

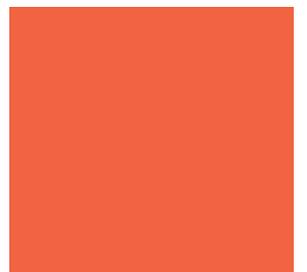
Swiss Study Foundation Summer School

# History, Threats and Opportunities. The Case of Georgia and Armenia

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## | Preface

«History, Threats and Opportunities» – these three keywords are certainly closely intertwined in the region known as the South Caucasus. Complicated historical legacies influence the economic, political and societal transformation processes that set in after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The same legacies play into the renewed ethno-territorial conflicts that began in the 1990s, conflicts that themselves have an impact on the transformation processes in the various countries. The South Caucasus remains, furthermore, a region in which different energy and geopolitical interests collide.

The Swiss Study Foundation (SSF) assembled a group of students to explore these complex relationships in Georgia, Armenia and the de facto state of Nagorno-Karabakh between August 27 and September 6, 2014. The group consisted of undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students and represented a wide range of disciplines such as Industrial Design Engineering, Educational Science, Eastern European History, Law, History/Philosophy/Economics, Business and Music Theory. Thus, upon landing in Tbilisi in the middle of the night most participants were both literally and figuratively to enter rather unfamiliar territory. The delegation was accompanied by students of Slavic Studies, History and Eastern European Studies from the University of Berne and Fribourg, the latter also being the host institution of the Academic Swiss Caucasus Net (ASCN). ASCN is a programme that aims to promote the Social Sciences and Humanities in the South Caucasus, initiated and supported by the GEBERT RÜF STIFTUNG, the largest private science foundation in Switzerland. ASCN maintains Local Coordination Units in both Georgia and Armenia, and was thus able not only to organize excellent speakers through its network but also to provide the logistics for the students' visit.

The programme of the summer school combined lectures as well as a cultural programme exploring both historical and religious sites such as Jvari, Mtskheta and the cities of Gori and Tbilisi in Georgia, the city of Yerevan and the monasteries of Noravank and Tatev in Armenia and the monastery of Gandzasar in Nagorno-Karabakh. Against the background of changing landscapes, lectures on various topics by academics and practitioners were scheduled, helping the students to deepen their knowledge of history, politics and society in the region. In line with the SSF's principle of curiosity, motivation and responsibility, the students were assigned different topics for pre-reading and further exploration during the study trip. The topics were broadly divided into two categories: (1) change, identities and values and (2) conflicts.

This publication presents a selection of the resulting essays. In the first category, two essays reflect on the overall transformation processes in post-Soviet Georgia and Armenia, while a third focuses on the relationship between religion and society in the two countries. The second part includes two essays on the conflicts in the region, focusing on the conflict over South Ossetia as well as the role of external actors in the conflict

resolution processes. The final contribution considers aspects from both categories by asking what role the European Union plays in the South Caucasus.

■ Anna Diem and Niklas Zimmermann examine *Democratization and Regime Change in Georgia since the Rose Revolution*. While noting progress in state-building and anti-corruption, the authors call into question the democratic credentials of the post-Rose Revolution government, thereby pointing out the shortcomings in checks and balances and the rule of law. Furthermore, they stress that the reforms failed to create jobs or an increase in living standards for society at large. The authors conclude that a neo-liberal model and a disciplinary state, as well as an elitist Western-funded «NGO-crazy» and a powerful, illiberal Church, remain serious obstacles to meeting European standards.

■ In *Armenia's Stalled Transformation Process* Sulamith Begemann and Ivo Meli take a closer look at the developments of post-independence Armenia, thereby assessing the transformation process in different dimensions. They show that while the level of corruption has decreased somewhat, progress in the other dimensions has not materialized. The electoral process is hampered by a dominant party, national and local governance are determined by the economic interests of the elite, civil society remains weak and the traditional media is controlled by political forces. The authors attribute these flaws in the transformation process inter alia to the unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, which has tied up resources and facilitated the construction of a centralized state apparatus, as well as the close connection between business and politics in Armenia, which disincentivises serious reforms.

■ Carla Cordin and Raphaela Cueni, in *Religion in States and Societies: Georgia and Armenia in Comparison*, focus on the aspect of religion and its roles in both countries. Their exploration begins by observing low religiosity (in terms of exercise of and attendance to religious practices) yet a high degree of trust in religious institutions as well as the high subjective importance attached to religion. The authors note a similar strong position of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgia and the Armenian Apostolic Church in Armenia. In both countries religion has played a significant role in the development of national identity. However, while religious freedom in Georgia is somewhat better protected, the Church or the patriarch have considerable (unchecked) influence on politics and political and social discourse, whereas in Armenia the importance of religion is to be found on a more cultural level.

■ Veronica Schärer and Elena Schwarz, in *The Georgian and South Ossetian Conflict and the 2008 Georgian-Russian War*, take up the prominent topic of the ethno-political struggle over Georgia's formerly autonomous region of South Ossetia. While also taking the historical perspective into account, the authors ascertain that the cause of the outbreak of the conflict in the 1990s lies within the weakness of the state at that time. After the war South Ossetia became a de facto independent zone and the conflict was frozen. Renewed tensions culminated in the 2008 Georgian-Russian War. While considering the

responsibility for the beginning of the renewed conflict, the authors identify the contentious issue of Russia profiting from the new status quo that has considerably improved its strategic position in the Southern Caucasus.

■ Stefan Kissmann and Jan Serwat ask *Which Roles have Russia, the EU, the USA and other External Actors Played in the Resolution of the Conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia?* Taking the status quo as a form of resolution they identify Russia as the dominant actor working towards this «resolution» of the conflicts. While they see South Ossetia and Abkhazia as totally dependent on Russia, the latter is less engaged in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh but maintains the military equilibrium between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The strategy of the USA and the EU is considered to be primarily driven by energy interests, thus favouring stability over conflict with Russia. Given the preference of the big powers for the status quo, i.e. ensuring a ceasefire in the conflicts, the authors consider the influence of other powers, such as Turkey and Iran, to be of only limited magnitude.

■ Julian Moritz Renninger and Tamara Brunner examine *The Role of the EU in the South Caucasus*. Demonstrating the very diverse challenges the three countries – including Azerbaijan – are facing, they argue that the Eastern Partnership and the Association Agreements proposed by the EU have to be considered inapt or inadequate means of structuring the EU's relationship with the countries of the South Caucasus. Rather, the EU needs customized strategies and their unambiguous implementation in order to help create stability, which in many respects is of the utmost importance to the EU as well as the region.

This wide range of essays provides an excellent insight into the understanding of the region the students attained through their participation in the SSF summer school, an understanding that demonstrates how history, threats and opportunities are inextricably linked.

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# I Democratization and Regime Change in Georgia since the Rose Revolution

## I Introduction

In November 2003 a transition of power took place in Georgia. The Rose Revolution was the initial spark for a series of «colour revolutions» in post-Soviet states<sup>1</sup> which the Georgian political scientist Ghia Nodia has termed «catch-up revolutions» due to their aspirations for normality, legality and the mainstream instead of rejecting these concepts (Jones 2012: 5–6). An opposition coalition formed around former Minister Mikhail Saakashvili and his party United National Movement (UNM) accused president Shevardnadze of election fraud and mobilized a protest movement in Tbilisi – protesters charged the parliament with roses in their hands and interrupted Shevardnadze's opening speech, demanding his resignation. Due to lack of support within his own ranks and the mediation of international diplomacy, Shevardnadze resigned and the parliamentary elections were annulled. Saakashvili won the presidential elections in January 2004 with a majority of 96%. Immediately after the formation of a new government, radical reforms were implemented in the name of democratization, with explicit reference to western values. A new generation came to power, Georgia thereby setting an example for other post-Soviet states to follow. In an attempt at state-building and invigorating an all but collapsing statehood, far reaching reforms were introduced (Halbach 2013: 7–25). These reforms predominantly concerned the judicial system and the separation of powers and were intended to strengthen executive power by fighting corruption and nepotism, while no investments were made in public infrastructure and social services. The new government was reshaped according to a radical neo-liberal model understanding statehood primarily as the guarantor of the rule of law and order.

<sup>1</sup> The Orange Revolution in Ukraine followed in November 2004, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005.

This paper evaluates how democratization has evolved in Georgia since the Rose Revolution and critically assesses whether the Saakashvili administration has met its self-declared goal of living up to European standards. The political system, state-building and rule of law, social policy and participation, the role of the highly influential Georgian Orthodox church as well as civil society and NGOs serve as exemplary fields for this evaluation.<sup>2</sup>

## I Democracy and Democratization in Georgia

### The political system since the Rose Revolution

After Saakashvili won the presidential elections in January 2004, the separation of powers was readjusted by constitutional amendments in favour of the executive, and hence the development took the direction of a super-presidential system. Particularly under Saakashvili there was at least a partial cult of personality, a political messianism which is considered a typical feature of post-Soviet states. Despite the permanent emphasis on western values, the shift to a powerful president prolonged the post-Soviet tradition of an expanding executive (Jones 2012: 9).

