIA IN THE SEVENTIES

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Prepared for the conference on the Soviet Caucasus
co-sponsored by the U.S. International Communication
Agency, and the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian
Studies, The Wilson Center, May 15, 1979

Soviet Georgia in the Seventies: A Briefing Paper

Officially the nationality policy of the Soviet government has in the last decade and a half cautiously referred to the "objective social forces" which are leading to a "drawing together" (sblizhenie) of the minority nationalities of the country. While the more assimilationist term sliianie ("complete merger") employed in Khrushchev's time has been eliminated from official statements about the future of Soviet minorities, nevertheless, party theoreticians still proclaim that the "construction of socialism" in the USSR has led to the emergence of a "new historical community of people, the Soviet people." Indeed this phrase has been enshrined in the new Soviet constitution adopted on October 7, 1977.¹ Thus, as the 1970s draw to a close Soviet policy continues to stand for the eventual assimilation of the minorities into a multi-national conglomerate, though specifically rejecting artificial prodding by party and state institutions and officials.

It is the contention of this paper that the party's policy of "benign neglect" has not resulted in the desired goal of greater assimilation, at least not in Georgia, and that evidence points to a greater consolidation and cohesion of the Georgian nationality in recent years than had been seen in the past. The assimilationist thrusts of ideology and modernization have not created a Georgian nationality more receptive to outside cultural and linguistic influences but just the opposite. Other tendencies, which in this paper will be referred to as "re-nationalization," have contributed to a greater sense of separateness and the resurgence of ethnic nationalism, both official and extra-legal.

While the "modernizing" policies of the Soviet state have created in Georgia a significantly more industrialized and urbanized society with the accompanying rise in literacy, social mobility, and material well-being, these processes have had a contradictory influence on the ethnic cohesion and consciousness of Georgians. New modern institutions had the dual effect of opening the advances of western and Russian learning to Georgians and other minorities as well as raising the literary abilities of these peoples in their own languages. For Georgia the years of Soviet rule have witnessed the creation of a technical intelligentsia and civil service and involved the gradual re-establishment of Georgian political control and ethnic dominance over their historical homeland. Whereas before the revolution Russian officials and Armenian businessmen had held the most important posts both in government and in the economy while Georgians remained on the fringe of the emerging urban society both politically and culturally, after the fall of the Menshevik republic Georgians steadily displaced the Armenian middle class and began to establish their own demographic and cultural hegemony in the towns of Georgia, especially in their own capital where they had long been second-class citizens. This trend toward ever greater Georgian political control over Georgia has continued unabated to the present day, though that control is exercised within the limits established by the central party leadership.

Besides the growth of political control, Georgians have experienced demographic consolidation within their republic. The percentage of ethnic Georgians in Georgia has increased from 61.4% in 1939 to 66.8% in 1970, while the percentage of Armenians in the republic has fallen from 11.7% to 9.7% and the percentage of Russians had dropped from 8.7% to 8.5%.² Georgia has the distinction of being the only union republic in which there has been an absolute fall in the number of Russians between 1959 and 1970.³

Yet another demographic datum is worth noting. While their republic is less homogeneous in population than either the Armenian (in which 88% of the population was Armenian in 1959, and 88.6% in 1970) or the Azerbaijani (67% Azerbaijani in 1959, 73.8% in 1970), the Georgians are much more likely than any major Soviet nationality to live within the confines of their national republic. A startling 97% of Georgians lived in Georgia in 1970 with another 2% in the RSFSR, whereas their neighbors, the Armenians, had the lowest percentage (60%) of any titular ethnic group living in its home republic; and the Azerbaijanis had 86% of their ethnic group living in their republic.⁴ Georgians, thus, are a people content to remain in Georgia, and their insignificant out-migration seems to argue for the cohesiveness of the Georgian nationality.

