



From Tensions to Violence: Tracing Evolution of “Cultural Security Dilemma” in Georgia

Author: Nino Kemoklidze
Research Associate, University of Birmingham

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Abstract

Contrary to the arguments advanced by mainstream security approaches, this paper challenges the understanding of the security dilemma in Georgia as mainly the result of institutional weakness of the Soviet Union and the ensuing "domestic anarchy", manifesting itself in the late 1980s only. Rather, as the paper argues, security dilemma, broadly defined, was embedded in the very institutional structure of the Soviet Union and was unfolding over the course of several decades. The paper revisits the Soviet Nationality policies and provides a systematic outline of how they contributed to the development of the "cultural security dilemma" in Georgia and the subsequent outbreak of violence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

I. Introduction

In the early 1990s several violent conflicts erupted in the Balkans and the former Soviet Union. At the time it was largely believed that the major driving forces behind them were the centuries-old ethnic antagonisms deeply ingrained among the warring parties. While such views were particularly widespread in media accounts of ethnic conflicts, this line of thinking – known as the “ancient hatreds” view – was also present within academia (Minogue and Williams, 1992, p.233). According to this view, much of what was often labelled as “ethnic conflict” was largely due to primordial ethnic hatreds that had existed between conflicting groups from time immemorial and which had been suppressed during the communist era. In this way, it was the communist system of controls that kept these ancient animosities from boiling over and, as soon as communist domination was over, long-standing bitterness among “the hate-filled, feuding ethnic groups” in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia immediately came to the surface and erupted with all its might (Fearon, 1995a, pp.1-2).

Nowadays, however, hardly any scholar of ethnicity and nationalism, at least in Western academia, would subscribe to such essentialist explanations of inter-ethnic relations. Increasingly in the past few decades, such views have been vigorously challenged and significantly, if not fully, discredited by new approaches grouped under the umbrella term “constructivism” (Özirimli, 2005, p.166; see also Lustick, 2001, p.22). This growing constructivist literature offers new and arguably more nuanced explanations of the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations (Tilley, 1997, p.511).

Constructivists maintain that ethnic identities are not fixed but socially constructed through different mechanisms of “framing and narrative encoding” in everyday life (Brubaker, 2002, p. 173). In other words, ethnic groups are not predisposed to view each other in negative terms; rather, the enemy image of the “other” and “the idea of threat” are the products of the processes of social construction (Kolstø, 2002, p.9; see also Eide, 1997). Thus, according to this thinking, violence is due to antagonistically constructed ethnic identities rather than deep-rooted ethnic antipathies (Fearon and Laitin, 2000, pp.846, 853).

While most scholars would agree with the above statement there does not seem to be a consensus over the process of social construction of identities. When analysing ethnic mobilisation in the former Soviet space, the starting point for much of the literature is the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹ It is largely within this time-period that most scholars seek to identify “a set of conditions under which sudden

transformations in identity occur” (de Figueiredo and Weingast, 1999, p.293). In other words, in these accounts construction of new (conflicting) identities occurs over a short period of time. In contrast, however, I argue that rather than being the outcome of the late 1980s only, the making of conflicting group identities in Georgia was a relatively long-term project, spanning over several decades. The mid to late 1980s and the onset of the processes of democratisation under Mikhail Gorbachev’s new policies of *glasnost* (“openness”) and *perestroika* (“restructuring”) provided the opportunity – the political space necessary to mobilise the masses amidst the disintegration of the Soviet Union. But as I argue, by that time, the grounds for the mobilisation had already largely been prepared. In this way, there is a need for a longer-term, more historical approach to the study of ethnic violence. Thus, I start my analysis much earlier, by looking at the development of inter-ethnic relations between Georgians and Abkhaz and Ossetians throughout much of the twentieth century and trace the process of *how ethnic differences evolved in Georgia over time and how did they contribute to violence?*

In the following sections I first provide a brief outline of the rational choice theories of ethnic violence by focusing on the concept of the security dilemma and other security-approaches. I then turn to the discussion of the Soviet nationality policies and highlight the role they played in the construction of conflicting group identities in Georgia; I also examine how these policies might have contributed to the creation of the necessary conditions that could have caused or further aggravated the security dilemma over the decades. I start by mapping out the process of the so-called *korenizatsiya*.² My focus is on those aspects of ethnicity that were particularly targeted for politicisation, such as territory and language. I discuss at some length the privileged status of titular nationalities and what it meant for different nationalities in Georgia, the issue of demographics and the policies of resettlement that altered the ethnic composition of autonomous territories, and the issue of Russification, which became particularly significant in Georgia in the post-Stalinist period. I also consider various shifts that the Soviet nationality policies went through and how these changes (or inconsistencies) affected inter-ethnic relations in Georgia.

¹ See, for instance Toft (2005, p.12); Wheatley (2005); George (2009, p.45); Zürcher (2007, p.9).

² This word is derived from the Russian term *korennoye naseleniye* meaning “indigenous population”.

II. Violence as a Rational Choice?

In stark opposition to the “ancient hatreds” view on ethnic violence stand the rational choice theories, largely based within the field of International Relations (Fearon, 1995b, p.380). As the name suggests, rational choice theories maintain that, while individual motivations to join the fighting may vary, they are almost always based on “rational cost–benefit calculations” (Cordell and Wolff, 2010, p.30). According to this line of thinking, ethnic violence is an outcome of intentional elite machinations whose main goals are to acquire, maintain and/or further strengthen their political power.³ In this way, elites often exaggerate the threat posed by the opposing group(s) and deliberately provoke violent incidents, later categorising such acts of violence as “ethnic”. The rationale behind this is that violence often breeds violence and “has the effect ... of constructing group identities in more antagonistic and rigid ways” (Fearon and Laitin, 2000, pp.846, 853; see also Brass, 1991; 1997).

One of the main questions that arise here, however, is – why do the public follow? If violence, instigated by elites, serves only the interests of these elites rather than the general public, then, as Fearon and Laitin (2000, p.854) inquire, “what explains popular ethnic antipathies?” Depending on the answers they provide to these questions and the motivating factors they outline for participation in violence, rational choice theories can be further subdivided into two main approaches – security-oriented and economic-oriented.⁴ My main concern in this paper is the security-oriented approaches, which I discuss below in relation to the cases in Georgia.

III. Outbreak of Violence and the Issue of (In)security

One of the most prominent rational choice theories of violence is the so-called security dilemma approach that emphasises the security aspect of inter-ethnic relations.⁵ It applies one of the key International Relations concepts – “anarchy” (i.e. lack of central authority to police relations among states) – to domestic politics within states and tries to explain intra-state violence in this context (Posen, 1993). The dissolution of the political and institutional structures of the state, generally accompanied by “the collapse of the formal economy”, often sets in motion the processes that create desirable conditions for violence (Glinkina and Rosenberg, 2003, pp.513–4). Thus, in the case of Georgia, it was state failure – the collapse of the

³ See, for instance Snyder (1993); Gagnon (1994–1995); Hardin (1995, p.143); Brown (1996); David (1997); de Figueiredo and Weingast (1999); Jones (1999, pp.117–8); Laitin (1999, p.153); Snyder and Jervis (1999, p.23); Walter (1999, p.9).

⁴ According to the latter, economic concerns are the primary driving force behind ethnic violence. However, there is no consensus among scholars on the “motivational structures” of why people might engage in violence for economic reasons. This has given rise to the so-called greed-versus-grievance debate within economic approaches. The former supports the idea that ethnic conflicts happen when opportunity arises and when there is an availability of material resources, while the latter argues that the main motivational factor for violence is grievance-based largely driven by economic inequalities (Zürcher, 2007, pp.45–6).

⁵ This approach has its roots in the realist school of International Relations theory and in particular the work of Robert Jervis (1978) and Kenneth Waltz (1979). In the 1990s it was further examined (and popularised) by political scientist Barry Posen (1993) in the context of ethnic conflicts.

Soviet Union – and institutional weakness in the emerging newly-independent state of Georgia, that were the major contributors to the outbreak of violence.⁶ According to the security dilemma approach, in the midst of the breakdown of central state authority, the anarchy that characterises the international state system also emerges at a sub-state (domestic) level. “Domestic anarchy” first and foremost means political and economic instability, which further increases groups’ feelings of insecurity about the intentions of the out-group and uncertainty about the future. In this way, people start preparing for the worst and begin arming in order to defend themselves and their group from potential future attacks. These actions, however, are most likely to be understood by their opponents as hostile, posing an imminent threat to their safety and, as a result, they might choose to attack pre-emptively in order to defend themselves. This is the classic security dilemma scenario – the situation in which the fear of the possibility that the opposing group will attack first is likely to drive people to violence (Hardin, 1995, p.143; Lake and Rothchild, 1996b, pp.41, 52; Walter, 1999, pp.1–2, 5). During the security dilemma and its accompanying “spiraling behavior”, war is seen as the best (and only) option to defend one’s own group, becoming “a rational response” to the “fear of victimisation” (de Figueiredo and Weingast, 1999, p.294; see also Bowen, 1996, pp.8–9; Woodward, 1999, p.80).