Nonetheless, in a first period from 2004 to 2007 the Georgian government can be still considered as democratic at heart. Further democratization was only a mid-level priority but the government enjoyed broad popular support for pursuing the agenda of state-building, political and economic reform and the attempt to restore Georgia's territorial integrity. But beginning with

<sup>2</sup> It is clear that a teleological conception of democratization is highly ideological and must be subjected to post-colonial critique. However, a discussion of this would go far beyond the scope of this essay.

the violent dispersion of demonstrations<sup>3</sup> in November 2007, in a second period until 2012 the Saakashvili government presented a different face, characterized by less fairly conducted elections, weaker media freedom and judicial independence. Saakashvili fulfilled the protesters' demand for resignation and was immediately re-elected in January 2008. The early presidential elections and the following parliamentary election in May 2008 were not completely unfair but certainly imperfect. While all parties were able to campaign and the standards were very high for the Georgian and post-Soviet context, there were serious reports of obstructing opposition events and the distinction between State activities and the campaign of Saakashvili's party, the UNM, was blurred (Mitchell 2012: 129–131). The UNM won the elections with 59.2% of the vote and achieved a constitutional majority. The opposition parties were unable to unite and to provide a programmatic alternative. When from late 2007 the government lost its overwhelming popularity and credibility as the guardian of modernization and democratization, it drew away from programmatic issues and began to attack the opposition as linked to Russia. The claims had some foundation in reality, as some of the opposition leaders did indeed have ties to Russia (Mitchell 2012: 133). The opposition was not able to counter the nationalist propaganda with a programmatic vision. The 2012 program of the Georgian Dream (GD), a newly established broad multi-party coalition led by the richest man in Georgia, Bidzina Ivanishvili, was rather vague in advocating deepening the relations with the EU and NATO as well as other neighbours, fighting unemployment and reforming health care, education and social welfare

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<sup>3</sup> Despite the government's suggesting that the mass demonstrations of November 2007 were guided by external forces, they were to a large part due to the failure of the economic reforms to provide ordinary Georgians with jobs and reasonable incomes. Cf. Lazarus (2013: 10–11).

(Atilgan et al. 2012: 2–10). Except for the economically liberally-oriented governing party, the UNM, only small opposition parties such as the conservative-clerical Christian Democratic Movement and the state-socialist Labour Party provided a comprehensible program. The need to move away from personalized or – in the case of GD – money-dominated parties towards a political landscape distinguished by competing visions for Georgia's future remains.

Nevertheless, the parliamentary elections in October 2012 were a democratic breakthrough. The governing party UNM lost and, winning 85 out of 150 seats, GD under Ivanishvili took power. The opposition victory and the orderly handover of power are still remarkable in the post-Soviet context, where governments have regularly been overthrown by mass movements protesting against election fraud. And even though GD also won the communal elections in 2014, the UNM remains a vital opposition party. A further democratic breakthrough was that unlike in all previous cases the governing party did not fall apart after losing power, because the UNM has an ideological orientation and convinced loyalists. The influence of intellectuals and the libertarian faction even seems to be growing (Fairbanks and Gugushvili 2013: 116–126). Still, there are two obstacles when politicians of both camps want the country to be judged by European standards. First, Georgian politics must refrain from demonizing and punishing political opponents such as former president Saakashvili, who is actually forced to stay in exile. Second, the fact that Ivanishvili handed over the post of prime minister and left the presidential chair to his political ally Margelashvili does not mean that Georgian politics has drifted away from personalization, since Ivanishvili and the Orthodox patriarch Illia now dominate Georgian society as «shadow leaders» (Aprasidze 2014: lecture), whereas under Saakashvili the really powerful were visible to the public.

### State-building and rule of law

One of the central promises of the Rose Revolution was the modernization of the state. Saakashvili was especially determined to restore the state's authority such that it would be able to perform its basic functions. Regarding the aspect of territorial integrity, the Georgian state was not able to control three regions, two of which were pushing for separation. An early success of the Saakashvili government was the full reintegration of the southwest region of Adjara, where the local despot Aslan Abashidze was ousted by a «second Rose Revolution» in 2004 (Halbach 2013: 17). In contrast, the attempt to repeat this success in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, where ethnic difference, a violent historical background and the interference of Russia as a protecting power prevented any rapprochement, turned out to be a complete failure.

Far more successful were the attempts concerning tax collection and the fight against corruption and organized crime, which undermined state authority in the Shevardnadze era. It was with good reason that the new rules staged the Rose Revolution primarily as a fight against corruption. In 2002, three quarters of the Georgian population had no confidence in the state organs. The confidence in the police was especially bad, as it was perceived not as a protector of citizens but as a band of robbers. Together with zero-tolerance even for petty criminals, one main project of the Saakashvili administration was the police reform, unique within the post-Soviet space with its salary increase for the distinctly reduced staff and draconian penalties for corruption. A central part of the Rose Revolution was the fight against corruption and the «big, weak state» which made money out of the arbitrary regulation of economic activities. At least in the Index of Transparency International, Georgia improved from rank 124 in 2003 to rank 51 in 2012 and achieved a far better result than most post-Soviet states and even EU members like Italy, Romania or Slovakia (Halbach 2013: 11–12).

Do the achievements in the fight against crime and corruption mean that Georgia has become a state under the rule of law? Certainly not according to the Western type. Despite the permanent emphasis on Western values, compared to the lawlessness of the Shevardnadze era the Rose Revolution led to a disciplinary state in which a strong executive exercised power through military forces, the interior ministry and the secret services. Furthermore, there are serious doubts about the independence of justice when government interests are affected (Mitchell 2012: 134–136). Judicial independence had already decreased under the Saakashvili government, as judges were placed under strong pressure and wealthy Georgians were threatened with the suggestion that their businesses might suffer. And under the new government from 2012 an unprecedented persecution of former government officials began; even Saakashvili could not return to Georgia without the threat of being arrested. As Halbach points out, the GD government finds itself in a difficult dilemma. On the one hand persecution of its predecessors gives the impression of a victor's justice and revenge, an old tradition in Georgian politics. But on the other hand, society expects justice and the lawful prosecution of the former and current abusers of power (Halbach 2013: 18–22).

Zedania provides an interesting explanation of law- and state-building in the Georgian context, arguing that the Rose Revolutionaries and international donors followed the narrative of modernisation in an unreflective manner in which the informal sphere of corruption, clientelism and patronage is replaced by formal laws. But in Georgia particularistic values instead of universal values remained strong. The Saakashvili government weakened checks and balances to make the struggle towards the Western ideal more effective, with the effect that many described the new leadership as an informal group assembled around a powerful president (Zedania 2013: 469–479).

### Social policy and participation

In contrast to their programmatically shapeless predecessors and successors, the movement around Saakashvili took clear positions, especially in the socio-economic sphere. The state withdrew from economic and social activities so taxes were minimized, rights of tariff unions were cut and the infrastructure privatized. Key decision makers were influenced by foreign neo-liberal economic doctrine; Saakashvili declared that he wanted to turn Georgia into the Switzerland of the Caucasus with elements of Singapore (Jones 2012: 7–8). The main economic figures, a double-digit economic growth rate and praise from institutions like the World Bank seemingly suggest a success story. But this narrative has two serious flaws:

First, the population at large could not benefit from this growth. Even the IMF calculated an increase in absolute poverty and social inequality and according to the GINI index, Georgia ranks highest among all post-Soviet states. Additionally, government spending on health care has decreased since the Rose Revolution; the government did not help the farmers hit by the Russian embargo and the Georgian state is the 7<sup>th</sup> lowest investor in education in the world. Despite the government's suggestion that the mass demonstrations of November 2007 were guided by external forces, they were to a large part due to the failure of the economic reforms to provide ordinary Georgians with jobs and decent incomes (Lazarus 2013: 10–11).

The second flaw is that the reference to the Singapore model already indicates that neo-liberal economic policies and autocratic leadership are not contradictory. According to Lazarus, the combination of neo-liberalism and «competitive authoritarianism» is Soviet in form, but neo-liberal in content (Lazarus 2013: 22). Furthermore, the commitment to pure capitalism and the partial withdrawal of the state undermined checks and balances, accountability and equal opportunities. These are all requirements for the development of a

stable middle class, itself a pre-requisite of democracy, since only those who do not have to fight for sheer survival on a daily basis are able to participate in a broader political discourse.

Nevertheless, the resolute pursuit of the neo-liberal paradigm has its foundations in the historical experience of Georgia and the broader region. For decades, people had bad experiences of an all-powerful and arbitrary state. Due to dramatic differences in income also before the Rose Revolution, the people were convinced that wealth could only be attained by corrupting state officials. The perception that taxes are not spent on the general public but on chosen groups and the conviction of the Rose Revolutionaries that Georgia could only become a «normal country» by enormous economic growth (cf. Halbach 2013: 11–14) led to dedication to the radical-liberal model, which was not an obstacle to the repeated electoral success of Saakashvili and the UNM. In this respect, the assumption of Lazarus that the neo-liberal revolution was driven by external actors termed the «transnational capital class» seems to be questionable, because the Georgian government followed an even more capitalist policy than the «capitalist West». For example, in 2006 it ignored the EU's critique of Georgia's Labour Code (Lazarus 2013: 4–5). Yet even in its election campaign, GD promised a change in socio-economic policy towards a «social oriented economic model». The new priorities had an impact on the budget of 2013, which saw a reduction in spending on the ministries of interior and defence but an increase in spending on agriculture, education, social welfare and health care (Halbach 2013: 22). But GD with its tycoon leaders can hardly be described as a bottom-up movement; its social policy has a more eastern-style-paternalistic than a truly social or even social-democratic character.

### The role of the Georgian Orthodox Church

In 2007, 86% of Georgians self-identified as Christian Orthodox and according to a survey conducted in 2006 the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia is the most trusted institution in the country, followed by the military and the media, and its patriarch Ilia II is the most popular personality of public life (cf. Halbach 2013, Künkler and Leininger 2009). Banned under Soviet rule and now considered such an influential institution, the role of the Church in the country's democratization process must be assessed carefully. Künkler/Leininger have done so in a comparative study comparing five young democracies and have come to the conclusion that the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the country's democratic transition is paradoxical, since it has produced both democratization and de-democratization processes. During the last years of Soviet power the Georgian Church was already tightly intertwined with politics and subverted foreign rule by emphasizing Georgian nationalism. The constitution of 1995 granted freedom of faith and belief and even though the Georgian Orthodox Church was not established as a state church, owing to its historic role in the struggle for independence it was granted «extraordinary privileges and exclusive access to material and immaterial resources of the state» (Künkler and Leininger 2009: 1072). The religious landscape has hardly diversified in the democratization process following national independence; the Orthodox Church of Georgia remains the dominant religious force in the country, even recording an increase in membership (International Republican Institute 2007). With 93% of Georgia's population approving of the Church's work, it possesses extraordinary ideational power and exceptional potential to mobilize the population (Künkler and Leininger 2009).