This cohesiveness is also supported by evidence on inter-marriage and bilingualism. Soviet statistics are strangely silent on the question of intermarriage, but Professor Wesley Fisher has managed to discover some figures for the year 1969. In that year 93.5% of Georgians who married wed endogamously, and only 6.5% intermarried.⁵ These percentages are bettered only by the Muslim nationalities. As for bilingualism, Georgians showed high percentages in the population with no fluency in Russian. According to the 1970 and the calculations of Professor Brian Silver, 91.4% of rural Georgians were not fluent in Russian, while 63% of urban Georgians fell into the same category.⁶ Looking at the figures for the capital city, Tbilisi, we find that even in the metropole 56.4% of Georgians were not fluent in Russian and only 42.6% could command fluency.⁷ The figure for Georgians in the capital city unable to express themselves fluently in Russian is a higher percentage than that for any of the other titular nationalities in the capital cities of their republics, with the single

exception of the Armenians in Erevan (63.1% of whom are not fluent in Russian).⁸ The Armenian case is anomalous, however, because large numbers of Erevantsis have immigrated from abroad. Thus, the figures for Georgians again show little tendency toward assimilation through the acquisition of Russian. Indeed, a quite clear resistance to learning Russian is evident.

The demographic, political, and cultural re-nationalization of the Georgians was well under way during the Stalinist period, but tight police controls on local party officials prevented the development of any local, national autonomy or nationalism. Instances of resistance to central authority were dealt with harshly. But with the fall of Beria in Moscow and the establishment of a new party leadership under Mzhavanadze in Tbilisi in September 1953, the power of the local party began to grow. For nineteen years Mzhavanadze and his closest associates enjoyed power in Georgia and usually found the needed support from the center. The new authority of the party, combined with Khrushchev's policy of economic decentralization, allowed for misuse of that power on the local level. In the 1950s-1960s the Georgian political elite increased its hold over political, economic, and cultural institutions in the republic, and while ruling in Moscow's name, actually offered a low-level resistance to policies from the center which attempted to drive the Georgians too fast in economic development or cultural assimilation.

Local political control and ethnic favoritism manifested itself in the Georgian economy with the growth of a vast network of illegal economic operations and exchanges which produced great private wealth for some Georgians while their republic grew insignificantly according to official statistics. Between 1960 and 1971, Georgia's national income grew by only 102%, the third lowest rate in the USSR.⁹ Yet in 1970 the average Georgian

savings account was nearly twice as large as the Soviet average.¹⁰ At the same time the educational system was turning out enormous numbers of specialists who avoided work assignments yet managed to live quite well. Georgia by the early 1970s had the highest percentage of the population in institutions of higher education of any major nationality.¹¹ Yet continually the press reported that thousands of graduates of high schools and university in Tbilisi had missed classes and were unwilling to accept work.¹²

The notion of "Georgia for Georgians" which seemed to prevail in the Mzhavanadze years had sinister consequences for the third of the republic's population which was not ethnically Georgian. National autonomy in Georgia had come to mean, not only resistance to central Russian authorities, but also the exercise of local power against the unrepresented local minorities. Higher education in Georgia, for example, had become the prerogative of Georgians, and other nationalities found it difficult to enter schools of higher learning. In 1969-1970, Georgians, who made up about 67% of the republic's population, accounted for 82.6% of the students in higher education, while Russians with 8.5% of the population made up only 6.8% of these students; Armenians fared even worse: with 9.7% of the republic's population, Armenians accounted for only 3.6% of the students in advanced courses.¹³ Clearly Georgian control of the local party and republican institutions was resulting, not in an egalitarian application of Leninist nationality policy, but in officially-sanctioned discrimination against minorities within the republic.

The beginning of the end for the Mzhavanadze regime was signaled by the publication in Pravda on March 6, 1972, of a Central Committee resolution criticizing the organizational and political work of the Tbilisi City Committee. While the tone of the resolution was markedly restrained — corruption, "liberalism" in personnel matters, and failure to meet economic

targets were noted —, it had an immediate galvanizing effect on the party aktiv in Georgia and initiated an intense internal examination and renewal of party leaders. On September 29, 1972, E.A. Shevardnadze, then forty-four years old and recently the Minister of Internal Affairs, replaced Mzhavanadze as First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party.