Since the publication of Posen’s work, the security dilemma approach has attracted much scholarly attention and has given way to the emergence of other security-related approaches (Cordell and Wolff, 2010, p.27). Political scientist James Fearon (1995a; 1995b; 1998), for instance, identifies other “strategic dilemmas” that may lead to violence, such as the problems of “credible commitment” – the so-called commitment problem approach. According to this, one of the main reasons ethnic groups opt for violence is the inability of either side in the conflict to convince its opponent that, in the case of a negotiated agreement (e.g. a ceasefire) requiring mutual adherence, it will not breach its terms and will credibly commit to its implementation (Fearon, 1995b, p.381; Hardin, 1995, p.143; Lake and Rothchild, 1996b, p.48).

Yet another security approach focuses on the problem of “asymmetric information” outlined by de Figueiredo and Weingast (1999). According to this view, when there is a lack of information (or contradictory information or deliberate misinformation), people cannot tell whose story to believe and whose side to take. When the stakes (i.e. the cost paid for making the wrong choice) are high, members of the group align themselves with the leadership of their own group rather than try to consider the rightfulness of competing claims. In this way, due to the uncertainty that generally characterises asymmetric information, elites are able to manipulate people’s beliefs to their advantage (de Figueiredo and Weingast, 1999, pp.291, 294; see also Fearon and Laitin, 1996, p.719; Lake and Rothchild, 1996b, p.46).

Undoubtedly some of these approaches concerning security (or, rather, insecurity) issues of groups, do offer valuable insights into inter-ethnic violence. They provide an

⁶ See, for instance: Wheatley (2005); Zürcher (2007, p.8); Cheterian (2008, pp.31, 33).

understanding of how the domestic environment in which competing groups operate, shapes actors' political behaviour and their decisions on whether to negotiate or fight. In particular, these approaches are concerned with how the political uncertainty might generate ethnic fears and lead to violence (Walter, 1999, p.2). Nevertheless, these approaches have been criticised on multiple grounds (Kaufman, 2001, pp.19–22; Cordell and Wolff, 2010, pp.26–32).

One of the challenges of the above-outlined security approaches is that they cannot adequately explain cases where violence is absent. For instance, why did the strategic dilemmas lead to violence in two regions of Georgia – autonomous territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while another region – Adjara, also an autonomous territory, remained largely peaceful? Arguably, the same structural conditions – the “emerging anarchy” (Posen, 1993) – should have had equal effect on all groups and regions across the country.

Another criticism directed towards these approaches is that they view all matters related to inter-group relations through a “rational” lens which leaves little room, if any, for exploring other, “non-rational” elements (like myths, symbols, metaphors) that often invoke strong emotions among conflicting groups. Even though one particular emotion – fear – has occupied an important place within the security studies field, it too is often examined through the “rational” lenses (de Figueiredo and Weingast, 1999). In other words, proponents of the security approaches seldom search for “non-rational” sources of ethnic fears and insecurities.⁷

Yet another major challenge faced by the security approaches is that they operate on the assumption that domestic anarchy comes first and is followed by the security dilemma. This is not always the case, however. As Stuart Kaufman (2001, p.20) argues, these approaches “have the causal chain backwards” – in ethnic conflicts it is often the security dilemma that causes anarchy, not vice versa. In the case of Georgia (and the Soviet Union in general), there is no consensus among scholars about which came first. However, evidence seems to suggest that, in the case of Abkhazia in particular, signs of the security dilemma understood in a broad sense as the situation “in which moves on each side motivated partly by insecurity create insecurity on the other side” (Kaufman, 2006, p.55), were visible well before any indication of domestic anarchy. John Cotter (1999, p.1) calls this phenomenon “cultural security dilemma” and argues that with their main emphasis on “weak states, armaments, demographics and geography” much of the security studies literature largely disregards “the ‘cultural’ aspects of security to ethnic groups, such as the preservation of native languages, histories and group identities”.⁸ Moreover, many scholars impose a rather narrow time frame on their study of inter-ethnic conflicts and start their

⁷Lake and Rothchild (1996a; 1996b) are among the few rational choice theorists who have tried to apply these “non-rational factors” to the study of ethnic violence and consider myths and symbols as potential sources of ethnic fears. However, even though they admit that the polarisation of a society is often also due to political and historical memories, myths and emotions, they do not go into any further examination of why this might be the case. In this way, they consider these factors as secondary to more rationalist, strategic explanations (Lake and Rothchild, 1996b, pp.44, 53, 55).

⁸It has to be pointed out though that while I agree with Cotter's criticism, in this paper I also point out some of the issues concerning the demographics of the ethnic groups concerned since it is related to the issue of the preservation of group identities.

analysis from the period immediately preceding the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the outbreak of violence, i.e. from the mid to late 1980s. In this way, they largely ignore inter-ethnic relations (and tensions) in Georgia in the previous decades, and especially in the post-Stalinist period⁹ – a period that would play an important role in the emergence and development of the security dilemma.

IV. Security Dilemma in Making: Soviet Nationality Policies and the Construction of Conflicting Group Identities

As many would agree, the ethno-federal structure of the Soviet Union, its politicisation and institutionalisation of ethnicity laid the foundations for inter-ethnic tensions across the Soviet Union resulting in violence in some parts of the country in late 1980s and early 1990s as the USSR fell apart. Among others, Rodolfo Stavenhagen (1996, p.89) is convinced that in the case of Georgia, the reasons behind violent conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia are also “intimately related to the way ethnic and national identities have been constructed” in the Soviet Union (see also Saparov, 2010, p.100).¹⁰ Without doubt, Soviet nationality policies were some of the most interesting, complex and paradoxical features of the Soviet reality, with far-reaching – and, in the case of Georgia, devastating – repercussions. This is why no study of Georgia’s conflicts would be complete without first understanding the *raison d’être* behind these policies.

Institutionalisation of ethnicity in Georgia resulted in the creation of three autonomous entities (Abkhazia, Adjara and South Ossetia). Bolshevik rule in Abkhazia was established on 4 March 1921 (following the annexation of Georgia by the Red Army on 21 February) and on 31 March the Abkhaz Revolutionary Committee (*Revcom*) officially proclaimed the creation of the Abkhaz Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), separate from Georgian SSR. However, on 16 December 1921 a Treaty of Union (*Soyuznyi Dogovor*) was signed in Tbilisi between Abkhazia and Georgia and in February 1922 the status of Abkhazia was officially changed from the SSR to that of the so-called Treaty Republic (*Dogovornaya Respublika*) (Blauvelt, 2013, p.4). On 17 April 1930, following Nestor Lakoba’s¹¹ recommendations, the concept of “Treaty Republic” was substituted with “Autonomous Republic” in the Abkhaz constitution and on 19 February 1931 Abkhazia was officially transformed into an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) within Georgia (RFE/RL, 26 June 1978, p.3; Shenfield, 2010; Papaskiri, n.d., pp.4, 18).

The Adjarian ASSR, the smallest of Georgia’s autonomous units, was created on 16 June 1921 and on 20 April 1922 the South Ossetian Autonomous *Oblast* (AO) was set up (Aves, 1996, p.159) (see Figures 1, 2 and 3).

⁹ That is, the period following Joseph Stalin's death in 1953.

¹⁰ Many in Georgia also share this view. See, for instance, author’s interview with political scientist Giorgi (Ghia) Tarkhan-Mouravi.

¹¹ Lakoba (1893–1936) was a prominent Abkhaz Bolshevik. He died in suspicious circumstances in Tbilisi, and many Abkhaz implicated Lavrenti Beria – then First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party – in his death (Blauvelt, 2007, pp.207–16).