This ideational power becomes obvious when it comes to the shaping of national identity. The Church has stuck to its appropriation of a nationalist discourse, linking ethnicity to religion, shaping an exclusive monolithic

Georgian Orthodox identity and thus exacerbating ethnic conflict and promoting particularist over national identities. Its intolerance towards various ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities is problematic in the context of the country's democratization process: within Georgia voices have been raised that state that the hitherto unproblematic relationship between Christians and Muslims has deteriorated, and at a demonstration for tolerance towards sexual minorities on May 17 2013 violent mobs in the garb of Orthodox priests physically attacked demonstrators. The government has subsequently been accused of not speaking out against such tendencies clearly enough and the new president was reproached for not criticizing the powerful Orthodox Church. Georgian intellectuals have expressed their concern that the Church has been intervening in nation- and state-building processes and warned against religious nationalism and forces conceptualizing the country as ethnically and confessionally uniform (Halbach 2013: 16). Despite president Saakashvili's formally advocating a civic nationalism intended to comprise all different communities of society, the integration of ethnic minorities into the political structures and female representation in government and parliament have mostly failed.

### Civil society and NGOs

Part of the legitimacy that the Rose Revolution claimed for itself and that the West recognized without questioning was its support from civil society groups such as the youth group *Kmara* or the *Georgian Young Lawyers Association*, who were themselves funded by foreign sponsors such as George Soros' *Open Society Foundation* (Halbach 2013; Lutsevych 2013). In the first government after the revolution, eight out of twenty ministers were former members of such NGOs funded by foreign countries (Halbach 2013). This illustrates the difficulties facing civil society in Georgia and its entanglement with international finance.

According to Lutsevych, twenty years of Western democracies' assistance in promoting civil society have seen few tangible results. Civil society as a legally protected «public space for citizens to engage in collective debate and self-expression, and where public opinions that influence public policy are formed» remains weak (Lutsevych 2013: 3). These citizens' groups and independent organizations situated between the family and the state can take various forms: «membership organizations, charities, think-tanks, neighbourhood associations, informal movements and faith-based groups» (Lutsevych 2013: 3). Extensive Western funding of locally registered NGOs after national independence in order to support the development of civil society in the post-Soviet area and thus to indirectly access and influence the state had led to these local NGOs *de facto* monopolizing civil society discourse, excluding wider society and alternative forms of citizens' engagement (Lutsevych 2013: 3). The disconnection of this Western-funded<sup>4</sup> elitist non-profit-organization sector or «NGO-crazy» and its disconnection from wider society and the isolation of citizens from public deliberations is mirrored by the fact that a mere 18% of Georgians say they trust local NGOs, only 4.8% of Georgian citizens are active in civic engagement (according to Lusevytch, this number has remained unchanged for the last twenty years), and solely 1.7% are members of a political party (Lutsevych 2013: 4, 7; Halbach 2013: 10). This lack of citizens' engagement in these organizations makes them «passive consumers of democracy development aid instead of the driving force behind democratic change» (Lutsevych 2013: 5). The NGOs have been working towards donor-driven agendas and have had a poor media profile, thus not being susceptible to scrutiny and criticism by

the public (Lutsevych 2013: 6). Moreover, these NGOs as well as parties and unions are still mostly organized around star personalities rather than specific societal interests (Halbach 2013).

This sector of civil society organizations has been unable to transform the collective energy and participatory spirit of the revolution into actual organized citizen power. Instead, many former dissident voices and leading figures in the NGO sector entered the government, leading to a decapitation and nationalization of civil society, forcing several smaller NGOs to close down and revealing the lack of any independent support base for these organizations (Halbach 2013: 11). Foreign funders accordingly diverted their funds from NGOs to the new government that was deemed to be a guarantor of democracy. The strongly centralized and opaque decision-making mechanisms, the lack of accountability of the government towards its population and the general strengthening of the executive power at the cost of the judiciary and legislative bodies created a power monopoly around president Saakashvili that again created a chasm between him and his entourage and society. According to Freedom House, Georgia's democratization results hardly improved in the years after 2003 (Halbach 2013: 10). Nonetheless, Saakashvili received enthusiastic support from Washington for being a stalwart of universal values such as democracy, freedom and civil rights (Halbach 2013: 10).

According to Lusevych, the NGOs' focus on monitoring state policies and human rights results in their elitism and disconnection from the expectations and interests of a wider society. Instead, bottom-up strategies are needed that encompass a focus on economic justice and access to services. The strengthening of civil society needs to be based on much wider genuine participation and also needs to include other organizational forms such as informal youth groups, intellectuals, faith-based associations, business associations and local citizens' initiative groups in the civil society dis-

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<sup>4</sup> In 2010 USAID, the largest international donor, spent \$19 million on Georgian civil society. Other substantial donors are the European Union and George Soros' Open Society Foundation. Cf. Lusevych (2013: 15).

course (Lutsevych 2013: 16). Thereby, citizens shall be empowered instead of already well-established NGOs – many experts even agree that there is even a problem with the local capacity to absorb all funding (Lutsevych 2013: 17).

It could be said that the «NGO-cracy» in a certain way mimics the government in its inaccessibility to average citizens, its lack of accountability towards the local population and perhaps even the patronage networks identified by Lutsevych, with the difference that it is not elected but rather installed unidirectionally by Western governments in an almost neo-imperial manner, thus fitting well into the neo-liberal paradigm according to which the Georgian state has been restructured. Furthermore, the decapitation of NGOs and their leading figures' entering the government can be regarded as the co-optation of large parts of civil society by the government, leading to a deterioration in the political climate by partly integrating and partly silencing oppositional voices. Also, the Orthodox Church's role must be assessed critically: on the one hand, after its oppression under Soviet rule the sheer existence of a church as an institution that is to some degree independent from the state and enjoys vast popular support can in itself be considered a sign of democratization. The Church plays a major role in civil society, claiming moral authority over many aspects of social life and governance, running several faith-based charitable foundations and enjoying wide societal support and a wide outreach as outlined above. On the other hand, it is closely entangled with the state and does not promote democratic ideals (Lutsevych 2013: 9).

## | Conclusion

Any serious discussion of «transformation» and «democratization» must be aware that a teleological understanding and globally uniform implementation of a particular model of democracy is ideological and must be subjected to critique. In general, the democratization discourse is determined by a struggle between the «universalist» and the «cultural relativist» camp. The universalists believe in the global validity of democratic governance, rule of law, human rights and respect for the individual, a perspective critics label as neo-imperialist. The cultural relativists are sceptical of what post-colonial critique labels a global transfer of Western models and argue for collective self-determination articulated on their own terms. This debate must be kept in mind in any discussion about Georgia's democratization process. However, the Rose Revolutionaries and their successors explicitly want to be measured by European standards (Halbach 2013: 6). Accordingly, we evaluated to what extent they met those standards in terms of democratic practices or whether the reference to democracy and democratization was a rather opportunistic attempt to gain the geopolitical and financial goodwill of Western states and organizations.

Regarding the political system, on the one hand Georgia moved away from liberal democracy to a significant extent when Saakashvili installed a super-presidential system with a strong man at the top and weakened separation of powers. On the other hand, Saakashvili's party UMN was the first relevant actor to provide a political vision, with its orientation towards law and order and economic liberalism, while the GD coalition held together especially thanks to its opposition to Saakashvili and the money generated by Ivanishvili. In order to move Georgian politics away from personalism towards program-orientated approaches, the creation of a strong socially-minded alternative to the neo-liberal UMN is needed. Instead of boundless capitalism, an

approach based on a welfare state social model enables the broader society to participate in the political discourse instead of struggling for daily survival. Such a socio-economic shift seems crucial to gaining popular support for democratization in the long run and to prevent an authoritarian backlash with simple solutions and scapegoats.

But dedication to the neo-liberal model and the disciplinary state, an elitist Western-funded «NGO-crazy» and a powerful, aggressively illiberal church are serious obstacles to meeting European standards. The efforts at fighting corruption and everyday crime were remarkable but bought at a high price. In post-Soviet comparison, great success in «low policing» aimed at the ordinary population and lower state officials is undermined by continued arbitrariness in «high policing» in the political and economic spheres. Transitional justice is a complex issue, since the persecution of abuse of power can be understood as taking revenge against political opponents but also as satisfying the popular desire for justice. Furthermore, the role of many NGOs is highly questionable. Instead of improving political participation, the empowerment of marginalized communities, access to state resources and the living conditions of the broader population through long-term projects, these often elitist circles focus on the short-term levying of foreign funding and on the interests of these foreign sponsors, often functioning as mere think-tanks. But Western donors too need to rethink their role and move away from the one-sided focus on governance, rule of law and human rights towards a policy that puts the welfare of the general population at its centre. Last but not least, Georgians must decide which role they assign to the Orthodox Church and its ethno-religious identity. If the Church continues to split society, hinder social pluralization and agitate against minorities, greater political and social emancipation from its overarching power needs to be discussed.

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# | Armenia's Stalled Transformation Process

## | Introduction

As a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR), Armenia became an independent and democratic state in 1991. During the same period, the Karabakh War with Azerbaijan began, lasting until 1994. Although Armenia was a democracy on paper, its democratic system was flawed. While there have been some improvements over time, many deficiencies still exist today. Armenia's state structures are very weak and dominated by informality and the political system is strongly personalized. Formally, a semi-presidential system was introduced in 2005. However, lacking serious implementation, the system is still dominated by the executive branch and especially the presidential office. The power of parliament and the opposition is very weak and political parties play only a minor role. Additionally, the judiciary's power is limited and dependent on the political elite (Gallina 2010: 20ff., 26f.).