The major reasons for this change in leadership were the widespread corruption in the administration of the republic, which, in turn, had led to consistently poor economic performances by Georgian industry and agriculture, and the tolerance of nationalist tendencies within the party and intelligentsia. The corruption, black marketing, speculation, and bribetaking in Georgia have their counterparts throughout the Soviet Union in what is referred to as the "second economy." But as one observer of this all-union phenomenon has noted, when it comes to illegality and venality "Georgia has a reputation second to none....In form this activity may not differ greatly from what takes place in other regions, but in Georgia it seems to have been carried out on an unparalleled scale and with unrivaled scope and daring."¹⁴ In Georgia uninterrupted power for nineteen years had given the post-Stalinist leadership an almost completely free hand within the republic. This, 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, led to an impenetrable system of mutual aid, protection, and disregard for those who were not part of the spoils system. Such an internally reinforcing system of favors and obligations could not be reformed from within, and it was only with Moscow's backing that Shevardnadze was empowered to purge the worst offenders in his predecessor's regime. The purges continued for several years, and hopes were aroused that fundamental changes were taking place in Georgia. But resistance to reform was great and sometimes violent. Understandably the zeal to uncover local

corruption has abated in recent years. Disillusion has set in, and, as one acquaintance in Tbilisi expressed it to me: "U nas bylo vremennaia sovetskaia vlast'!" ("We had temporary Soviet power!")

In the Shevardnadze period the peoples of Georgia have experienced the results of the dual developments of modernization and re-nationalization with their contradictory effects. Three distinct forms of nationalism have emerged in the last decade: a pervasive "official nationalism" within the party and state bureaucracy and sanctioned among the intelligentsia and the population; a dissident or "unorthodox nationalism" expressed by a few human rights activists; and the counter-nationalism of the smaller nationalities within the republic who have been aroused by what they feel is systematic discrimination by the ethnic majority.

"Official nationalism" is manifested in the actual practice of the political authorities in Georgia, both by tolerating and promoting Georgian patriotism and by discriminating against non-Georgians. In one of his earliest speeches Shevardnadze complained that under Mzhavanadze "a half-baked nationalism had raised its head in some places in the republic; things came to such a pass that attempts were made to rehabilitate emigre writers who are hostile to us. In those years the public psyche, man's inner world and his faith in bright ideas suffered more than the economy."¹⁵ In other speeches the party leader condemned "national narrow-mindedness and isolation," and particularly the reluctance of many Georgians to study Russian. Artists, writers, and film-makers were attacked for exploiting themes with nationalist overtones, and the strongest attacks were reserved for that most ideological of sciences, the study of history.¹⁶

The pervasiveness of nationalism in the Georgian intelligentsia and the population at large is clear not only from the frequency of the official condemnations but from the overt resistance to anti-nationalist pressures.

At the Eighth Congress of Georgian Writers in April 1976, for example, Revaz Japaridze angrily opposed suggestions by the Georgian Minister of Education that history, geography, and other subjects should be taught in Russian. He was outraged by an order from Moscow that all textbooks for higher educational institutions be published in Russian and that dissertations and their defenses be translated into Russian. Japaridze's speech was greeted by nearly a quarter hour of applause, and the audience would not permit the Minister of Higher Education, Giorgi Jibladze, to answer him. When Shevardnadze spoke to allay fears of Russification, his speech was interrupted repeatedly by shouts from the audience.¹⁷

In the 1970s Georgia witnessed the appearance of an "unorthodox" or dissident nationalism. Its most articulate and active advocates were a small group of students and professional people stimulated by their aversion to the all-encompassing corruption that they saw around them and frustrated by the immovable restrictions on the exercise of political expression. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the son of the prominent Georgian writer, Konstantin Gamsakhurdia, began to complain to authorities about the treatment of various Georgian architectural monuments. In 1972 he and his associates became aware of the theft of religious treasures from the Georgian Patriarchate in Tbilisi; Gamsakhurdia phoned Shevardnadze, then still Minister of Internal Affairs, and an investigation was begun. The threads of the investigation led to the wife of Mzhavanadze, and though he soon lost his post, an official cover-up of the thefts was maintained. Gamsakhurdia and V. Pailodze soon publicized their claims and made contact with the Russian dissident movement and the western press. In mid-1974 Gamsakhurdia, M. Kostava, O. Tsikolia, and others formed a Human Rights Defense Group in the Georgian capital. After the Helsinki accords of August 1975, a so-called "watch com-

mitte" to observe human rights violations was set up in Tbilisi (January 1977). Until his arrest in April 1977, Gamsakhurdia wrote numerous articles complaining of the condition of Georgian national monuments, of the illegal deportation of Georgian Muslims (the Meskhians) to Central Asia, and in defense of his arrested colleagues.¹⁸ After more than a year in prison, Gamsakhurdia and Kostava were tried and sentenced to three years in prison and two in exile.¹⁹

In the spring of 1978 the potency of Georgian nationalism was revealed dramatically when the government made an ill-advised attempt to remove a clause from the draft of the new Georgian constitution which affirmed Georgian to be the state language of the republic. On Friday, April 14, an estimated five thousand people, primarily university students, demonstrated in the streets as the Supreme Soviet met to consider the draft. Shevardnadze, cursed when he first tried to speak to the crowd, returned later to announce to the demonstrators that the disputed clause would be retained.²⁰ This was a highly unusual concession to an open expression of opposition to state policy, a clear indication of the uneasiness and caution of government policy toward the new nationalism.