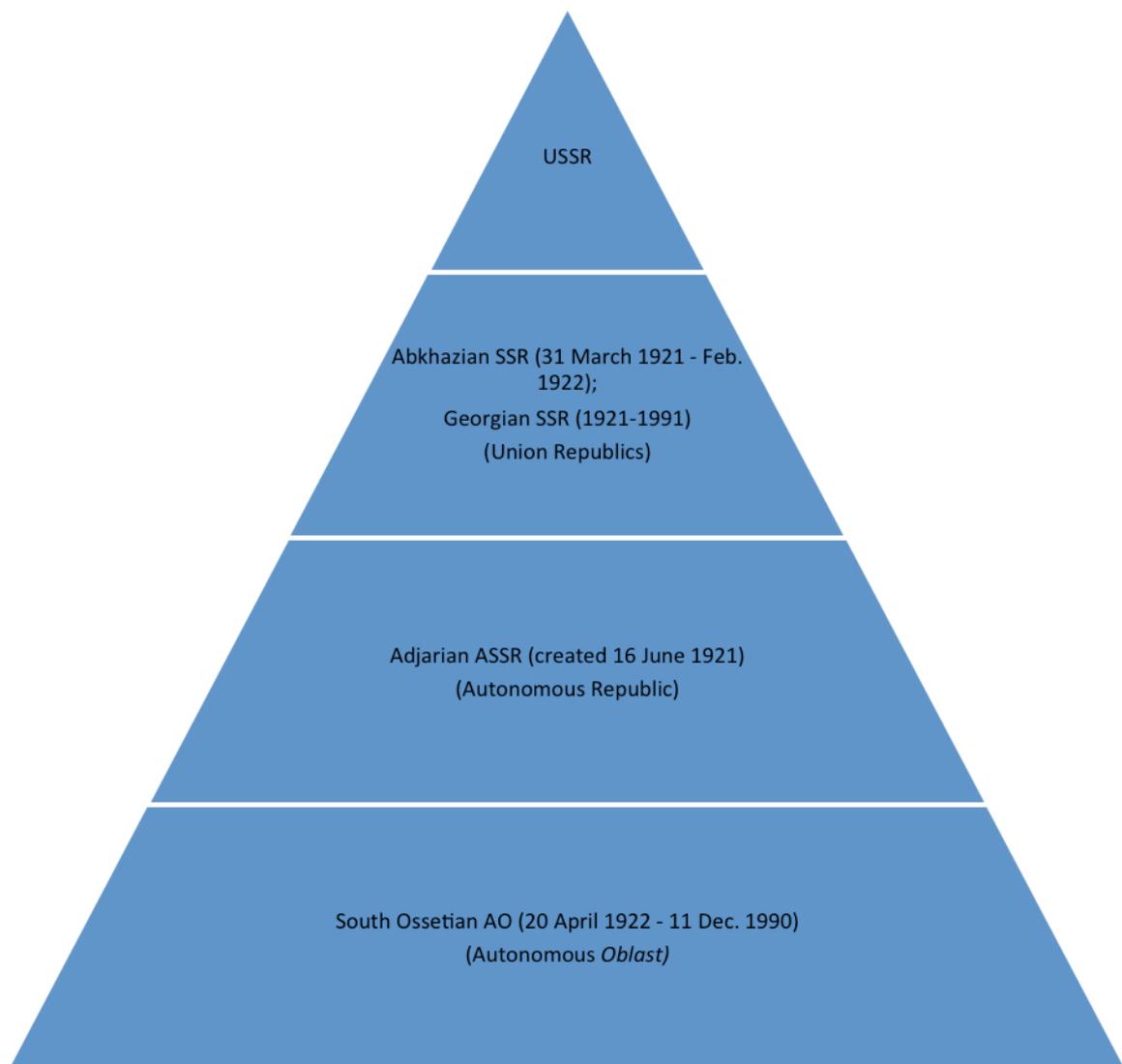


Figure 1: Soviet Ethno-Federal Pyramid and the Territory of the Georgian SSR (1921-1922)

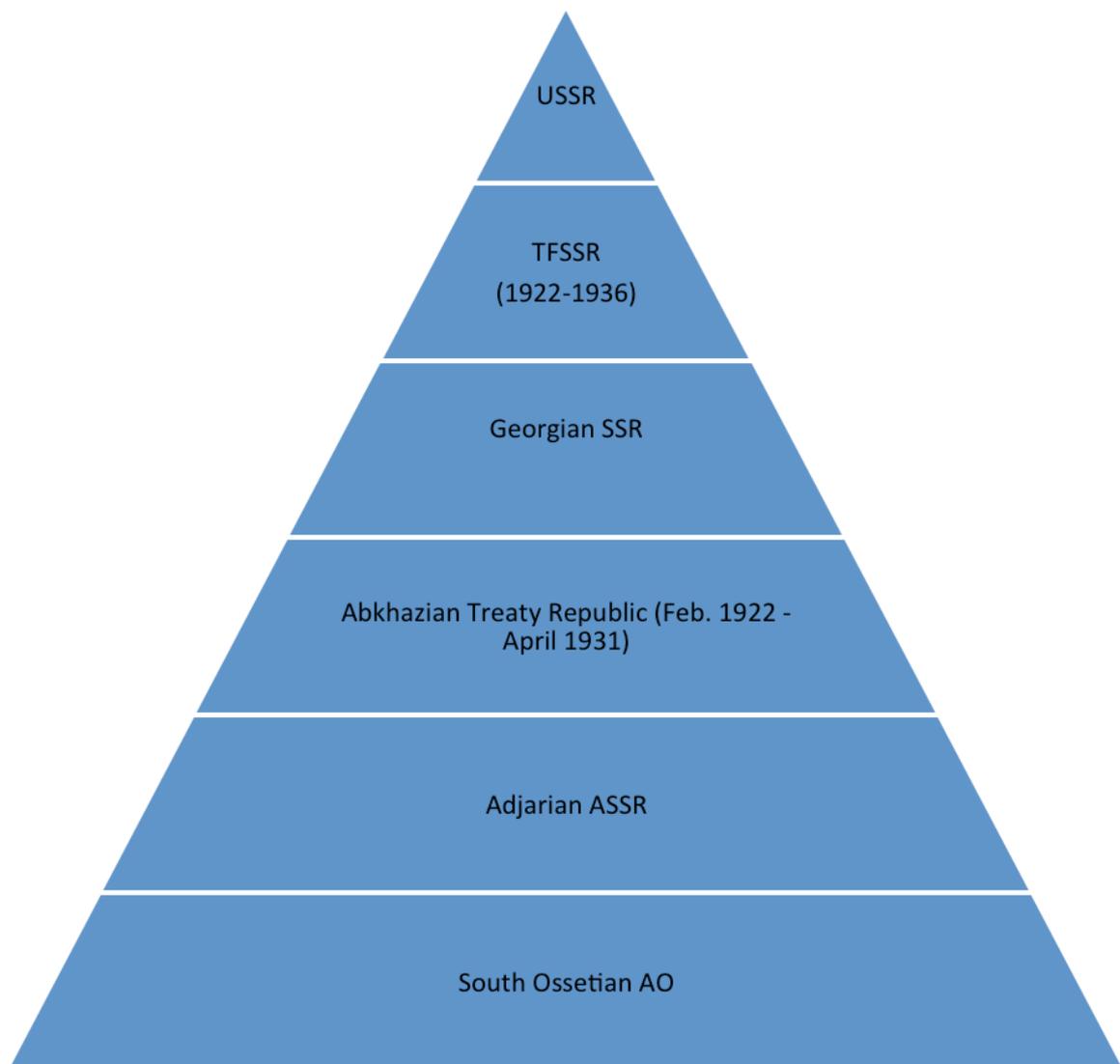
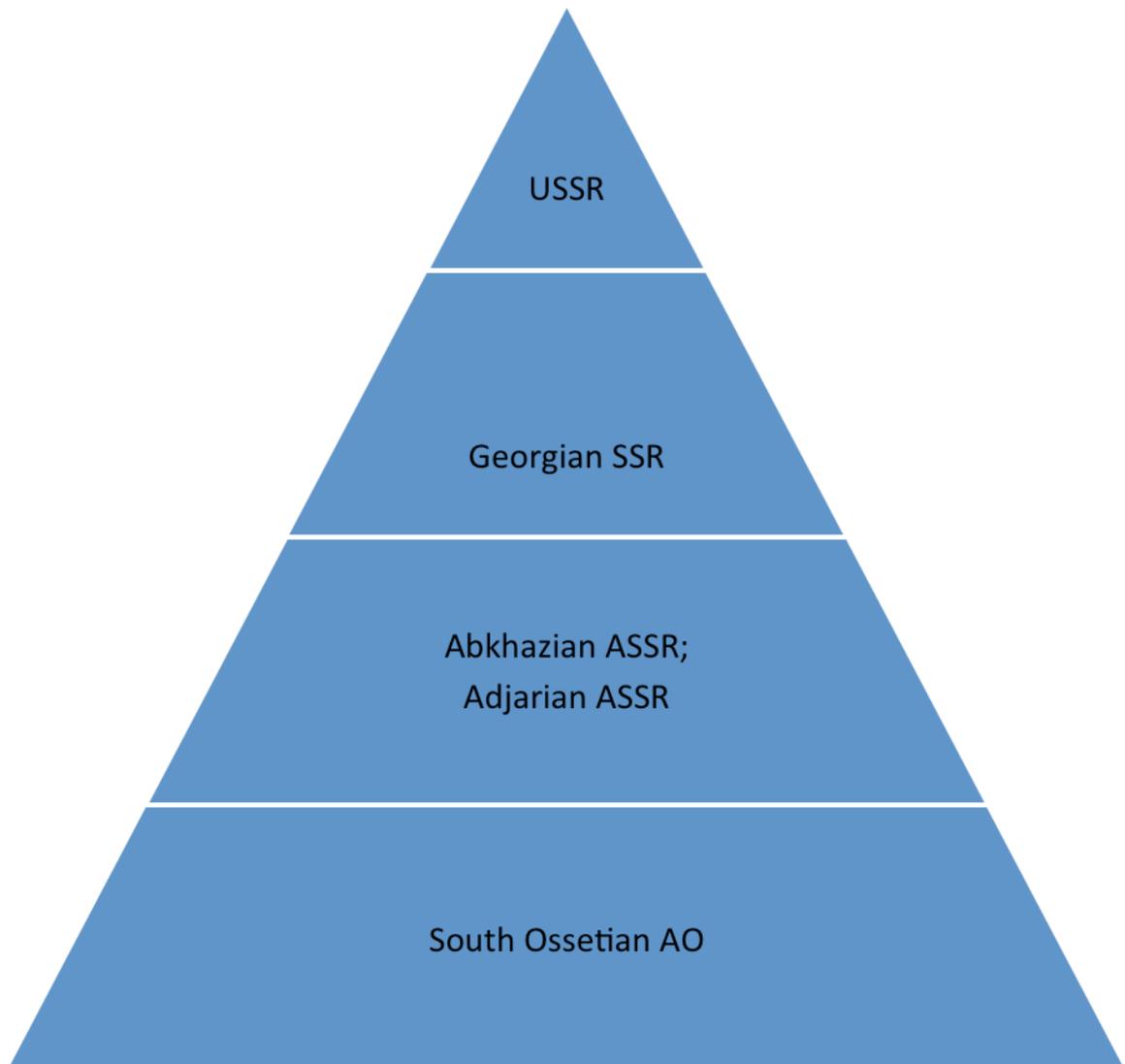


