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Nationalism as an Obstacle to Conflict Resolution and Peace Building Processes in Georgia

DOI: 10.52340/isj.2022.26.04

Abstract. The article seeks to explore the impact of nationalism on Georgia's ethno-territorial conflicts and its negative role in conflict transformation and peace building processes. By looking at fundamental differences and contradictions between Georgian, Abkhaz and Ossetian national projects, article claims that Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts were unavoidable. It also discusses all key arguments and counterarguments of conflicting parties, such as discrepancies in rethinking the history, demographic expansion, attempt of assimilation, linguistic politics, etc. When nationalism becomes key trigger of conflict and mistrust between the parties, the ground for external intervention is convenient to use existing situation and strengthen its influence in a country or region. In Georgian ethno-territorial conflicts, this destructive external power was Russian Federation. Hence, disagreement between Georgian, Abkhaz and Ossetian national projects as well as Russia's destructive engagement and declaration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, postpones conflict resolution and complicates peace building processes.

Keywords Nationalism, Ethnic Conflicts, National Idea, Conflict Solution, Peace Building

Introduction

Answer to the question - was nationalism one of the leading causes for rising ethnic confrontation in Georgia and does it create serious obstacle for conflict resolution is quite straightforward. Our hypothesis is: as far as national projects and identity of Georgian, Abkhaz and Ossetian people were completely contradictory, conflicts were inevitable.

According to Georgian narrative, Abkhazia is one of the provinces of Georgia and has always been part of the country. Consequently, it is impossible to argue that Georgia would ever consent to the secession of Abkhazia, especially when 45% of the population of Abkhazia was ethnic Georgians. While Abkhazian narrative claims that Abkhazians are different people, distinguished by their history, language and culture and, as every people, they have right to self-determination and creation of their own state (Lakoba, 1995, p.105).

Ossetian case is slightly different as their land is divided between two states (Russia and Georgia). Therefore, their aspiration of being united within one state is understandable, however, Georgian narrative annuls their claim and argues that South Ossetia as an administrative entity is artificially created and does not have legitimate ground. South Ossetia was established by Bolsheviks due to fragility of Georgian state and Ossetians who settled after the 17th century on this territory where referred as South Ossetians. For this reason, Ossetians have legitimate right of claiming cultural autonomy but no right to secession (Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict, 2011 p.9).

Considering contradictions between Georgian, Abkhaz and Ossetian versions of truth, the answer to the question – what are borders of Georgia? What is Abkhazia and what is South Ossetia will

be also contradictory and depend on the ethnic background of the person giving the answer. Therefore, it is not surprising that the resolution of the Georgian conflicts is so problematic. Although nowadays Georgians are ready to give maximum political autonomy to Abkhazia and South Ossetia within the country, the scenario became absolutely unacceptable for Abkhazians and Ossetians. They simply have no desire to be national minorities in Georgian national-state as it does not coincide with their national projects (Jones, 2013 p.28-29).

Considering complexity of ethno-territorial conflicts that took place in Georgia, they cannot be referred as usual ethnic conflicts between majority and minority, where minorities are fighting for their rights and the majority deprives them. Apart from this, definition of ethnic conflict does not apply to Georgia's case as source of the conflict has not been ethnic minority's fight to the majority's violence. Perhaps this thesis is true in the case of already formed, developed nation-state, where the majority must be responsible for the protection of minorities' right. While Georgia has not been independent country when these conflicts emerged, Abkhazian and Ossetian secessionist movement as the response to the violence of the Georgian state is not justifiable version.

Denial of ethnic dimension of the conflict is common for all conflicting parties. According to Georgia's official narrative, conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have political backgrounds, not ethnic one, frequently emphasizing that not Abkhazian or Ossetian people are fighting against Georgians, but separatists who want to destroy the territorial integrity of Georgia. Abkhazian and Ossetian leaders also declare that they are not fighting against Georgian people but against Georgian imperialists, who deny the right of their self-determination. Some scholars also argue that the idea of "ethnic conflicts" used in Western academia refers to "Third World" and never to the conflicts of the same nature occurring in Western Countries, which means that conflicting sides are considered as "backward" and "non-civilized" (Nodia, 1997, p. 5).