This paper provides a short overview of Armenia's transition and the current situation, followed by an analysis of the main reasons for its slow democratic development. As this paper was written after the study trip to the South Caucasus, some quotations from Armenian lecturers are included in the text: they should be considered as notes and not exact quotations. They are framed in order to make them distinguishable from regular quotations.

There are several concepts and a variety of measurements of regime classifications. According to Freedom House, Armenia is a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime with a democracy score of 5.36 in 2014.<sup>5</sup> The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) classifies Ar-

menia as a moderate autocracy,<sup>6</sup> while Polity IV describes it as an open anocracy (Polity IV 2014) or an uninstitutionalized, or «weak» democratic regime (Marshall & Cole 2014: 56). Haerpfer (2009: 316) uses the label electoral democracy,<sup>7</sup> which is explicitly rejected by Freedom House (2014b). The following description of Armenia's political transformation focuses on the seven dimensions electoral process, civil society, independent media, judicial framework and independence, corruption, national governance and local governance, taken from the Freedom House Report Nations in Transit 2014 (Iskandaryan 2014).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Based on the Democracy Score and its scale of 1 to 7, Freedom House has defined the *following* regime types: consolidated democracy (1–2), semi-consolidated democracy (3), transitional government/hybrid regime (4), semi-consolidated authoritarian regime (5), and consolidated authoritarian regime (6–7) (Freedom House 2012).

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<sup>6</sup> There are six threshold values that are considered as minimum values in the BTI for receiving the status of a democracy. If one value falls below the minimum value, the country is classified as an autocracy. These threshold values cover the indicators free and fair elections, effective power to govern, freedom of association, freedom of expression and freedom of the press, separation of powers and civil rights. The group of autocracies is furthermore considered as «*failing states*», thus states where the governmental monopoly on the use of force and basic administration are limited in a way that the government is hardly capable of acting (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2014b).

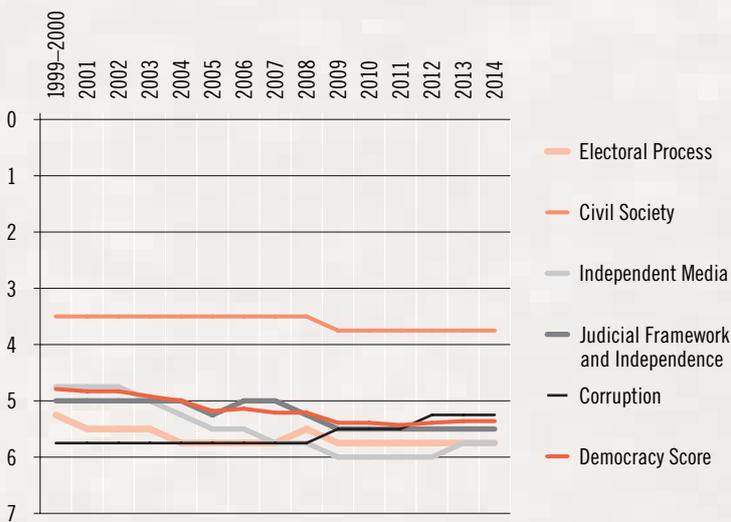
<sup>7</sup> «A political regime can be described as an electoral democracy when it is fulfilling a minimum definition of democracy. When a political system is holding competitive and multi-party elections it can achieve the status of an electoral democracy. This concept of electoral democracy is restricted to the institutions and processes of nationwide elections and does not account for the democratic character of political institutions. It is not considering the democratic performance of actors and institutions. [...] An electoral democracy is not obliged to fulfil any of the criteria for full or consolidated democracies, such as the rule of law, separation of powers, civil society, constitutionalism, pluralism, human and political rights, or freedom of media and opinion» (Haerpfer 2009: 316).

<sup>8</sup> The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year.

## | Armenia's Transformation Process

The development of these five dimensions from 1999 to 2014 is presented in the graph below.

Freedom House Ratings from 1999 to 2014  
(Iskandaryan 2009; 2014)<sup>9</sup>



If we compare the development of these different dimensions in the graph, it becomes clear that *corruption* is the only category where the country has made a lasting improvement to its score since 1999. The ratings in all other categories have deteriorated. Compared with the other dimensions, the level of *civil society* is conspicuously higher. In the following chapters, the development of all seven categories is discussed in more detail.

<sup>9</sup> Since there are no separate analysis for national governance and local governance for the years prior to 2005, these categories are not included in the diagram.

## The Electoral Process

Armenia's first elections in May 1990, when the Armenian National Movement (ANM) defeated the Communist Party, and in 1991, when Ter-Petrosian was elected President, were free and fair without restrictions (cf. Way 2009: 107; Bertelsmann Stiftung 2014a: 7). This was not the case for the ones that followed, which were marked by electoral fraud and arrests of protesters and members of the opposition. In 1996 for example, the results were falsified to prevent the victory of Vasgen Manukian. The protests of Manukian supporters were answered with mass arrests, closures of opposition parties and an army presence on the streets (cf. Way 2009: 111; Stefes 2006: 46).

Until 2007, there were more serious irregularities and democratic abuses, including persecution of the opposition and harassment of the media (cf. Stefes 2006: 51; Freedom House 2004). A direct and still unresolved attack on the government took place in 1999 with the assassination of prime minister Sargsian, speaker of the parliament Demirchian and six other members of the government (cf. Stefes 2006: 50). The parliamentary elections in 2007 proceeded more fairly due to amendments to the electoral code and training of election officials. However, campaign financing and the counting of votes were not unproblematic (cf. Freedom House 2008).

This positive development did not continue during the next presidential election in 2008, when Serzh Sargsyan, who was the favored candidate of the former president Kocharian, was elected president. Although the election was considered to be competitive and mostly in line with international standards before and during the elections, it was followed by mass protests which were dispersed by the police, leading to several members of the opposition being killed and hundreds of people wounded (cf. Way 2009: 113; Iskandaryan 2009).

Such street rallies did not take place after the parliamentary elections in May 2012, which may be due to the fact that, for the first time, all major political parties won seats in parliament. Even the Armenian National Congress led by Ter-Petrosyan, which had formerly denounced all government institutions, decided to move its political engagement from the streets to the legislature and was elected to parliament (cf. Iskandaryan 2013a: 461, 2013b). This development increased the legitimacy of the legislative and will, according to Iskandaryan (2012a: 3f.), ensure competition between the majority parties and within the opposition in future. In the lead up to the elections, the two main parties competed with non-ideological campaigns marked by paternalism. Their strategy worked well, which indicates that the majority of Armenian citizens are not demanding ideologies and concrete programs from the parties (cf. Iskandaryan 2012a: 3f.). Furthermore, there is a «deep mistrust of elections within the electorate itself, a lack of issue-based dialogue, and weak interparty dialogue both during and beyond elections. As these issues are mutually reinforcing, they contribute not only to general wariness of elections as a democratic institution but also a low level of public engagement with political issues» (Iskandaryan 2014: 72).

The positive development towards more competition could not be observed for the presidential elections, as the two main opposition parties did not field candidates, which raised doubts about the competitiveness of the elections (cf. Sargsyan 2013: 3).

In general, the parliamentary elections in 2012, as well as the presidential election and the Yerevan City Council elections in 2013 were characterized by improvements in balanced media coverage, election administration and conditions for campaigning. However, there was large-scale vote-buying through gifts and abuse of administrative resources and voter intimidation still took place. Isabella Sargsyan (2013: 2) even speaks of «an unprecedented level of bribery» during parliamentary

elections and of a worsening of the conditions after the parliamentary elections in 2012. She asserts that the government enlarged its control over the citizens by integrating influential persons from every part of society into the Republican Party. Together with semi-criminal street authorities, they manipulated citizens through bribing, voter intimidation and pressure. There is a clear tendency that electoral fraud is not taking place on the election-day itself, but months before elections through the measures listed above. «The system is fuelled by resources provided by loyal oligarchs and is a result of clear trade-offs. At this moment there are no political or civic forces that are able to counteract the regime given the existing rules of the game. It is extremely difficult to stand against the state that possesses unlimited power and employs all possible ways of electoral fraud» (Sargsyan 2013: 6).

Yet, despite these negative characteristics of the Armenian electoral process, there are also some reasons for optimism. According to Iskandaryan (2012a: 2), the development of parliamentary elections with two parties winning more than 80 percent of the vote may indicate a change in the political system towards a two-party system with increased political competition. Giragosian (2013: 2) states that the post-election situation of the presidential elections in 2013, characterized by a wave of discontent among the broader population, opens «a new chapter in Armenian politics, defined by a new stage of confrontation bolstered by less apathy and even less fear». In view of the fact that Sargsyan has no successor and is the last representative of the political elite that arose from the struggle for Nagorno-Karabakh, Giragosian also speaks of a «start of a transition to a new political elite» (Giragosian 2013: 3).

### Civil Society

Civil society is often considered to support a positive development of democracy, to strengthen its consolidation and to improve established democratic systems in several ways. For example, it enables a society to limit state power, to support democratic institutions and to prevent abuse of power by governments. Additionally, it improves political participation by sustaining the system of political parties, including minorities or other excluded groups and promoting tolerance and the willingness to compromise.