Figure 2: Soviet Ethno-Federal Pyramid and the Territory of the Georgian SSR (1922-1936)¹²

¹² TFSSR in this Figure refers to the Transcaucasian Federative Soviet Socialist Republic, which existed during the period of 1922–36 and incorporated Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Abkhazia was also incorporated in the TFSSR on 13 Dec. 1922 following Georgia (on 12 March) and remained part of it until 1931.



Source: author's compilation

Figure 3: Soviet Ethno-Federal Pyramid and the Territory of the Georgian SSR (1936-1991)

The issue of the legitimacy of these autonomous territories has been a particularly sensitive one and has played a decisive role in the outbreak of violence in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹³ However, while the federal structure of the Soviet Union became one of the main aspects of the nationality policies, it went hand-in-hand with the process of *korenizatsiya*. The latter comprised “a set of policies aimed at developing and promoting national identity” and was meant to produce “flourishing” (*rastsvet*) of various ethnic groups across the Soviet Union (Smith,

¹³ The Georgian side has continuously questioned the existence of the three autonomous territories within the Georgian SSR and has argued that the only explanation for setting up these autonomies, while many less ethnically homogeneous republics had no autonomy at all, was a deliberate divide-and-rule policy exercised by the Soviet Union (Aves, 1992, p.177). Indeed, by 1991 Georgia had the second-largest number of autonomous territories within its state borders of any Soviet republic (after Russia). The RSFSR incorporated 16 autonomous republics, 5 autonomous *oblasts* and ten autonomous *okrugs* (areas/units).

2006, p.498). Throughout the 1920s, these policies would “turn into the most extravagant celebration of ethnic diversity” in the Soviet Union (Slezkine, 1994, pp.414–5, 422; see also Zürcher, 2007, p.23). In this way, as Rogers Brubaker (1996, pp.8, 29) argues, the Soviet Union probably went further than any other state “in sponsoring, codifying, institutionalising, and even (in some cases) inventing nationhood and nationality” (see also Zaslavsky, 1992, p.99; Cheterian, 2008, pp.45–6).

Through the process of *korenizatsiya*, Soviet policymakers actively promoted the local languages of different ethnic groups, established educational and cultural institutions in these indigenous languages, followed affirmative action in areas of employment and encouraged the advancement of local cadres into positions of power (Suny, 1993, pp.101, 105). Thus, the first decade of the Soviet Union is often dubbed “an era of nation-building” (Smith, 2006, pp. 498, 501). Indeed, at the time of its collapse, the USSR consisted of around 127 officially recognised ethnic entities (Glebov and Crowfoot, 1989, p.78) represented by the uniform categories of nations (*natsii*), nationalities (*natsionalnosti*) and peoples (*narody*).¹⁴ Numerically smaller or “underdeveloped peoples” (*narodnosti* or *malochislennye narody*)¹⁵ and tribes (*plemena*) were placed at the very bottom of this ethnic “ladder” (Slezkine, 1994, pp.426–7; Wolczuk and Yemelianova, 2008, p.178; Rutland, 2010, p.117).

While Union republics and their autonomous territories might have lacked any real sovereignty, every large non-Russian ethnic group within the Soviet Union was guaranteed a territorial identity. As a result, within the 15 Union republics of the Soviet Union, 40 other peoples possessed some form of governmental structure whose title also reflected their ethnic identity. Altogether, by the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were 20 ASSRs, 8 autonomous *oblasts*, and 11 autonomous *okrugs* (Roeder, 1991, p.204).¹⁶ Each of these autonomous territories had its own officially recognised titular nationality (Coppieters, n.d.; Zürcher, 2007, p.23).

This four-tier Matrioshka-style ethno-federal structure of the Soviet Union was intrinsically linked to the status of nationalities and was reflected (and embedded) in many Soviet institutions (Cheterian, 2008, p.46). The ethno-federal hierarchy manifested itself in many ways in the daily lives of Soviet citizens as control of resources by cadres of a particular ethnic group depended significantly on this hierarchy and what position a group occupied on the ethno-federal “ladder” (Roeder, 1991, p.220). This “status pyramid” (Horowitz, [1985]2000, p.24) also set the rules of ethnic bargaining.

1. The Privileged Position of Titular Nationalities in the Georgian SSR

Within the Georgian SSR, Georgians were considered a titular nationality at the state

¹⁴ *Narody* was an ethnically non-specific term (Slezkine, 1994, pp.427, 443).

¹⁵ Like *natsionalnost*, *narodnost* is sometimes also translated in English as “nationality”.

¹⁶ For more on the federal structure of the Soviet Union, see also Connor (1984, p.221); Bremmer (1997, p.8); Hale (2008).

level.¹⁷ The Abkhaz, on the other hand, were considered a titular nationality of the Abkhaz ASSR.¹⁸ Ossetians were also considered a titular nationality both in South Ossetia and North Ossetia (Osipova, 1997, p.40).¹⁹ In practice, dividing society into several titular nationalities meant that the process of national consolidation in Georgia went in three different (and separate) directions. By being members of titular nationalities, certain groups were always privileged in certain parts of the republic. Thus, the Abkhaz and Ossetians were granted a disproportionate share of socio-economic, political and cultural privileges in their own autonomous units (Zürcher, 2007, p.26). On the other hand, these groups, as well as significant numbers of other ethnic minorities in Georgia (Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Greeks, Jews, Kurds and Russians) found themselves disadvantaged “in the competition for the budgetary pie” at the central (i.e. Union republican) level (Suny, [1988] 1994, p.290). Since minorities were relatively underrepresented at the republican level, this area became a protected area of privilege for ethnic Georgians (Cheterian, 2008, p.159). In other words, policies of *korenizatsiya* effectively turned ethnicity into “a condition for success” (Roeder, 1991, p.39), and created a sense of entitlement amongst Georgians, Abkhaz and Ossetians that as representatives of titular nationalities they deserved to be treated in a certain (more privileged) way.

This unequal, subordinated relationship between ethnic communities provided a framework through which inter-ethnic relations would play out in Georgia over the decades and played a decisive role in the formation of conflicting group identities among ethnic Georgians, Abkhaz and Ossetians. Relations between these groups were marked by resistance to, and victimisation by, the “other” group which further intensified feelings of insecurity and vulnerability among them (Slider, 1985; Coppieters, 1998; 2002; Bunce, 2005). As a result, inter-ethnic relations in Georgia were largely characterised by visceral mutual suspicion between different groups.

As early as 1923, for instance, Sergo Ordjonikidze – a prominent Georgian Bolshevik, complained that while Georgians made up only 25% of the population of Tbilisi at the time, they occupied “43% of the city soviet, 75% of the city executive committee, 91% of the presidium of the executive committee, and 100% of both the republican *Sovnarkom* and the Central Committee of the Party”²⁰ (cited in Slezkine, 1994, p.426). This trend continued over the next few decades and was reflected in other, non-political spheres of the country as well. Between 1955 and 1972, for instance, ethnic Georgians occupied 97.2% of all nomenklatura positions in Georgia despite

¹⁷ According to the final Soviet census in 1989, ethnic Georgians constituted 70.1% (3,787,393) of the total population of Georgia, which numbered 5,400,841 people (*Zarya Vostoka*, 23 March 1990, p.2).