One way or another, there was no progress towards resolving of Georgian conflicts, despite engagement of significant international and transnational actors such as United Nations and Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Historical retrospective of Abkhazian problem

Abkhaz language belongs to North Caucasian linguistic family, and in this aspect their next of kin are Adygeans, Kabardinians and Circassians. However, lifestyle and spiritual culture of Abkhazians are closely connected to Georgian culture and there is just a little difference between them and Georgian other sub-ethnic groups - Megrelians and Svans. There is only indisputable question for scholars that besides Abkhaz language, by economic, political and cultural aspects the region was legitimate part of Georgia. Moreover, it was principality of Abkhazia (covered approximately the territory of present Gudauta district) where Georgia's unification took start back in IX century. Kingdom of Abkhazia, which included the entire West Georgia with the capital city of Kutaisi, was formed and "Abkhaz" meant the resident of Western Georgia or West Georgian (supposedly in that period 90% of Western Georgia's residents were ethnic Georgians, arguing that at that time Abkhazians were ethnically not Georgians, but from North Caucasian origin). At the end of X century after West and East Georgia's unification, the "Abkhaz and Georgian kingdom" was formed, and in the beginning of XII century, after uniting with Kakheti-Hereti, the term "Georgia" was introduced (Studies in History of Georgia, 1973 Vol. II.,pp. 416-445).

In the beginning of XV century, when Georgia disintegrated and Abkhazia was formed as a separate principality, Abkhazia's estrangement from Georgia started. This was supported by

weakening of Christianity, establishment of ottoman's protectorate, Islam introduction, North Caucasians' immigration and separation from Georgian linguistic-cultural environment. However, the official language of Abkhaz Principality remained Georgian and Abkhaz aristocracy was the part of Georgian noble society. After establishing Russia's protectorate, Abkhaz Principality existed for over half a century and officially was abolished in 1864 and replaced by Sukhumi Okrug, which became part of Kutaisi region (guberniya). In Caucasian war led by North Caucasians against Russia, which lasted for half a century, Abkhaz people fought alongside with North Caucasians. Another key part in Abkhaz history is their deportation to Turkey in 1864, 1866 and 1877-78 years as this process decreased number of Abkhazians in the region and some territories became entirely uninhabited (Studies in History of Georgia, 1970 Vol. V, pp.216-226).

Russian Empire's attitude toward Abkhazians was shifted in the beginning of XX century. By that period, due to strengthening Georgian national movement for liberty, which aimed at restoring Georgian state, one of the best opportunities to prevent Georgia's aspiration towards independence was creation of inner dispute. The strategy of supporting Abkhazians against Georgians served exactly to that purpose. Russian propaganda used every effort to convince Abkhazians that Abkhazia and Georgia were two different countries, historical monuments in Abkhazia were not Georgian, etc. In addition, Abkhaz young people received primary, secondary and high education in Russian language and could not speak in Georgian (except for aristocracy). Consequently, newly formed Abkhaz intelligentsia had positive attitude towards Russia and not towards Georgia. Nonetheless, majority of Abkhaz people still supporting union with Georgians and in 1918, when Georgia declared its independence, Abkhazia entered into Georgia as an autonomies region, guaranteed by constitution of the first Georgian Democratic Republic.

In 1921, after Georgia's forced sovietisation and annexation by Russia, "independent" Soviet Socialistic Republic of Abkhazia was formed. However, in eight months status of Abkhazia was re-established and entered back to Georgia as "Republic under agreement", which officially ended in 1931 and Abkhazia became autonomic republic within Georgia's Soviet Socialist Republic. Abkhaz narrative argues that Georgian government downgraded Abkhazia's status twice, first from the "independent" republic to the union republic, and then to autonomic republic (Zhorzholiani, 2000, p. 76).