Armenia's civil society score is much lower than those for the other dimensions, which remained more or less on the same level since 1996. (cf. Diamond 1994: 7f.; Paturyan & Gevorgyan 2014: 239ff.) There are more than 4,500 civil society organizations registered in Armenia, 15–20% of which are consistently active. They are active in several social, political or economic areas, including monitoring elections and post-electoral developments. In 2013 there were frequent public protests, for example against the rise of the costs for public transportation and university tuition (cf. Iskandaryan 2014: 72ff.). Compared to Georgia and Azerbaijan, Armenia shows the highest levels of self-reported volunteering (cf. Paturyan & Gevorgyan 2014: 257). However, the organizations remain concentrated in the major cities and depend on foreign funding, which makes them vulnerable to funding fluctuations. Other problems are the opposition to authorities, which undermines their efforts, and the population's mistrust, which is higher than in Azerbaijan and Georgia (cf. Iskandaryan 2014: 72ff.; Paturyan & Gevorgyan 2014: 257). Concerning this general mistrust, the younger generation that grew up in Armenia as an independent Republic is more trusting towards civil society organisations than older generations. However, despite this difference, they are not more likely to engage in voluntary activities (cf. Paturyan & Gevorgyan 2014: 257).

### Independent Media

Armenia has not only constitutionalized freedom of speech, but also signed various conventions and commitments to respect and protect the freedom of the media, freedom of expression and the free flow of information (Sargsyan 2014: 285). Despite these commitments, the media in Armenia are not free, according to Freedom House (Sargsyan 2014: 285). Although Armenia's media «maintained an impressive degree of independence and critical news coverage» (Stefes 2006: 51) in the years after the independence from the USSR, the media development has deteriorated from 2002 to 2009, with a slight improvement in the recent years. The negative trend is due to the difficulties faced by independent broadcasters, violence towards and intimidation of journalists, the libel laws, government harassment of independent media, biased broadcasts in favor of the incumbent power, unfair coverage through broadcast media during elections and a lack of judicial and institutional protection for freedom of expression (cf. Stefes 2006: 51, 60; Freedom House 2004, 2005, 2007; Iskandaryan 2009, 2013b, 2014; Sargsyan 2014: 283). A consequence of such pressure on the media is self-censorship. But despite this negative media environment, print and online media are becoming increasingly plural and independent. While print media reach only a limited amount of readers, the online community is growing rapidly. Online media are now allowed to publish without a licence, which has eliminated restrictions and fostered the growth of independent online media. They have «created a diverse and highly competitive media environment and have diminished the influence of ownership and political bias of pro-governmental and oppositional publications on content» (Sargsyan 2014: 283). Traditional media, like major television stations, are still co-opted by political forces, but ensured, for example, more balanced campaign coverage prior to the elections in 2012 and 2013. Further improvements have been made regarding the

protection of intellectual property (cf. Freedom House 2004, 2005, 2007; Iskandaryan 2009, 2013b, 2014).

### **The Judicial Framework and Independence**

The judiciary in Armenia is not able to fulfill its role as a guarantor of law and justice, due to corruption and close ties with executive authorities (cf. Stefes 2006: 58; Iskandaryan 2014). Therefore public trust in the judiciary is low. Its score has dropped since 2004, due to restrictions and violent dispersals of demonstrations, influence of the executive over the judiciary, as well as arrests, investigations and trials in connection with the post-election rally in 2008. There have been some attempts at improvement, such as limiting presidential influence in 2005, reforms in the judicial framework in 2008 and releasing prison inmates in a general amnesty in 2013. However, there have been no significant fundamental improvements since 2009. The Armenian justice system is marked by arbitrary arrests without warrants, violence during arrest and interrogation and torture within the police system. Prisons are overcrowded and have poor sanitary conditions. One example of the unwillingness to examine violations is the parliament's rejection of an investigation of the events surrounding the post-election rally of March 2008 (cf. Freedom House 2005, 2006, 2008a; Iskandaryan 2009, 2014).

### **Corruption**

Pervasive corruption is one of Armenia's main challenges. Bribery and nepotism are common, corrupt government officials are rarely prosecuted, industries are dominated by monopolies, antimonopoly policies are weak and tax collection is low. Nevertheless, there have been some improvements since 2008. Thus the government introduced an anti-corruption strategy for 2008–2012 with legislative measures and a reform of public services, and e-government services to reduce opportunities for bribery and stricter regulations. Digitized processes regarding visas and passports were established, a web-

site to increase transparency concerning policy crimes and corruption was created, tax collection has improved and there has been an increase in the number of corruption lawsuits and fines (cf. Iskandaryan 2009, 2012b, 2014).

### **National Governance**

Despite some attempts to divide power equally, governance is dominated by executive authorities. Thus changes to the constitution in 2005 aimed to ensure pluralism and the rule of law, and in 2013 a constitutional review process started to make further amendments. One of it is the idea of transforming Armenia into a parliamentary republic (cf. Iskandaryan 2007, 2009, 2014). Due to the fact that until 2012 the opposition was personality-driven and fragmented, denounced all government institutions, refused to participate in parliamentary politics, and was inactive between elections, the incumbent party coalition dominated the political sphere (cf. Iskandaryan 2014). To this day, power has remained with the economic, military and regional elites and the opposition has had little influence on politics, representing less the interests of social groups or the elite, but different ideals (cf. Iskandaryan 2008: 529). The political opposition used rallies, protest marches and an overall refusal to play by the rules, which brought only little influence and minor changes to governance (cf. Iskandaryan 2013a: 461). Although the Armenian National Congress now has seats in parliament, the President's Republican Party of Armenia (HKK) still has a parliamentary majority.

The government is formed on a coalition basis even if the ruling party has the majority and no need to form a coalition government. This circumstance is to a large extent due to the influence of business groups, regional feudal lords and senior government technocrats.

«Armenia's political system operates on the basis of consensus among elite groups that control economic and political resources» (Iskandaryan 2014: 69). Soci-

ety has little influence over political decisions, as «politics is an informal elite game, which society can only become involved in at the time of elections» (Iskandaryan 2013a: 464). An example of this close connection between the economy and politics is the parliament, which has become mainly an arena for the exchange of economic interests. Consequently, many businesspeople use their influence to get a seat in the parliament. Despite the consensus and backdoor agreements among elite groups, there is strong competition between them as they compete for influence in politics and thereby economics, privileges and resources.

### **Local Governance**

Although Armenia's local governance is institutionalized in all communities, it is weak, inefficient, non-transparent and politically and financially dependent on the central government. This is due to the small size of the communities, which are unable to collect sufficient revenue for their services, a tax distribution system that sees most of the taxes going to the state budget, the informal control by the central government and the dependence on regional governors appointed by the central government. Changes to this income distribution and a merger of small communities would be necessary for more financial independence. Citizens' trust and involvement in local governance remains low (cf. Stefes 2006: 59; Iskandaryan 2011, 2014: 77f.).

## **| Reasons for Armenia's Slow Transformation**

### **International Relations and Conflicts**

The two long-lasting conflicts that Armenia is facing at the moment and Armenia's contradicting relationships to Russia and the European Union (EU) are two important factors that are slowing down Armenia's transition to democracy. According to Hegre (2014: 163f.) and Gibler & Sewell (2006: 428), countries are more likely

to become democracies when they are not threatened by a conflict. The conflict around Nagorno-Karabakh is still unsolved and reconciliation with Turkey is not in sight. Several factors are hindering the normalization of Armenia's relations with its neighbors. As will be explained below, the ruling elite of Armenia has only limited interest in ending the conflicts. Additionally, the fact that ethnicity is a dominant factor in the Caucasian understanding of identity and politics complicates any attempt at reconciliation. Last but not least, Russia – partner of Armenia and one of the main players in the region – has little interest in solving the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, since this would reduce its influence considerably (Iskandaryan 2008: 565; Adomeit 2011: 60). Consequently, the conflicts remained unresolved, two of Armenia's four borders remain closed and the country has no diplomatic relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan.

This situation prevents the transition of Armenia in several ways. First, as Armenia never signed a peace agreement with Azerbaijan, it needs to maintain a large army. Hence a considerable part of the state budget is used for military expenditure, which leaves only minor resources for socio-economic development. Second, the conflicts united the vast majority of the population and the elite and created a strong sense of national identity, which facilitated the construction of a centralized state apparatus. The conflicts allow political actors to focus on security issues, which serves as an excuse for power accumulation and allows them to maintain political power and to distract the public from other urgent issues. Therefore, it is not surprising that the political elite shows little motivation and talent for resolving these conflicts. Third, the interruption of trade routes and difficult relations with neighboring countries are severely hindering economic development in Armenia (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2014a: 29f.; Gallina 2010: 25ff, 30f.; Iskandaryan 2008: 537; Iskandaryan 2013a: 461; Minasyan 2010: 21; Way 2009: 107ff.).

Both Alexander Iskandaryan and Tevan Pogosyan refer to the strong impact of the conflicts by stating:

**«The army was established before statehood. It's one of the cores and backgrounds of the state. The army is still huge because of the conflict: there are more than 70,000 soldiers in the army.»** (Iskandaryan)

**«The conflict serves Armenia's governments as an excuse for their inactivity concerning democratic development.»** (Pogosyan)

In addition to the conflicts, Armenia's contradictory relations to its powerful partners, the EU and Russia, may be an additional factor that is impeding its development. While Armenia depends very strongly on Russian support, especially in security and energy issues, it also expects to profit economically from a gradual process of EU integration. Therefore, Armenia's strategy is to try to maintain good relations with both sides. However, those two relations are very different from each other. On the one hand, the EU integration process is very much formalized and closely related to requirements related to democratization and human rights issues. On the other hand, Russia's relations to Armenia are based on coercive policies and informal networks. This contradiction may cause a stalling effect on Armenia's transition (Minasyan 2014; Pardo Sierra 2011: 236, 241f.; Adomeit 2011).