¹⁸ In 1989, Abkhaz nationals in Georgia numbered 95,853, the overwhelming majority of whom (93,267 people) lived in the Abkhaz ASSR. The Abkhaz constituted 1.8% of the total population of Georgia and 17.8% of the total population of Abkhazia’s 525,061 people. Ethnic Georgians constituted a plurality in the autonomous republic before the outbreak of violence, with 45.7% (239,872 people) of the total population of Abkhazia (*Zarya Vostoka*, 23 March 1990, p.2).

¹⁹ South Ossetia had a population of 98,527 people in 1989 and ethnic Ossetians formed the majority with 66.2% (65,232) of the overall population of the *Oblast*. Ethnic Georgians were the second largest group, comprising 29% (28,544) of the total population. However, Georgia’s overall Ossetian population was much higher – 164,055 people, of which 98,823 (60.2%) lived in other parts of Georgia (ICG, 2005, p.1). Overall, Ossetians comprised 3% of Georgia’s total population (*Zarya Vostoka*, 23 March 1990, p.2)

²⁰ *Sovnarkom* (*Sovet Narodnykh Komissarov*) is Russian for the Council of People’s Commissars.

constituting only 64.3% of the overall population of the Georgian SSR in 1959 (Hodnett, 1978, p.103). In 1969–70, when constituting 67% of the republic's overall population, with the same number of the overall college-age student population, ethnic Georgians made up 82.6% of the overall student body of Georgia's institutions of higher education (Parsons, 1982, p.554).²¹ Furthermore, 91% of the books and 83% of newspapers published in Georgia in 1985 were in the Georgian language (Coppieters, 2002, p.101; see also Smith et al., 1998, p.6).

In contrast, while ethnic minorities complained that they were constantly being discriminated against and lacked any real opportunities, especially at the central republican level, ethnic Georgians argued that it was they who were continuously disadvantaged in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This issue was particularly emphasised in regard to Abkhazia, where as early as 1926 ethnic Georgians comprised the largest ethnic group of the autonomous republic, with 33.6% of the overall population. They complained that Georgian historic monuments were destroyed and Georgian toponyms were replaced by Abkhaz ones (1 Arkhi TV, 13 March 2010). Furthermore, complaints were raised that leadership positions in both political and cultural spheres of the autonomous republic were mainly occupied by ethnic Abkhaz (RFE/RL, 10 March 1989, p.26; Coppieters, 2002, p.102). Western commentators also observed that the Abkhaz were indeed “overreaching in the matter of representation in the Party and government” and were keen to occupy all the key government positions in the Abkhaz ASSR (RFE/RL, 26 June 1978, p.6).²² In fact, as some have argued, this signalled a period of Abkhazianisation in Abkhazia from the 1970s onwards. 1996, p.233). As one Western observer pointed out,

[i]t would also seem safe to assume that the concessions granted to the Abkhaz since 1978 have served to reinforce their perception of the strength of their position vis-à-vis Georgians living in the autonomous republic, who are increasingly on the defensive against any further erosion of their rights. (RFE/RL, 10 March 1989, p.27)

By 1990, ethnic Abkhaz occupied up to 67% of the ministerial positions in the Abkhaz ASSR. Since control of economic resources largely depended on the control of administrative organs, Georgian side complained that ethnic Abkhaz were left in charge of most of the local economy in the autonomous republic (Slider, 1997, p.170; Zürcher, 2005, p.3; 2007, p.120).²³

The fact that the Abkhaz were awarded more rights and privileges in the Abkhaz ASSR than the much larger group of ethnic Georgians, became an issue again when, in spring 1991, a joint group of Abkhaz and Georgian legal experts drafted an

²¹ According to some reports, 98% of all students enrolled at Ivane Javakhisvili Tbilisi State University (TSU) in 1987 were ethnic Georgians (Coppieters, 2002, p.101).

²² For more on the status of ethnic Abkhaz in the Abkhaz ASSR in the 1970s, see *Zarya Vostoka* (27 April 1973, p.2); Benet (1974). For more on the status of different nationalities in Abkhazia in the 1980s, see also RFE/RL (10 March 1989).

²³ It must be pointed out, however, that this has not always been the case in Abkhazia and that these changes were taking place mainly during the previous two decades of the Soviet Union – in the 1970s and especially the 1980s. In 1980, for instance, the regional Communist Party organisation of Abkhazia complained that it was ethnic Georgians who were overrepresented in the Abkhaz Communist Party, accounting for 51% of the membership positions while constituting only 43.9% of the overall population of Abkhazia at the time (Slider, 1985, p.53; see also Shnirelman, 2001, pp.211–2).

electoral law governing legislative elections in Abkhazia. The number of deputies was reduced from 130 to 67, of whom 28 would be ethnic Abkhaz (who constituted 17.8% of the total population of Abkhazia at the time); 26 Georgians (45.7%); and 11 seats divided between Armenian (14.6%), Russian (14.4%), Greek (2.8%) and other nationals of Abkhazia. According to this new law, a two-thirds majority would be required to pass legislation.²⁴ Many in Georgia were against this arrangement, dubbing the law *apartheid*-like. They believed that the 17.8% Abkhaz should not be allocated more seats than the 45.7% Georgians.²⁵

What the above-listed examples demonstrate is that the privileged position of the titular nationalities, whether in autonomous territories or at the republican level, led to continuous counter-accusations by each side and aided the accumulation of grievances. It further created a suspicious environment among conflicting groups where no-one was willing to trust the intentions of the other.

Already in 1985, these counter-accusations and suspicions led one Western analyst to remark that “no solution exists to these problems that would satisfy both the Abkhaz and the Georgians. Both perceive the nationalist strivings of the other ethnic group as a threat to their own rights” (Slider, 1985, p.65). In this context, a sense of victimisation became particularly relevant, and the opposing communities almost competed with one another to demonstrate who had suffered the most at the hands of the other group. Bruno Coppieters (2002, p.110) sums up the situation eloquently when he argues that inter-ethnic relations in Georgia

constitute long-term cycles of victimisation in which the perpetration of aggression or the refusal to redress historical injustices is justified by a previous victimization, so that every community considers that it has objective grounds for seeing itself as a victim and refusing to acknowledge guilt.^{26,27}

Indeed, the issue of victimisation became one of the main issues in Georgian–Abkhaz and Georgian–Ossetian relations and played a decisive role in constructing conflicting group identities. In fact, as I argue, it was this sense of victimisation and accompanying ethnic fears that led to the emergence of the security dilemma among these groups. In line with Kaufman's (2006, p.55) definition, security dilemma is understood in a broad sense here, referring to the situation when each group's actions, largely motivated by fear of the “other”, create fear and insecurity among members of the opposing group as well. Thus, as Christoph Zürcher (2005, p.10) points out, “the mobilisation of the three groups was an interdependent process in which each action produced a counteraction”. In this way, contrary to the arguments advanced by mainstream security approaches discussed earlier, I argue that the security dilemma in

²⁴See *Svobodnaya Gruzija* (11 July 1991; 17 October 1991; 4 December 1991; 14 May 1992, p.2); Zürcher, 2007, p.130).

²⁵See author's interviews with members of the national movement of Georgia in the late 1980s and early 1990s – journalist Nino Ratashvili and Professor Nodar Natadze, one of the founders and a Chairman of the Popular Front of Georgia.

²⁶Coppieters (2002) originally makes this argument in relation to Georgian–Abkhaz relations but it is also relevant in the case of Georgian–Ossetian relations.

²⁷For more on this, see also Crelinsten (1996, pp.175–85); Coppieters (1998, p.164).

Georgia was not simply the result of institutional weakness of the Soviet Union and the ensuing “domestic anarchy”, manifesting itself in the late 1980s only. Rather, it was embedded in the very institutional structure of the Soviet Union and was unfolding over the course of several decades.