The first claim and most referred event by Abkhazians within Soviet Union is so called "demographic expansion", when number of ethnic Georgian population in Abkhazia increased six times. One of the reasons of migrating ethnic Georgians to Abkhazia was development of subtropical production. By the decision of USSR central government about 50.000 people moved to Abkhazia from the neighbouring Georgian provinces (not 150.000 as Abkhazians claim). It is noteworthy that according to the population census in 1989 (45,5%), the portion of ethnical Georgians in Abkhazia population was less than in 1886 (51,3%). Decrease of Abkhazians share in the same period (from 41% to 17,5%) is explained mainly by moving other ethnical groups to the region. Number of Russians in Abkhazia within the same period increased by 72 times, and Armenians by 75 times and made 15 -15 % each (Totadze,1993, pp. 57-75).

Another claim against Georgians is replacement of Abkhazian schools by Georgian ones, which is not objective claim. At Abkhazian Schools education was led in Abkhazian language only in the elementary grades, and after the fourth grade Abkhazian language was taught only as a subject, but all the other subjects were taught in Russian language. In 1938, Russian as an educational language in upper grades was replaced by Georgian, and in lower ones it remained Abkhazian. Consequently, there were no changes made to Abkhazian language education and Abkhazian schools were not replaced with Georgian. In 1953, the upper grade language became

Russian again, and Georgian language was removed from Abkhazian schools. Therefore, Abkhazian young people were restricted to study Georgian language, which caused estrangement of the whole generations from Georgian language and culture. While Abkhazians learnt Russian and got acquainted with Russian culture, which eventually created sufficient ground for stirring up the ethnical conflict (Davitashvili, 2003, 413-414).

Abkhazians were one of the most privileged ethnic groups within the Soviet Union and one needs to mention that it was the only autonomic republic where the local language had the status of state-language and Abkhazians, who were 17% of the population, occupied almost all of the major positions. Opposing to this process, Russian propaganda and Abkhazian press claimed that Abkhaz people were oppressed by Georgians, which became one of the leading factors stopping Abkhaz people supporting Georgia's independence after breaking up of Soviet Union and in case of Georgia's independence declared their will to integrate into Russia (Bondyrev, Davitashvili, Singh 2015, p.28).

In 1992, when Georgia became independent country and internal civil wars erupted, Abkhazian took several provocative steps, in particular, they interrupted Georgian constitution being into the force, detained ethnic Georgians, rob trains, etc. Considering existing situation, Georgian government displayed internal military units on the territory of Abkhazia with the purpose of re-establishing state order, which closely resonated with Russia's strategy of playing destructive role. In 1992, war started where inexperienced, inappropriately equipped and weak Georgian army and volunteers fought against Russian well-equipped and experienced soldiers (most of them were veterans of Afghanistan war) and Kazak and North Caucasian soldiers, who made 80% of "Abkhaz army". In September 1993, Russians, North Caucasians and Abkhazians started mass attack to Sukhumi and violated ceasefire agreement which was concluded in July at the same year. After ten days of fight city of Sukhumi was surrounded and taken by joint Abkhaz-Russian troops and massive displacement of Georgian population started. Almost entire Georgian population had to flee from Abkhazia. Georgia managed to keep only upper part of Kodori Gorge with several thousands of ethnic Georgian residents. However, in 2008 after Russian-Georgian war, Russia occupied this territory too and declared Abkhazia's independence (which according to Georgian law and international society equals occupation of this region by Russia). Russia created one more explosive hot point and made the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity international problem.

Historical retrospective of South Ossetia/ Tskhinvali region problem

The fact that Ossetian people's ethnic genesis took place in North Caucasus and the first Ossetian settlements on the south side of the Caucasian range, on Georgia's territory appeared only in the beginning of XVII century, was not disputable even for Ossetian scholars. The first Ossetian settlement took place in highland regions of Georgia (upper parts of the rivers Liakhvi and Ksani) and occupied former settlements of Georgians who had moved to plains. In XIX century, Ossetians migration to Georgia became more intensive and area of their settlement became wider and Ossetian villages appeared in the plain areas of Kartli and Kakheti too. Within half a century, number of Ossetians residing in Georgia increased up to 150 thousand people. At the end of XIX century, the term "South Ossetia" first appeared, meaning the northern mountainous region of ShidaKartli, densely inhabited by Ossetians, present Java district and highland part of Akhgori district (Studies in History of Georgia, 1973 Vol. IV., pp. 429-433).