### **The Armenian Elite, Informality and the Soviet Legacy**

While other post-Soviet countries such as Russia and Turkmenistan inherited most of their institutions from the USSR, Armenia had a much lower institutional continuity when it gained its independence in 1991. Before 1991, for the Karabakh movement the prospect of independence from the USSR seemed to be the only way to achieve its goals. Consequently, Armenia's pro-demo-

cracy movement merged completely with the Karabakh issue, making the struggle for Nagorno-Karabakh the core of Armenia's political identity. The leaders of the Karabakh movement – mainly intellectuals – formed the new Armenian elite. They took over or abolished and replaced existing networks of corruption and Soviet institutions. Accordingly, informal institutions played an important role in Armenia's state building process. The formalization process of many actors and institutions started only after they entered the political system and in many cases it was not successful. Political parties, for example, are dominated by business lobby groups and are still in the process of formalization. This process of formalization is ongoing, and many of the newly formalized institutions still function according to their former informal rules. Therefore to this day informality, clientelistic structures and personalization of public offices are shaping the Armenian system and impeding its development (Gallina 2010: 20, 24; Iskandaryan 2013a: 453f., 456f.; Stefes 2006; Way 2009: 107). Another important cause of the slow transformation of Armenia is the close connection between business and politics. The Karabakh war produced thousands of veterans who formed a veterans' corporation. Due to the economic situation after the war, the state was not able to pay sufficient wages to veterans. Therefore they were rewarded with informal benefits in the business sphere. Consequently, the veterans' corporation became very powerful and its members were able to control most of Armenia's economy. «As a result, economic power in Armenia in the 1990s relied on a consensus between the members of an informal institution that de facto regulated the economy» (Iskandaryan 2013a: 458). In the following years, the veterans' corporation gained strong influence in governance institutions and the economic elite started participating in politics, using it as an arena to compete against their economic opponents. «The everyday cutting-up of the small economic cake (the distribution of influence zones, licenses, prefer-

ences and access to resources) has become the main drama of Armenia's domestic politics, making business people key actors in the political field and specifically, in the parliament» (Iskandaryan 2013a: 462). The result is that Armenian political parties and parliament are dominated by lobby groups and informal networks and are used by businessmen to pursue their economic interests. The struggle for money, power and spheres of influence among the elite is very tough. However, while elite networks, including the ruling party and the opposition, compete against each other in public, the distribution of benefits is usually negotiated in private based on consensus and informal agreements (Gallina 2010: 27; Iskandaryan 2008: 532; Iskandaryan 2013a: 462). It is difficult to categorize the real functioning of politics in Armenia. Politics are used as an arena where business disputes are fought out and powerful actors of the business sphere have huge direct or indirect influence on politics. While the authors mentioned here agree that there is a mixture of competition and consensus, it is not clear which of them is crucial at what stage. Nonetheless, the Armenian political elite is mainly concerned about coming to power or remaining in power. There is no incentive for representing people's interests, implementing real reforms or creating a democratic system that actually works Iskandaryan (2013a: 464) concludes: «elite groups compete against each other but the masses are either not involved or used. [...] society at large remains a tool and not a player in politics.»

In addition to preventing serious reforms, the proximity and entanglement of business and politics, combined with the negative effects of ongoing conflicts (cf. chapter *International Relations and Conflicts*), has a strong negative impact on the economic development of Armenia. In the light of modernization theory, which assumes a positive correlation between economic development and democratization, we can assume that this constitutes an additional indirect negative effect on the transition of Armenia. However, modernization theory

and similar approaches of connecting democratization and economic development are highly controversial (cf. Merkel 2010: 70–76; Welzel 2009: 80f.).

### **Political Culture, Civil Society and the Media**

Several factors related to political culture and the role of civil society and the media are hindering Armenia's transition to democracy. First of all, Armenia does not have any democratic tradition or sufficient experience of statehood. The last Armenian kingdom existed 700 years ago and was situated on a different territory. With the exception of the years 1918–1921, Armenia was not an independent state until the USSR collapsed in 1991. Additionally, it did not have any democratic experience, having formerly been part of Persia, the Russian Empire and the USSR (Iskandaryan 2008: 526f.), Armenia's situation can be illustrated with the following assessment offered by Iskandaryan in September 2014:

**«What constitutes Armenian's identity? Language, culture, religion, alphabet, music, literature, but not the state! The state is something from outside.»**

Additionally, Armenia's civil society is relatively weak. Even though according to the Bertelsmann Stiftung (2014a: 8) Armenia has a «vibrant civil society, comprised of a wide array of civic groups and NGOs», its influence on politics and democratization remains very limited. There are various reasons for this. First, like every company or organization, NGOs struggle with the negative effects of corruption and informality. Second, the Armenian government does not show any motivation to start a constructive discourse and excludes civil society actors from the political process. Third, while there has been a massive increase in the official number of NGOs (from 44 in 1994 to 4,500 in 2014) many of them remain active only as long as they receive financial support from foreign donors and only 15–20% operate consistently. Additionally, as 97% of Armenians do not participate in voluntary or other social organizations and

only 1% of the population are members of an NGO, there is a severe lack of acceptance by local communities (BTI 2014a: 13, 24, 29; Ishkanian 2008: 30; Iskandaryan 2014; Payaslian 2011: 132, 135). The absence of civic activism can be related to the high level of bonding social capital and the low levels of bridging social capital and trust in other people. Consequently, social capital is mostly limited to family and close social groups (BTI 2014a: 13). According to Payaslian (2011), the lack of civic activism is a legacy of Armenia's turbulent history. «The Armenian public [...] lacks confidence in the efficacy of civil society. This skepticism [...] reflects a general lack of self-confidence at both the personal and collective levels to act effectively in the public sphere to influence public policy, undoubtedly a byproduct in Armenian political culture as inherited from centuries of subjecthood under foreign rule.» (Payaslian 2011: 131) In Armenia, the media, which are supposed to be an important actor in a country's transition, struggle to play their role. Although the Armenian media got rid of Soviet censorship, they are still being manipulated. According to Payaslian (2011: 164f.) and Freedom House (2014a) the media do not have to follow a particular ideology and the obligation to register every media outlet was removed in 2003. However, the media are still controlled in several ways. Many journalists exercise self-censorship and there is a «contemporary form of censorship [...] achieved through a mix of state-enabled oligarchic control, broadcast monopolies of presidential «families», judicial persecution, and subtle and overt forms of intimidation» (Payaslian 2011: 165). There are no restrictions on internet access and apart from one exception in 2008, the authorities do not block any online content for political reasons. Similarly to traditional media, online media are exposed to political pressure. However, independent online publishers and bloggers do not exercise self-censorship (Freedom House 2013: 61f.).

The situation is even worse because Armenia has only a weak middle class which is not able to prevent the elite's

domination of politics. Votes can be bought easily and decisions are made by a small section of society, which again encourages informality. Therefore, the emergence of a strong and active middle class and a culture of political participation is essential for transition in Armenia (cf. Iskandaryan 2013a: 465f.).

## | Conclusion

The reasons that are hindering Armenia's transition to democracy are manifold and in many cases rooted in the history of Armenia and Armenians. First of all, the country is involved in two long-lasting conflicts. As a consequence, a large part of the state budget is needed and used to maintain a large army and a strong security sector, economic development is hindered and political leaders manage to accumulate power and distract the people from other important issues. Furthermore, the difference of Armenia's relations to the EU and Russia and their ways of supporting and influencing Armenia adds another obstacle to its transformation. Time will tell how Armenia's recent decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU and to join the Russian-led Customs Union (CU) will affect Armenian foreign relations and its development (cf. Minasyan 2014). As a consequence of the way Armenia gained its independence in 1991 and the subsequent inadequate process of state-building and formalization, Armenia's politics and institutions have been dominated by informality and corruption. As a result, Armenian business and politics are related very closely and the latter is often used in order to distribute profit and influence among the Armenian elite instead of reflecting people's preferences and ideology. This constellation prevents the possibility of serious reforms and the creation of efficient democratic institutions. Another reason for Armenia's slow transformation is its lack of sufficient experience in statehood and the absence of a democratic tradition. Moreover, Armenia's civil society is weak and there is no

politically active middle class. Although there are many NGO's, only a few of them are active and their influence is very limited. To make things worse, the media also struggle to play their role in improving democracy in Armenia. Although there were some improvements, they still suffer from manipulation and many journalists are coerced to exercise self-censorship.

In order to understand the development of Armenia and its underlying reasons in their entirety, the factors that are discussed here need to be examined in more detail. Additionally, more aspects of the Armenian system, its history and culture should be taken into account. A closer analysis should include, for example, the role of the judiciary, religion and the clergy as well as the impact of Armenia's low economic performance. Moreover, the theoretical foundation and implications – which cannot be discussed within the scope of this analysis – need to be considered and developed in detail.

Although it may seem difficult not to be pessimistic about the future development of Armenia, there is still room for optimism. The importance of ethnicity and the corresponding negative effects as well as the lack of a strong and active middle class are one of the big obstacles to Armenia's transition. But at the same time, they constitute a huge potential to change things – if a new middle class emerges and ethnicity loses its dominant influence. To change the Armenian system, a few steps are necessary. First of all, Armenian people and society need to be aware of the costs that are caused by the current situation. They need to accept that it is not possible to return to the past and that they have to overcome the current reluctance to find a peaceful settlement of the Karabakh Conflict. In addition to this, a long-term political unification of oppositional actors would be essential (cf. Iskandaryan 2008: 536f., 565; Nedolyan 2013).

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# I Religion in States and Societies: Georgia and Armenia in Comparison

## I Introduction

The authors of this paper visited Georgia and Armenia in late summer 2014 as part of a study group. We were particularly interested in developments concerning religion and religiosity in these transformational states; landing in Tbilisi at 3 a.m., a city full of churches brightly illuminated in the middle of the night, seemed to be the beginning of a promising journey in search of answers to the question of religion in Georgia and Armenia.