2. Language and Ethnicity in the Georgian SSR

Central to the issue of victimisation was the language question. While the authorities in Moscow actively promoted an idea of a nation fixed to a certain territory, they also promoted an alternative view, that of “an ethno-cultural community, typically a community of language” (Brubaker, 1996, p.35; see also Suny, 1993, p.110). As part of the process of *korenizatsiya* Bolsheviks embarked on promoting linguistic and cultural rights of the Soviet Union’s many nationalities, and supporting native languages was an important part of this process. By 1926, for instance, in Abkhazia alone, alongside Georgian and Abkhazian schools there were “43 Armenian, 41 Greek, 27 Russian, 2 Estonian and 2 German schools” (Slezkine, 1994, pp.417–8, 430). The language issue thus became an important tool in the politicisation of ethnicity in Georgia, especially as the three groups concerned all spoke different languages.²⁸

Linked to the language issue was also the question of alphabets. The Abkhaz language, with its complex sound system, was developed into a written language only in the mid-nineteenth century. Russian general Pyotr Karlovich Uslar is believed to have invented its alphabet in 1862 (Shnirelman, 2001, p.216). Uslar’s Abkhaz alphabet consisted of 37 letters and was largely based on Cyrillic script. Since then, however, it has gone through a number of changes until reaching its present-day form. In 1865, another Russian general, Ivan Alekseevich Bartolomei, suggested a different version of the Abkhaz alphabet, also based on Cyrillic, which became the basis of the first primer in the Abkhaz language, published in Tbilisi in 1892. In 1909 Alexei Chochua modified Uslar’s version of the Abkhaz alphabet and expanded it to 55 letters (Shnirelman, 2001, p. 216; Shenfield, 2012).²⁹

In the 1920s and 1930s considerable efforts were made to further “develop the Abkhaz language and introduce a more sophisticated vocabulary” (Blauvelt, 2007, p.219). Hence in 1926 the Cyrillic alphabet was replaced by a Latin-based alphabet devised by Georgia-born historian and linguist Niko Marr.³⁰ Marr’s so-called Abkhaz Analytical Alphabet contained 77 letters; however, two years later it would be replaced again by another Latin-based alphabet (Slezkine, 1994, p.427; 1996; Shenfield, 2012). Yet another switch of alphabets occurred in 1938, when “Russian, already the effective lingua franca of the Soviet Union, [became] compulsory subject

²⁸ The Georgian language, with its unique alphabet, is part of the Caucasian language family belonging to its Kartvelian (or South Caucasian) branch. The Abkhaz language, on the other hand, belongs to the North-West Caucasian branch of the same language family, while Ossetian is an Indo-European language and is part of its North-Eastern Iranian branch (RFE/RL, 8 December 1989, p.17; Toft, 2002, pp.129–30; Zürcher, 2007, pp.119–20).

²⁹ For more on the Abkhaz language, see also Hewitt (1995, pp.48, 57); Blauvelt (2013, p.8).

³⁰ Marr (1865–1934) was in charge of the Caucasus section of the Commission responsible for the study of the population of Russia and its borderlands.

of study in all schools”, and hence all Latin-based alphabets were made to switch to Cyrillic-based alphabets (Smith, 2006, p.500). Instead of Cyrillic, however, the Abkhaz language now acquired an adapted version of the Georgian alphabet, which continued to be used until after Stalin’s death. In 1954, Abkhaz began to be written in Cyrillic once more (Blauvelt, 2007, p.219).³¹ Having a written language (and therefore an alphabet) played an important role in the ethno-linguistic hierarchy of nationalities in the Soviet Union. These changes, often within rather short periods, therefore increased the sense of vulnerability among the Abkhaz and contributed to their feeling of victimisation as well as distrust of the authorities in Tbilisi.

These changes also affected the Ossetian language, although to a lesser degree. During the eighteenth century it was first written in a version of Arabic script; however, in 1844, a method was devised of writing Ossetian with the Cyrillic alphabet. After the establishment of Soviet rule, similarly to the Abkhaz case, a version of the Latin alphabet was introduced for written Ossetian during the period 1923–37. From 1938, the Georgian alphabet substituted Latin until Ossetian switched back to Cyrillic in 1954 (Omniglot, n.d.).

The Abkhaz and Ossetian sides have argued that switching their alphabets to Georgian was part of the Georgianisation policies that were directed towards linguistic and cultural assimilation of ethnic minorities in the Georgian SSR. It was believed that this was largely due to powerful positions held by two prominent Georgia-born communists – Stalin and Lavrenti Beria³² – whose decisions were often viewed as being in favour of Georgia and Georgians (RFE/RL, 26 June 1978, p.4).³³ While the real intentions of Stalin and Beria are questionable, it cannot be denied that the process of Georgianisation of ethnic minorities was indeed taking place in the 1930s and 1940s in Georgia. This was particularly well manifested in the case of Abkhazia (Smith, 2008, p.9).

The 1922 Constitution of the Georgian SSR listed Abkhaz, Georgian and Russian as all being languages of government in Abkhazia. In practice, Russian remained both “the language of government and of daily life in Abkhazia”; in fact, the 1925 Abkhazian Constitution (Section 2, Paragraph 6) listed Russian as “[t]he language of state bureaus [organs] of the Abkhazian SSR” (Blauvelt, 2007, p.219). Thus, at the time – as now – teaching in Abkhaz schools was conducted in the Abkhaz language for the first four years only, after which all subjects were taught in Russian.³⁴ In 1944, however, it was announced that the education system in Abkhazia was significantly slowing the cultural development of the republic and that, in order to avoid this, it was

³¹ For more on this, see also *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* (1970, p.45); RFE/RL (26 June 1978, p.4; 11 August 1989).

³² Beria (1899–1953), born in Abkhazia, was another prominent Georgian Bolshevik. He served as the First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party on two occasions, in 1931–32 and 1934–38. In 1938 he was made the head of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) and was transferred to Moscow. He was arrested and executed in 1953 following Stalin’s death.

³³ Among some Western and Russian scholars who share similar views, see Glebov and Crowfoot (1989, p.79); Cheterian (2008, pp.156–7); Blauvelt (2009, p.654); Shnirelman (2003, p.60).

³⁴ See author’s interviews with Georgian IDPs – Lali Khutsishvili and Avto Gugeshashvili who fled Gagra, Abkhazia in 1992, and Guram Odisharia – a Georgian writer from Abkhazia. A historian by training, Odisharia served as Georgia’s Minister of Culture and Monument Protection in 2012–14.

necessary to introduce Georgian as a language of instruction in schools. It was argued that “Georgian culture, as unquestionably higher in relation to Abkhaz culture, has a direct influence on it and enriches it” (Blauvelt, 2007, pp.219, 221). Thus, from the following school year Georgian language textbooks were introduced in primary and secondary schools of the Abkhaz ASSR. More than 220 teachers reportedly lost their jobs during this time due to lack of knowledge of the Georgian language. Many schools in predominantly Abkhaz-populated regions of the autonomous republic were also forced to close down. As a result, this significantly affected ethnic Abkhaz populations’ chances of getting higher education and better employment. This policy continued until 1954, when the Abkhaz alphabet switched back to Cyrillic and teaching in schools (including Georgian-language schools in the Abkhaz ASSR) “reverted to the Russian language beyond the primary grades” (Blauvelt, 2007, pp.221, 224; see also Coppieters, 2002, p.92).³⁵

In this way, issues connected to the Abkhaz language and alphabet became increasingly important and contributed to the sense of victimisation among the Abkhaz who felt vulnerable about their future as a separate nationality amidst the dominance of Georgian language and culture.

South Ossetian complaints against Tbilisi were very similar to those of the Abkhaz, and language issues had been particularly instrumental in their campaign for separation from the Georgian SSR too. Indeed it could be argued that the publication of the Georgian state programme on language in late August 1989 acted as a catalyst for popular emotions in South Ossetia and the situation quickly deteriorated from then onwards (RFE/RL, 8 December 1989, p.19).³⁶ Published in the republican press, the programme underlined the importance of Georgian as the state language of the Georgian SSR and called for its “increased use ... in all spheres of public life” (RFE/RL, 8 December 1989, p.18; see also *Zarya Vostoka*, 25 August 1989a; 1989b, 1989c, pp.1, 2–3). If implemented, this decision would have had a significant effect on ethnic minorities, including the Abkhaz and Ossetians, who generally did not have sufficient knowledge of Georgian. In response, the regional newspaper of South Ossetia published the state programme on the development of the Ossetian language on 5 September 1989, proposing equal status for Ossetian, Georgian and Russian as the state languages of the autonomous *oblast* (*Sovetskaya Ossetia*, 5 September 1989, pp.1–2; *Akhalgazrda Komunisti*, 30 September 1989, p.7). On 26 September, however, the *Oblast* Supreme Soviet passed an amendment to Article 75 of the 1978 Constitution of the South Ossetian AO, declaring Ossetian as the sole state language of the *Oblast* (RFE/RL, 8 December 1989, p.19; see also 1 Arkhi TV, 2 December 2010). Until then, according to that Article, Georgian had been the state language in South Ossetia (*Zarya Vostoka*, 16 April 1978a; 1978b, p.3). Hence it was language-

³⁵ According to Rapiel Gelantia, a Georgian IDP from Abkhazia, before the outbreak of violence there were about 234 schools in Abkhazia, of which 170 were of Georgian language and the rest of Abkhaz–Russian language (author’s interview).