Ossetians, migrated to Georgia, had the status of “tenants” and experienced certain limitations. However, this status was removed in the beginning of XX century and they became the usual peasants and even obtained number of privileges. Again, this scenario was part of Russia’s strategy as Ossetians were considered as reliable people for the Empire and easy to motivate against Georgia’s national project. This process proved itself in 1918, when Georgia restored its independence and Ossetians turned out to be the most active opponents of the Georgian independent state. Having support from Russian Bolsheviks, they organized two riots, but both times were defeated and over 20 thousand of Ossetians escaped and took shelter in North Caucasus.

In 1921, after sovietisation and factual annexation of Georgia by Soviet Russia, the politics of punishing Georgia due to its aspiration towards independence and encouraging Ossetians for opposing their will started and in 1922, Autonomous Region of South Ossetia was established. With this step new political unit was formed on Georgia’s territory and the term - “South Ossetia” entered into legal force and emphasized the existence of “two Ossetia”. The autonomic region in real Ossetia’s territory was created only two years later within Russian Federation.

The fact that South Ossetia was an artificial formation complicated border determination process of the unit. Districts compactly inhabited by the Ossetians (Java, Znauri and the part of Akhmagori) were few. For this reason, it was necessary to include neighbouring plain regions, where Ossetian villages were scattered among Georgian ones, into autonomies region of South Ossetia. In that way over hundreds of Georgian villages appeared within South Ossetia’s administrative unit. The nearest town to that territory and later on capital was Tskhinvali, in which according to the population census in 1886, Ossetian representation was zero and the whole population of the town was consisted of Georgians, Armenians and Jews (Totadze,1993, p. 82). Borders of autonomous province was established in a way that Tskhinvali appeared within it. South of Tskhinvali directly crossed Georgian villages, which administratively belonged to Gori district and never was part of autonomous region. The north of Tskhinvali was also surrounded by nine Georgian villages, which formed the continuous 20 km zone of settlement at the Liakhvi riverside. In that way the town located entirely among ethnic Georgian villages with zero representation of Ossetian inhabitants became the centre of South Ossetia.

Within Soviet power situation has radically changed and Tskhinvali turned into the Ossetian town. According to the population census in 1989, ethnic Ossetians made 70% of the town with 41 thousand residents and Tskhinvali became the centre of Ossetian culture. There was Pedagogical Institute, Ossetian theatre of Tskhinvali, Ossetian newspapers and magazines, etc. In total, 98 Ossetian schools were functioning in the province, while in historical Ossetia (North Ossetia) not a single Ossetian school existed. All major research on Ossetian language, literature and Ossetian history was conducted only in Tskhinvali and all of this process was accompanied by purposeful policy to estrange Ossetians from Georgian culture and since 1953, education in Georgian language was also ceased in Ossetian schools. As a result, unlike the older generations who spoke fluent Georgian, for the younger generations Georgian language and culture became estranged and was replaced by Russian. (Bondyrev, Davitashvili, Singh 2015, p.30)

Processes described above created convenient ground for Ossetian separatism and aspiration to secede South Ossetia from Georgia and unite it with North Ossetia within Russian Federation. At the end of the 80s, when Georgia’s national movement for liberty strengthened and Georgia’s independence became a real, Ossetian separatism powerfully exploded. The first step was change of status of autonomous province and declaration of autonomous republic instead of it, while Georgian government (still Communistic) annulled this decision, which became one of

the triggers of the conflict. In October 1990, South Ossetia declared its independence from Georgia and after parliament elections took place and communists' power ended, radical nationalists led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia came into power. This new government took a radical steps against Ossetian separatism, which turned into the military conflict. When Zviad Gamsakhurdia was replaced by Eduard Shevardnadze, the agreement on cessation of fire was reached and the region was occupied by Russian peacekeepers who supported Ossetian separatists' interests. The situation turned into a frozen conflict, however, the everyday relations and communication between Ossetian and Georgian populations have not stopped (De Waal, 2010, pp. 139-145).