Nationalism begets nationalisms. As one people develops ethnic consciousness and the sense of exclusiveness and pride that accompany it, other peoples living near or among the first group often react with their own counter-nationalisms. In Georgia the growth of nationalism, both institutional and dissident, has had a stimulating effect on the local minorities — Russians, Armenians, Jews, Adzharians, Abkhazs, and Osetins. Georgian Jews, for example, a group which historically had not suffered from anti-Semitic persecutions from the dominant community, have, nevertheless, in recent years begun to emigrate to Israel and the United States. After decades of hearing

about the Soviet motherland (rodina) and the Georgian fatherland (samshoblo), the Jews of Georgia now seek their own homeland and national future outside the Soviet Union.

The Abkhaz people have reacted against what they contend is Georgian interference in their national life and Tbilisi's failure to foster Abkhaz cultural and economic development. In December 1977, 130 Abkhaz intellectuals signed a letter of collective protest and circulated it widely. In May 1978, twelve thousand people gathered in the village of Lichni to support the signers of the letter and to demand that Abkhazia be allowed to secede from Georgia and join the Russian republic (RSFSR). After being deluged with letters and telegrams in favor of secession, Moscow dispatched I.V. Kapitonov, secretary of the Central Committee, to Sukhumi and installed a new party leader, Boris V. Adleiba, in Abkhazia. Gently but firmly Kapitonov told the local party aktiv that secession was impermissible. Shortly afterwards, the government acknowledged the seriousness of Abkhaz complaints by decreeing a costly plan "for further development of the economy and culture of the Abkhaz ASSR."²¹

Most striking about official responses in Georgia to the new and more open expressions of nationalism is their relative tolerance and flexibility. Such expressions twenty-five years earlier would have been dealt with by the most brutal police measures, as was the pro-Stalin demonstration in Tbilisi in March 1956. The dissidents have largely been rounded up and isolated from the rest of the population, while an unusual dialogue appears to have commenced between the ruling elite and the intelligentsia. The ethnic and political consolidation of the Georgian people has created the possibility for that elite to use its ethnic base in negotiations with Moscow while at the same time the conscious critical mass of Georgians obviously is more confident about its strengths.

Official nationality policy with its avowedly assimilationist goals has had little real effect on the Georgians, who have moved steadily toward greater consolidation of their ethnic separateness. The unresolved tension between the assimilationist tendencies of modern society and the reconsolidation of Georgian ethnicity has produced an increasingly potent nationalist mood in all parts of Georgian society and counter-nationalisms among the ethnic minorities within the republic. The new nationalism is related both to the continuing social trends carried on from Stalinist times — modernization and re-nationalization — and the freer political atmosphere of the last quarter century. More specifically, four major reasons for the appearance of this nationalism can be elaborated:

- 1) the reduction in political penalties with the relaxation of the Stalinist terror has made it easier for people to express long-latent national feelings. And whereas other forms of political action and expression have been more strictly prohibited, in Georgia at least the state has made significant concessions to the population's national feelings. Thus, it may be that nationalist expression is in part an outlet for a variety of discontents — political, economic, intellectual, and cultural —, a kind of political sublimation for activity and expression which is otherwise too dangerous to articulate.
- 2) the autonomy permitted by Moscow under Khrushchev, who now chose to rule indirectly through local cadres rather than employ the centralized police system of Stalin, gave the national elite in Georgia the chance to cultivate popular support through the exploitation of national feelings. Georgian nationalism was expressed in culture, manifested in cadre favoritism, and abetted the economic "exploitation" of the Soviet system.