³⁶ For more on this, see also Birch (1996, p.161); Shnirelman (2001, p.355).

related issues that sparked a series of decisions and events that eventually turned from “wars of words” and “wars of laws” into actual physical violence in South Ossetia.

3. Inter-Ethnic Relations amidst Shifts in Soviet Nationality Policies

While for the first decade of the Soviet Union’s existence, it was the process of *korenizatsiya* that determined the structure and nature of Soviet ethno-federalism, by the early 1930s nationality policies were taking a different turn (Martin, 2001; Smith, 2006). A further striking innovation of this new “turn” in the nationality policies was the emergence of Russia and Russians at centre-stage of Soviet politics. During the process of *korenizatsiya* Russians had lost the privileges they had possessed during Tsarist times. Indeed, as residents of other Union republics they also experienced a certain negative discrimination. In 1935, however, Stalin pronounced that “non-Russian ‘mistrust’ had been overcome” and that it was now time to rehabilitate Russia and Russians (Martin, 2001, p.451).³⁷

This change in attitude towards the largest nationality of the Soviet Union was further manifested in the revival of the Russian language and culture. One of the first steps was the replacement of Latin alphabets in most literary standards written in the 1920s by the Cyrillic one in 1937–9. However, the changes of particular importance in the case of the Georgian SSR were those enacted in 1938, when Russian language became a compulsory subject in all non-Russian schools (Smith, 2006, p.500; see also Martin, 2001, pp.456–7). However, this period also coincided with large-scale voluntary resettlements of non-Abkhaz ethnic groups to Abkhazia – a process that in fact had its roots in the Tsarist period.

In 1864, the year when Abkhazia was fully subordinated to Tsarist rule, frontier wars in the Caucasus finally came to an end. As members of the North Caucasian tribal alliance, the Abkhaz were on the losing side and launched a series of unsuccessful uprisings in 1866 and 1877. As a result, significant numbers of Abkhaz were deported *en masse* to the Ottoman Empire, alongside other North Caucasian peoples.³⁸ This process is known as *mohajirstvo* (“migration”) and has an enormous symbolic meaning for the Abkhaz. Starting in the 1870s and 1880s these territories were instead resettled by other ethnic groups including Georgians (especially from western Georgia), Armenians, Estonians, Germans, Greeks and Russians (Kaufman, 2001, p.95; Blauvelt, 2007, p.206; Cheterian, 2008, pp.66, 68, 188). Hence it is from this period that the ethnic Abkhaz proportion of the native population of Abkhazia started to decline. By the time of the establishment of Soviet rule in Abkhazia in 1921, ethnic Abkhaz constituted only 32% of the total population of Abkhazia; their numbers dropped to 27.8% by 1926 and to 18% by 1939. Between 1926 and 1939 the proportion of ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia also fell, from 33.6% to 29.5%. In fact, during this time, resettlement of other ethnic groups (such as Armenians, Greeks and Russians) was much higher than that of Georgians. During 1939–59, however, the

³⁷ For more on this, see also Slezkine (1994, pp.434–5); Smith (2006, p.499).

³⁸ As a result, significant numbers of ethnic Abkhaz live in present-day Turkey and some Middle Eastern countries.

ethnic Georgian population of Abkhazia increased significantly – reportedly by 66,254 people, compared to less than 5,000 for the Abkhaz share of the population.³⁹

These shifts in demographics are often also associated with the above-mentioned policy of Georgianisation (Shnirelman, 2001, p. 207; Blauvelt, 2007, pp.217–8). However, political motives behind migration movements in Georgia cannot be disassociated from economic ones. Indeed, as some have argued, “both kinds of motives were strongly interlinked in the Soviet type of planned economy” (Coppieters, 2002, p.92). Thus, it seems more likely that these resettlement policies were part of the process of forced collectivisation that was taking place in the Abkhaz ASSR at the time.⁴⁰

Whatever the real reasons behind these resettlements, they affected the ethnic composition of Union republics as well as ethnic regions and the issue of demography became significantly politicised. In Georgia, it became a particularly sensitive issue with regard to both Abkhazia and South Ossetia and significantly contributed to the deepening of feelings of , insecurity, and suspicion among the opposing groups. In the Abkhaz ASSR the Abkhaz were on the defensive – as representatives of a minority group within their republic, they were concerned about losing the status of both the titular nationality and the autonomous territory (Coppieters, 2002, p.92). In South Ossetia, on the other hand, Georgians were concerned about their minority status within the autonomous *oblast*, which further exacerbated inter-ethnic tensions between these communities.

Following Stalin’s death in 1953 and after Nikita Khrushchev took over the office of General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, signs of a further ideological shift in Soviet nationality policies started to emerge. Khrushchev introduced a number of changes in relation to Soviet nationality policies which were manifested particularly well in his new education law (presented in November 1958). The law further affected the status of non-Russian languages by making knowledge of the Russian language compulsory at schools from grade one. Parents could now choose which language they wanted their children to be educated in and schools had the right “to drop the teaching of a second language” (Smith, 2006, p.510). This meant that ethnic minorities were now no longer required to learn the local languages of the republics in which they resided. In fact, as Dmitry Gorenburg (2006, pp.281–2) points out, many parents “did prefer to send their children to Russian language schools because of the perception that fluency in Russian was the key to a successful career” (see also Slezkine, 1994, p.449).

³⁹ See Slider (1985, p.52); Shnirelman (2001, p.207); Coppieters (2002, pp.92, 112); Blauvelt (2007, p.218); Cheterian (2008, p.69).

⁴⁰ Abkhazia was actually one of the last regions in the Georgian SSR to be collectivised. According to official figures, by 1934 only 34.1% of agriculture in Abkhazia was collectivised, while the overall figure for the Soviet Union in 1932 was already 61.5% (Blauvelt, 2007, pp.213, 218). However, it has to be pointed out also that the resettlements in Abkhazia did continue until the mid-1950s – well after the collectivisation of Abkhazia had been achieved (Blauvelt, 2007, p.218; see also Shnirelman, 2001, p.207).

This law had significant repercussions in Georgia too, and its impact went far beyond ideological shifts. Despite the Georgianisation policies in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the 1930s and 40s, knowledge of the Georgian language among ethnic minorities remained “abysmally low”. The census of 1970, for instance, indicates that there was very little, if any, linguistic assimilation between Georgians and the Abkhaz and the Ossetians.⁴¹

Kremlin’s policy of “national language – Russian bilingualism” (RFE/RL, 3 May 1978, p.11) continued during the rule of Leonid Brezhnev as well (in office 1964–82). Thus, the language issue remained very sensitive in Georgia and some members of the Georgian intelligentsia were publicly voicing concerns about the promotion of the Russian language and its extensive use in Georgian universities.⁴² In 1978, attempts to deny Georgian the status of the state language in the new draft constitution of the Georgian SSR even led to outbursts of public discontent and unprecedented mass demonstrations in Tbilisi.

As a result of these policies, fears of Russification became increasingly prominent among the Georgian public. Abkhaz and Ossetians traditionally maintained close links with Moscow and the Russian language served as the main tool of communication in these regions (much more important than Georgian, especially in Abkhazia). In fact, as Aleksandre Maisuradze, a Georgian IDP from Sokhumi (Sukhum) admits, “we spoke in Russian even with Georgians.... Russian was the main language of communication in Abkhazia” (author’s interview). The Georgian side continuously complained about the dominant position of Russian, arguing that Georgian was deliberately neglected and discriminated against, whether in the educational, public or cultural spheres (RFE/RL, 7 April 1981).⁴³ The same arguments were voiced against South Ossetia. Georgians complained that Georgian was official language only on paper in the autonomous *oblast*, and that reportedly there were no Georgian-language kindergartens in Tskhinvali, while there were 24 Ossetian and Russian-language ones (1 Arkhi TV, 18 November 2010). Thus, Russification became increasingly central to the discourse of inter-ethnic relations in Georgia.

Gorbachev’s accession to power in 1985 and his policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* did little to address these concerns and the issues concerning language and demography continued to dominate ethnic politics in Georgia for much of the 1980s. Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s speech at a founding meeting of the Popular Front of Georgia

⁴¹ 97.8% of Abkhaz claimed the Abkhaz language as their native language, 1.7% listed Russian, and only 0.6% claimed Georgian. Furthermore, only 1.4% of the Abkhaz stated that they had a good command of the Georgian language as a second language, while the figure for Russian was much higher – 59.8%. This is when there were more than twice as many ethnic Georgians living in the Abkhaz ASSR as Russians (RFE/RL, 26 June 1978, p.5). The situation was not much different in South Ossetia. Virtually the entire ethnic Ossetian population of South Ossetia considered Ossetian as their native language. In 1980, approximately 50% claimed fluency in Russian as a second language and only 14% claimed knowledge of Georgian (RFE/RL, 8 December 1989, p.17).