In 2004, after Rose Revolution, new government led by Mikheil Saakashvili took active steps to settle the conflict and reintegrate South Ossetia into Georgia. However, Russia's interest keeping South Ossetia and Abkhazia far from Georgia's jurisdiction was still influential and one of the best ways of reaching this purpose was provoking new conflict. In August of 2008 Georgia gave an answer to Georgian village bombing and opened the fire to Tskhinvali. Russia reached its goal and drew into the war against Georgia. As a result of the war, Russia fully occupied South Ossetia, and ruined to the ground Georgian villages of Liakhvi gorge, which was followed by Russia's declaration of South Ossetia as "independent state" and disposed a military base on its territory. In this way, the middle of Georgia, surrounded from three sides by Georgian regions and from the fourth side separated by Caucasian range from Russia, is occupied and severed from rest of the country. Russian army is displayed within 40 km from Tbilisi, which is extremely dangerous and can serve as a real source for provoking international conflict.

Conclusion. Nationalism played a big role in escalation of ethno-conflicts in Georgia as well as in the whole post-Soviet space. Different and incompatible national projects triggered Georgian-Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhazian conflicts. When a cause of a conflict lies in confronting nationalist ideas, this creates a good foundation for a third power to step in and pursue its own interests during the conflict resolution.

In case of Georgia Russia has been such a third party which has been actively supporting separatism. Its contribution in worsening the confrontations in Georgia is non-debatable. Russian's engagement and position towards those conflicts has always been one of the major impediments of conflict resolution and peace building. However, an important question about those conflicts still needs to be answered: were Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts inevitable? Our working hypotheses states that those two conflicts were inevitable due to diametric difference and contradictory character of Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian national projects.

Even without Russian engagement and its support of separatism, a huge difference and incompatibility of Georgian, Abkhazian and Ossetian national ideas and identity perspectives could be enough to trigger conflicts. Georgia's perception of Abkhazia as one of its provinces and its consideration of South Ossetia as an administrative unit in Shida Kartli, artificially created by Bolsheviks, contradicts self-perceptions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The former considers itself as a state independent from Georgia and the latter sees whole Ossetia (North and South) as an artificially divided country.

Abkhazian and Ossetian accusations towards Georgia related to understanding the historical path, demographic challenges, linguistic issues or educational aspects as well as Georgian counter accusations clearly demonstrated how poor a mutual trust is and how unyielding the positions are. In the beginning a level of Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian integration was pretty high, a proof of which could be found in a high proportion of mixed marriages. During the early stage of confrontation an opposition was mainly present in between elite groups and not that much among masses. And yet the probability of conflicts gradually

increased. In 1980s and 90s, when nationalism was already widespread among wider population, conflicts became inevitable.

Considering the aforementioned, we believe, that our hypothesis that nationalism made Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts inevitable, was proved to be true. Nationalism also stays as a great obstacle on the way of conflict resolution and peace building along with the Russian factor.

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Национализм как препятствие для разрешения конфликтов и миростроительства в Грузии

Резюме

Ключевые слова: национализм, этнические конфликты, национальная идея, решение конфликтов, миростроительство.

В статье делается попытка исследовать влияние национализма на этнотерриториальные конфликты в Грузии и его негативную роль в процессах трансформации конфликтов и миростроительства. Рассматривая принципиальные различия и противоречия между грузинским, абхазским и осетинским национальными проектами, в статье утверждается, что грузино-абхазский и грузино-осетинский конфликты были неизбежны. Также обсуждаются все ключевые аргументы и контраргументы конфликтующих сторон, такие как разногласия в переосмыслении истории, демографическая экспансия, попытка ассимиляции, языковая политика и др. Когда национализм становится ключевым триггером конфликта и недоверия между сторонами, почвой для внешнего вмешательства удобно использовать сложившуюся ситуацию и усилить свое влияние в стране или регионе. В грузинских этнотерриториальных конфликтах такой разрушительной внешней силой была Российская Федерация. Таким образом, разногласия между грузинским, абхазским и осетинским национальными проектами, а также деструктивное вмешательство России и

провозглашение Абхазии и т.н. Южной Осетии независимыми государствами отодвигают разрешение конфликта и усложняют процессы миростроительства.