Georgia and Armenia, together with Azerbaijan – a country not taken into account for the purpose of this paper – form a small group of states with one particularly interesting common feature: religiosity, understood as the exercise of and attendance to religious practices, is very low whilst at the same time the population's trust in religious institutions and the subjective importance ascribed to religion is extremely high (Charles 2010: 244).<sup>10</sup>

These highly interesting and seemingly contradictory findings stand at the very beginning not only of this paper but also of our recent journey to the region. Our first aim was to find out whether the trust in religious institutions was really as important as suggested by various papers. A second goal was to gain a better understanding of the reasons behind the development of this uncommonly high trust. Finally, we also wanted to find out whether the great amount of trust in religious institutions has positive and or negative impacts on the democratic development of the two states.

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<sup>10</sup> Charles (2010: 244) asks whether the traditional parameters for measuring religiosity are sufficient to account for the degree of influence religion/religiosity has on political and social phenomena. She assumes that a low degree of religious practices is no proof of secularisation or modernisation. Instead she introduces a new element which is supposed to describe another dimension of religiosity: the subjective importance of religion.

The main idea of this paper is to give an overview of religion and its impact on society and politics both in Georgia and Armenia. For this purpose, relevant literature, information obtained by people in the two countries, as well as personal impressions and thoughts are taken into account. This paper is therefore not strictly scientific but rather an essay incorporating both relevant literature and personal impressions.

The initial questions outlined above also determine the structure of this paper. In the first part, we will take a closer look at the situation of religion in Georgia, including some general information, a chapter on important facts on religion in Georgia today, possible explanations for them, some personal impressions as well as a final chapter with reflections on the impact of the current situation on the state and society. Then, in a second, much shorter part, the case of Armenia will be examined. There, special attention will be devoted to comparing and contrasting the situations in the two countries.

## I Georgia

### General Information on Religion in Georgia

The vast majority of the Georgian population (83%) belongs to the Georgian Orthodox Church (Reisner 2010: 32).<sup>11</sup> The origins of the Georgian Orthodox Church can be traced back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when Christianity became the prevalent and later the official religion in the Georgian territories (Reisner 2010: 35; Fuchslocher 2010: 2, 66). The Georgian Orthodox Church is autocephalous and headed by the Georgian Orthodox Patriarch or *Catholicos-Patriarch*; since 1977 this position has been held by Ilia II (Motika 2010: 219).

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<sup>11</sup> Of the remaining 17% of the population, 9.5% are Muslims, 5.5% belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church, and about 2% are Catholics (Reisner 2010: 32).

It was also in the 4<sup>th</sup> century that Georgian alphabet was developed for the purpose of translating the Bible into Georgian (Reisner 2010: 35; Fuchslocher 2010: 2). In this way, the Georgian script, Church language and literature were formed (Fuchslocher 2010: 68). It was in this context that the first idea of a Georgian Nation emerged. Over the centuries, language, script and religion have been considered essential elements of Georgian national identity in which language, territory and the Church or religion form a united entity (Reisner 2010: 35; Fuchslocher 2010: 2, 65, 68–69, 115). However, despite its historic importance, in the 1850/60s, when Georgian nationalism first appeared in a modern sense, religion was not a major identifying factor. This first Georgian nationalism had an ambivalent attitude towards religion. Of course, Christianity had always been an important marker distinguishing Georgia within its Islamic neighbourhood (Nodia 2009: 90). But in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, strengthening the role of religion within the emerging national identity was not very useful (Nodia 2009: 91). The reasons for this minor role of religion and especially the Church in early Georgian nationalism are manifold, but the most important factor was that the Georgian Orthodox Church was losing influence, and that Orthodoxy suggested an undesired link to the «invaders» of the Russian Empire. So it happened that the first Georgian nationalism focused on dynasties and territories and, most importantly, on history (Zedania 2011a: 123–124).<sup>12</sup>

The most important personality in Georgian nationalism was Ilia Chavchavadze (1837–1907), a writer, publicist and co-founder of the Georgian Bank. His work *Letters of a Traveller* is generally considered to be the first

<sup>12</sup> Nodia (2009: 88–90) discusses how much later, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it became popular to cite the formula «Fatherland, Language, Faith» as the core of 19<sup>th</sup>-century nationalism. Still, «Faith» was in third place only and not linked to the Church directly.

expression of modern Georgian nationalism (Zedania 2011b: 17–18).

The role of the Church in forming nationalism changed with World War II, during which the Georgian Orthodox Church was actively involved in enhancing mobilisation in the Soviet Union. A real revitalisation of religion and the Church began in the late 1970s both in Russia and Georgia (Zedania 2011a: 126).

### Religion in Georgia Today

#### *Trust in the Patriarch & «Religious Nationalism»*

If we take a closer look at the status of religion in Georgia today, several interesting elements can be noted: religion is considered an important factor for many people in their lives, the trust of the population in religious institutions and the Patriarch is very high, religion plays a significant non-negligible role in politics and, taking all these points together, religion also influences social values and behaviour. The issues will form the focus of the following chapter.

A significant majority of the Georgian population considers religion an important factor in their daily lives. It is interesting to observe that people in the capital Tbilisi are actually even more religious than people living in other areas and that the level of education has no influence whatsoever on whether people consider religion to be important or not (Filetti 2014: 225).<sup>13</sup>

However, religion is not simply perceived as something important; the Georgian Orthodox Church is also the

<sup>13</sup> Turmanidze and Gabedava (2014: 2, 5), in their study on the socio-economic profile of Internet users in Georgia and their similarities and differences from non-users in terms of political attitudes and religiosity, present a highly interesting correlation between Internet users and religiosity. They find that Internet users appear to be more religious than non-users, whilst at the same time they are also more tolerant towards minorities, clearly support democracy, and are critical of the government.

institution people trust in most (Tchiaberashvili 2014: lecture) and the Patriarch Ilia II has enjoyed the trust and support of more than 90% of the population ever since the 1990s (Tchiaberashvili 2014: lecture). In other words, Ilia II is the most trusted and respected leader in Georgia and is seen as an authority in Georgian society and politics. This authority has been confirmed by the former Georgian president Saakashvili in a common mass held in April 2009 (Charles 2010: 249).

The Georgian Orthodox Church plays a crucial role in the narrative of Georgian nationalism. While the earlier forms of Georgian nationalism focused on a common history and language rather than the Orthodox Church, «faith» nevertheless played a certain role in defining ethnicity. A more directly «religious» nationalism emerged in the 21st century, partly as a reaction to the modernization project of the Saakashvili government. Since 2003, a form of nationalism which can be called «revolutionary nationalism» (Zedania 2011a: 122–123) has become more important. Zedania (2011: 122–123) uses this term to explain the strategy of the Saakashvili government (2003–2012), which is characterized by an emphasis on freedom of the nation (above freedom of the individual) and its development in an institutional vacuum. «Revolutionary» nationalism developed in Georgia after the 2003 revolution when the new government started its nation building program. It aimed at changing society with a new and modern interpretation of «Georgianness» and being Georgian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Citizenship was stressed but nevertheless a revolutionary character with particular exclusions remained: friend-enemy differences were stressed. At the same time, with the emergence of this revolutionary nationalism, the religious element became stronger too. «Religious nationalism» manifested itself as an answer to the civic or revolutionary nationalism promoted by the government, rejecting the latter's project of modernisation (Zedania 2011a: 123–124). The religious element in the form of a discourse of «religious nationalism» is

indeed very strong, the Church defining Orthodoxy as the heart of Georgia and «Georgianness», adding that liberal and modern values are not acceptable for Georgia and that the supreme authority for Georgia is the Patriarch (Janelidze 2013: 8).

#### *The Role of the Orthodox Church in Politics*

As already briefly mentioned above, the Georgian Orthodox Church is also an important factor in politics and state matters in general. Since 2001, the Church has been granted several privileges (one of which is that the Georgian Orthodox Church is, unlike other religious institutions and groups, exempt from paying taxes) and can be said to be the official national Church (Motika 2010: 212–222).

As early as 1990, the Communist Council of Ministers of Georgia declared all Georgian Orthodox places of worship on the territory of Georgia to be property of the Georgian Orthodox Church (Serrano 2010: 8). However, due to difficulties in the implementation of this declaration it was only the Constitutional Agreement of 14 October 2002 between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Government<sup>14</sup> which determined the relations between Church and state and to this day it remains the only official agreement on this issue. Its main purpose was to allow compensation for damages the Church suffered in Soviet times and it gives the Church a high degree of influence over all places of worship. The Church therefore enjoys a position of hegemony over the heritage of the past (Serrano 2010: 5). It is important to stress the fact that the 2002 agreement was negotiated between the Church and the government of president Shevardnadze in a moment of government weakness and compensates for concessions of the Patriarch with regards to several international questions (Serrano 2010: 9).

<sup>14</sup> An agreement between the Church and the state which only involved the Georgian Orthodox Church. No other churches took part (Serrano 2010: 9).