- 3) nationalist expression is a genuine indicator of the historic fear of small nations that they will be swallowed up by larger nations in the process of modernization. Georgian nationalists fear the loss of their language and its replacement by Russian, the destruction of their ancient monuments, and the elimination of their unique customs, traditions, and way of life. Built into the nationalist fears is a deeply-rooted conservatism and apprehension about what the future in a multi-national state holds for minorities.
- 4) finally, the erosion of Marxist ideology within the Soviet Union has cleared the way for its replacement by patriotism and nationalism. Ironically, the Soviet government itself has aided in this process by transforming Marxism from its original purpose, that is, as a critical and revolutionary tool of the working class against the status quo, into a rigid, dull rationalization of the existing order. Nationalism, on the other hand, holds out a hope for a better future with reference constantly to great moments in the national past. The romanticism, irrationality, and utopianism of nationalism at least provides an alternative to the everyday reality of a slowly modernizing society with all its mundane inadequacies.

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FOOTNOTES

1. A. Shtromas, "The Legal Position of Soviet Nationalities and their Territorial Units according to the 1977 Constitution of the USSR," The Russian Review, XXXVII, 3 (July 1978), p. 267.
2. Richard B. Dobson, "Georgia and the Georgians," in Zev Katz, ed., Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities (New York: The Free Press, 1975), p. 168.
3. The number of Russians fell in Georgia from 408,000 in 1959 to 397,000 in 1970. (J.A. Newth, "The 1970 Soviet Census," Soviet Studies, XXIV, 2 (October 1972), p. 216)
4. ibid., p. 215. See also, Teresa Rakowska-Marmstone, "The Study of Ethnic Politics in the USSR," in George W. Simmonds, ed., Nationalism in the USSR & Eastern Europe in the Era of Brezhnev & Kosygin (Detroit: University of Detroit Press, 1977), p. 24.
5. Wesley A. Fisher, "Ethnic Consciousness and Inter-marriage: Correlates of Endogamy among the Major Soviet Nationalities," Soviet Studies, XXIX, 3 (July 1977), p. 398. These figures are for marriages within the Georgian republic.
6. Brian D. Silver, "Methods of Deriving Data on Bilingualism from the 1970 Soviet Census," Soviet Studies, XXVII 4 (October 1975), p. 596.
7. ibid.
8. ibid., pp. 592-597.
9. Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR 1922-1972: Iubileinyi statisticheskii ezhegodnik (Moscow, 1972), p. 515 ff; Dobson, p. 163.
10. Dobson, p. 163.
11. ibid., p. 177.
12. Zaria vostoka, March 24, 1956; Ocherki istorii Kommunisticheskoi Partii Gruzii, II (Tbilisi, 1963), 269.

13. Dobson, p. 177.
14. Gregory Grossman, "The 'Second Economy' of the USSR," Problems of Communism, XXVI, 5 (September-October 1977), pp. 34-35.
15. Zaria vostoka, February 28, 1973; Current Digest of the Soviet Press, XXV, 13, April 25, 1973, p. 6.
16. Two historians who wrote about the period 1917-1924, U. Sidamonidze and A. Menadbe, were taken to task for their less-than-total condemnation of the Mensheviks and Georgian autonomists. (See, for example, Zaria vostoka, February 8, 1974; CDSP, XXVI, 8, March 20, 1974, p. 3)
17. A Russian translation of Japaridze's speech was published in Arkhiv samizdata 2583 in Materialy samizdata 23/76, July 14, 1976.
18. Gamsakhurdia's writings have been published in Materialy samizdata, AS 2581 in MS 28/76, August 25, 1976; AS 2444 in MS 16/76, May 14, 1976; AS 2580; AS 2757 in MS 42/76, December 31, 1976; AS 2809; and in other issues.
19. New York Times, May 20, 1978. For reporting that Gamsakhurdia's televised expression of remorse might have been fabricated, two American journalists, Craig Whitney of the New York Times and Harold Piper of the Baltimore Sun, were ordered to retract their articles and were fined by a Moscow court.
20. New York Times, April 15, 18, 1978; Zaria vostoka, April 16, 1978.
On April 14, a similar clause was restored to the new constitution of the Armenian SSR.
21. New York Times, June 25, 1978; Zaria vostoka, May 26; June 7, 1978.
For more on the conflict in Abkhazia, see Roman Solchanyk and Ann Sheehy, "Kapitonov on Nationality Relations in Georgia," Radio Liberty Research, RL 125/78, June 1, 1978; and Ann Sheehy, "Recent Events in Abkhazia Mirror the Complexities of National Relations in the USSR," ibid., RL 141/78, June 26, 1978.