⁴² It is therefore no surprise that the 1975 decree of the Soviet Ministry of Education was met with strong dissatisfaction in Georgia. According to this decree all PhD dissertations written in the Soviet Union were now required to be submitted in Russian. This decision led to several petitions signed by 365 members of the Georgian intelligentsia arguing that such a move would result in a reduction of Georgian language scholarship and lead to its impoverishment (RFE/RL, 3 May 1978, p.8; Cheterian, 2008, p.159).

⁴³ For more on this, see also RFE/RL (10 March 1989, p.26); *Literaturuli Sakartvelo* (26 May 1989, p.2); Coppieters (2002, pp.96, 102).

in June 1989 sums up and reflects much of the concern of many ordinary Georgians at the time. The former dissident and one of the most prominent leaders of Georgia's national movement noted with regret that the Popular Front had begun its existence by publishing articles in two languages – Russian and Georgian – which he considered unacceptable:

In most regions of Georgia there are newspapers published in two languages already; not only in Abkhazia, not only in South Ossetia, but in other places too. [In certain regions we have] newspapers in two and three languages, even in four languages. I am telling you soon we will have four official languages in Georgia. ... Once again here we have the Kremlin's policy of privileging Ossetians and Abkhaz in Georgia. For some reason Abkhazia and [South] Ossetia are emphasised and the Popular Front is fighting for the rights of the Abkhaz and for the rights of Ossetians. Abkhaz and Ossetian interests have a very good defender in the shape of the Kremlin [applause] ... You [Popular Front] defend Georgia's interests. (1 Arkhi TV, 23 April 2010)⁴⁴

Even Merab Kostava, a long-time dissident and one of the most popular (and relatively moderate) leaders of the national movement of Georgia, argued that while Georgians could not forbid anyone from speaking their native language and ethnic minorities had a right to learn their own languages, “they were also obliged to learn Georgian and receive citizenship only through this means” (1 Arkhi TV, 2 December 2010).

At the time there was also a strong perception among many Georgians that Abkhaz and Ossetians were more concerned with the state of the Russian language in their autonomous territories than with the Abkhazian or Ossetian languages themselves. According to Tamar (Tamriko) Chkheidze, one of the founders and a chairwoman of the Ilia Chavchavadze Society, moderate segments of the national movement of Georgia were ready to support ethnic minorities in their quest to defend their group identities and to promote minority languages in schools. However, their response to this proposal often was that they wanted to be schooled in Russian rather than in Abkhaz or Ossetian (author's interview). In fact, in Sokhumi (Sukhum) in particular, for instance, even among ethnic Abkhaz, “almost no-one knew Abkhaz language” (author's interview with Levan Berdzenishvili⁴⁵). “This is why Georgians did not believe that the Abkhaz and Ossetian popular movements were genuine and considered them as Russian movements from the very start”, argues Tamriko Chkheidze (1 Arkhi TV, 13 March 2010; see also author's interview). Since language played such an important part in the Soviet understanding of an ethnic group, lack of commitment to their native languages was perceived by Georgians as a sign that the Abkhaz and Ossetians were, in fact, advancing Russia's interests rather than their

⁴⁴ See also 1 Arkhi TV (27 February 2010).

⁴⁵ A philologist by training, Berdzenishvili taught history of antique literature and Greek and Latin languages at Tbilisi State University and Abkhaz State University. He was one of the founders of the Republican Party of Georgia in 1978 and had been involved in dissident activities since 1979. In 1984–87, he was imprisoned for “Anti-Soviet Agitation and Propaganda”. He served as a Member of Parliament in 2004–2008 and 2012–2016.

own. The two issues therefore soon became closely intertwined and almost inseparable, and the Georgian–Abkhaz and Georgian–Ossetian conflicts were now viewed as “part of the increasingly tense Russo–Georgian relations” (Coppieters, 2002, p.96).

When it comes to the Russian-Georgian relations, however, most western commentators fail to acknowledge, or give due credit to, this aspect of the relationship. They mainly focus on Russian involvement in the military campaigns in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and while no scholar would go as far as denying Kremlin’s influence on the events in Georgia, the general conclusion tends to be that the Georgian side often dramatically exaggerated this influence (Zürcher, 2005, p.12, 19). What the above examples demonstrate, however, is that from the Georgian perspective, Russian involvement in these conflicts goes far back, and far beyond Moscow’s political and military assistance to the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides in the early 1990s. As Vladimir (Lado) Papava, Georgia’s Minister of Economic Development in 1994–2000, points out, “there is Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, there is Georgian-Ossetian conflict, but there is also Georgian-Russian conflict and it has existed from the very beginning. These conflicts are all intertwined. ... They are all together ... [and] they do not exist separately” (author’s interview). This further contributed to the development of the security dilemma in Georgia since from the Georgian perspective the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides could not be trusted because the real driving force behind them and the real decision-maker was, in fact, Russia.

V. Concluding Remarks

As this paper shows, the institutional capacity of autonomous units was only one “side-effect” of the territorialisation of ethnicity. An equally important aspect of Soviet nationality policies was the “ranking” and “hierarchical ordering”⁴⁶ of different ethno-linguistic groups. In this way, in addition to resources, what these policies provided to Soviet Union’s multitude of nationalities was resentments (Bunce, 2005, p.430). Under the Soviet ranking system, certain ethnic groups were privileged in some parts of the country and disadvantaged in others. As a titular nationality of the Union republic, ethnic Georgians held a privileged position at the central level in the Georgian SSR while being relatively disadvantaged in autonomous territories. On the other hand, ethnic Abkhaz, who were in a minority within the Abkhaz ASSR, were considered a titular nationality there and enjoyed a privileged position vis-à-vis the numerically much larger group – ethnic Georgians. The Ossetians of South Ossetia were also a titular nationality in their autonomous *oblast*. This “status pyramid” (Horowitz, [1985] 2000, p.24) also set the rules of ethnic bargaining. This unequal, subordinated relationship between ethnic communities provided a framework through which inter-ethnic relations played out over time and played a decisive role in the formation of conflicting group identities among ethnic Georgians, Abkhaz and Ossetians. Relations between these groups were marked by

⁴⁶I borrow these terms from Donald Horowitz ([1985] 2000).

resistance to, and victimisation by, the “other” group which further intensified feelings of insecurity and vulnerability among them (Slider, 1985; Coppieters, 1998; 2002; Bunce, 2005). As a result, inter-ethnic relations in Georgia were largely characterised by visceral mutual suspicion between different groups.

Georgianisation policies in the 1930s and 1940s further affected Abkhaz and Ossetian populations, providing these groups with a sufficiently long list of grievances and serving as a powerful motive for them to seek secession from Georgia. The Abkhaz ASSR was a particularly interesting case in this regard. Unlike South Ossetian elites, Abkhaz elites had direct access to high-ranking decision-makers in the Kremlin, who often vacationed in Abkhazia. This provided them with an opportunity to bypass the Georgian authorities in Tbilisi and stay in direct contact with Moscow. This could also explain their more active role in terms of staging protests and organising rallies. In the decades following Stalin’s death, concessions granted to the Abkhaz from Tbilisi and Moscow meant that the Stalinist-era Georgianisation policies turned into Abkhazianisation policies in the 1970s and 1980s in Abkhazia, which further heightened a sense of insecurity among its ethnic Georgian population.

Ethnic fears and insecurities among Georgians were also due to intensified Russification policies that stemmed from Khrushchev’s renewed efforts to promote the teaching of the Russian language across the Soviet Union. Since Abkhaz and Ossetians both demanded the transfer of their autonomous territories from the Georgian SSR to the RSFSR, from the Georgian perspective these ethnic groups were increasingly viewed through the prism of Georgian–Russian relations. These minority groups were perceived as the Kremlin’s allies against Georgia and their grievances, however legitimate, were regarded as provocations and manipulations orchestrated from Moscow. Thus, ethnic mobilisation and subsequent ethnic conflict in Georgia was closely intertwined with anti-Soviet (anti-Kremlin) mobilisation; it was shaped as much by inter-ethnic relations between Georgians and Abkhaz and Ossetians as by attitudes to Moscow (Smith, 2008, p.12). From the Georgian perspective these two issues (concerning Georgia’s minorities and relations with Moscow) were inseparable – a view that continues to dominate the current Georgian discourse on these conflicts.

Consequently, as I argue in this paper, Soviet nationality policies contributed significantly to the development of the security dilemma. Broadly defined, the security dilemma emerges when ethnic fears and insecurities among members of a particular group create fears and insecurities among members of the opposing group (Kaufman, 2006, p.55). When understood in this general sense, the security dilemma was not solely the result of the collapse of the central state authority and the subsequent “domestic anarchy” of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Rather, it was one of the long-term side effects of Soviet nationality policies, evolving over the course of several decades