This agreement between Church and state has never been challenged, not even by President Saakashvili. Despite his initial distance to the Georgian Orthodox Church<sup>15</sup> and his promise to uphold religious freedom and to decrease discrimination against minority religions, President Saakashvili's government showed little interest in clarifying relationships between the Church and the state and in advancing restitution of religious minorities' property. Furthermore, with the The government's decreasing popularity after 2007 and the 2008 war, figures show that the financial support of the Church by the government increased significantly (Serrano 2010: 5).<sup>16</sup>

Thus it becomes clear that the Georgian Orthodox Church is and has been a powerful institution positioning itself not only as a representation of the past but also as an important player in today's politics. The Georgian Orthodox Church has significant influence on the daily business of politics, on legislation processes and political decisions. An example from 2011 illustrates that although not actively involved in politics, the opinion of the Church does matter and can make politicians change or at least amend their projects. In June 2011, the Georgian parliament adopted a statute granting official registration as private or public entities to religious organizations recognized by the EU and having a traditional connection to Georgian society. This statute was adopted without intervention by the president or anyone else despite the heavy protests from Church rep-

resentatives.<sup>17</sup> However, the day after the statute was signed, public protests broke out. As a consequence, a document was added to the new statute, reaffirming the privileged status of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the special agreement between the Church and the state. This conflict between the government and the Church received a great deal of public attention, and public opinion clearly sided with the Church (Serrano 2010: 6; Janelidze 2013: 6). The problem was finally solved when some members of the government took part in a mass celebrated by Ilia II, and the mayor of Tbilisi officially declared that the new statute posed no threat to the privileged position of the Georgian Orthodox Church. This peaceful solution shows that neither the Church nor politics (i.e. the government) are interested in open confrontation and disagreement. However, the solution arrived at also seems to suggest that the Church is extremely powerful and one might get the impression that the Church actually «won» on this matter.<sup>18</sup>

#### *The Orthodox Church, Society, and Modern Liberal Values*

Not only does the Georgian Orthodox Church use its position of power to gain influence in politics, it also has a considerable impact on debates in society in general. An example is the intervention of the Church in the TV show «Heroes of Georgia». The format of the show was significantly altered after intervention by the Church, which managed in this way to impose its own interpretation of Georgian heroes and Georgian history

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<sup>15</sup> Saakashvili has neither sympathized with the Church nor used it for a project of nation-building (Serrano 2010: 5).

<sup>16</sup> After the Caucasus War in 2008 the narrative of a «unified Georgia», promoted by the Saakashvili government, lost its power and religious discourse became even stronger (Janelidze 2013: 8-9).

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<sup>17</sup> Statements on whether the Church had been consulted during the legislation process are contradictory. The government stated that the matter had been discussed in the council of religions, and that members of the patriarchy had been invited but had refused to cooperate. The Church denies being offered this opportunity and actually justified its opposition on these grounds. (Janelidze 2013: 7).

<sup>18</sup> Janelidze (2013: 7) argues that the Church was by no means the winner in this conflict but does not justify her interpretation.

and culture on Georgian society (Zedania 2011a: 120). Not surprisingly, the subjective importance of religion for people and the high degree of trust in religious institutions and the Patriarch Ilia II lead to a prevalence in Georgian society of values and opinions supported by the Church. The negative attitude of the Church towards the topic of homosexuality and the influence of this opinion on society is just one typical example which will be discussed in greater detail below.

The Church positioned itself as an opposition to Saakashvili's presidency, led by the idea of Georgia as a liberal modern state with an inclusive vision of the nation as shared citizenship. This became especially apparent in the 2012 presidential elections, when, although not openly stating so, the Church backed the Georgian Dream Coalition rather than the then leading UNM party. This incident demonstrates that tensions between the Church and the Saakashvili government, especially apparent towards the end of Saakashvili's presidency, were, despite seeming to be of a political nature, basically conflict over the issue of values. Thus, there is a clear link between the influence of the Church on values in society and its influence on politics.

### **Possible Reasons and Explanations for the Dominant Role of the Orthodox Church**

There are several reasons for the high degree in trust in the Church and the low degree of trust in political and public institutions. First, political repression during Soviet times has literally discredited public institutions and the state in the eyes of the population (Charles 2010: 240; Janelidze 2013: 4). Second, the tumultuous changes in the post-communist regime in the 1990s have generally been accompanied by a loss of trust in all areas (Charles 2010: 240). Additionally, the 1990s saw a high level of social injustice and insecurity, corruption on a broad scale in all public institutions, high unemployment figures, wars with Abkhazia and other ethnic conflicts (Janelidze 2013: 4). All these

factors undoubtedly contributed to the population's loss of trust in public institutions. Together with this decline of communist institutions and state power, traditional cultural values have re-emerged. It is therefore not surprising that the Church has succeeded in filling this vacuum of trust. A crucial role in this re-emergence of the Church as an institution to be trusted was played by Patriarch Ilia II, appointed in 1977. By fighting corruption and stressing the importance of the Church for Georgian nationhood and culture he further increased the perception of the Church as a popular and trusted institution (Fuchslocher 2010: 111–112).

It should be added that today the Church is also heavily supported by the state and politicians and that this contributes to the feeling of trust people have towards religious institutions. It has been shown that trust in religion is generally higher in states where religion is supported by the state (Charles 2010: 247). And the Church also has a vested interest in the continuation of this de-secularisation process.

Public spaces in Georgia have not only been formed by the government but also by the Church; in the last twenty years, many houses of worship have been built. Whereas in the 1980s churches were a place of resistance, religion being of only minor social significance, the 1990s saw a «return of God». Since then, religious signs have become increasingly present in public spaces and this re-emergence of religion has not simply been a reawakening of religious feelings but a development intended and brought about by the agenda of the Church in trying to establish a link between national identity and religion (Serrano 2010: 1–2, 4).

Despite the increased power and the supremacy of Georgian Orthodox religion, with the Saakashvili government in power from 2003, discrimination and acts of violence against minority religions have significantly decreased. However, Armenian Apostolic and Catholic places of worship are still occasionally taken over by the Georgian Orthodox Church (causing tensions between

Georgia and Armenia) and it is evident that the Georgian Orthodox Church knowingly extinguishes signs of other religions in order to mark Georgia as an Orthodox-only sphere (Serrano 2010: 4).<sup>19</sup>

Paradoxically, the Church became stronger in its conquest of public spaces after 2003, when Saakashvili, the president who had been sceptical about the Patriarch and had devoted himself to religious pluralism, was elected (Serrano 2010: 8; Janelidze 2013: 8). Changes in developments since 2013 cannot be assessed yet.

Finally, political groups and leaders also have an interest in keeping the Church «in politics». Politicians know that by showing a certain closeness and friendship to the Church or their leader, they can profit from the Church's legitimacy and acceptance by the population. Wherever the Church backs a political project, support from the population is obtained much more easily. For politicians, the Church in this context is never seen as a potential danger. Winning the Church's favour is further simplified by the very vague and thus insufficient rules on gifts or bribery, meaning that politicians can ingratiate themselves with the Church, most notably by bestowing on it pieces of real estate (Serrano 2010: 10). It can be said then that the Georgian Orthodox Church actively uses the population's trust for its project of a purely Orthodox Georgian national identity, whereas the political establishment, in return, in general manages to profit from the high legitimacy of the Church.

### Own Impression

With all this background information on the importance of the Georgian Orthodox Church for people's lives, the importance of religion and the prevalence of conservative social values, one might expect that (almost) all Georgian people are religious and share some rather traditionalist values. However, the people we had the

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<sup>19</sup> A different point of view is presented in Fuchslocher (2010: 170–174).

opportunity to meet in Georgia did not seem to conform to this picture of the typical average Georgian.

We met several students who were, if not totally areligious, at least very critical in their views about the Church. Our guide even openly rejected the Church and certain policies such as the obligation to cover hair and knees inside places of worship. She also appeared to be rather sceptical about the reconstruction of Zinvali and the existing conflicts between Church and (art) historians on how to rebuild old medieval churches.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, we had the opportunity to meet Professor Zedania, who has published several articles clearly criticizing the Church for being an obstacle to modernization and democracy in Georgia.<sup>21</sup>

We probably obtained a more realistic image of Georgian society as far as religious matters and religiosity are concerned during our visit to Jvari Monastery. As it was the day of the Assumption of Mary, one of the most important religious holidays in Georgia, many people came to visit this ancient church. They all seemed delighted to be there and people of all ages, from the infant to the frail old grandmother, could be seen entering the church, lighting candles, and praying.

A striking comment illustrating what religiosity in Georgia could imply was made by our guide in the Stalin Museum in Gori. When asked for his opinion of Stalin he answered that he was a Christian and as such not allowed to judge other people. His answer seems to be the expression of a deep-rooted, internalised attitude – an attitude which of course can also be quite convenient at times.

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<sup>20</sup> An interesting point is made by Serrano (2010: 6) on the cooperation between the Church and the Ministry of Culture: churches are built and rebuilt on the basis of consensus on what a Georgian Church should look like. Old churches are not seen as examples of medieval architecture but as places of worship (= desecularisation).

<sup>21</sup> This issue will be addressed further in the chapter «Impact on State and Society».

In general, it can be said that the central role of religion in Georgia and issues relating to it were mentioned by almost everyone we met. Thus, the main points made in the different sources of literature analysed were clearly confirmed by the lectures we attended and also by our own impressions in Georgia. However, conversations with several more Church-critical people also showed us that it is necessary to have a more differentiated picture.

### Impact on State and Society

As discussed in the previous sections, the Georgian Orthodox Church occupies a special position in Georgian society, and religion in general plays a very important role for the people. This situation may have different consequences for the future development of the Georgian state and society.

■ First, this special position of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the country's political and social landscape means that **politics are heavily influenced** (if not even dominated) **by politically non-legitimized entities**.

The Church actively seeks influence on politics and political decisions (Fuchslocher 2010: 166–169). This has already been mentioned and illustrated above with the example of the planned statute on religious minorities. The Church and the prevalence of orthodox values also have a significant influence on the execution or non-execution of regulations. For instance, freedom of religion (and non-discrimination) is guaranteed by the constitution and a non-discrimination statute. Nonetheless, despite these regulations, in reality a lot of administrative acts still qualify as religious discrimination (Serrano 2010: 11; Fuchslocher 2010: 170–174).

Still, it is difficult to tell to what extent people actually support further claims to power by the Church. Scholars do not agree on whether these interventions by the Church and the Patriarch in politics meet with the acceptance or approval of the population. Whilst Fuchslocher (2010: 111–112, 166–169) shows that Ilia II has been involved in politics ever since the early 1990s

(and been popular despite or because of this ever since), Tchiaberashvili (2014: lecture), on the basis of other data, demonstrates that people do not want the Church to be part of politics and that when the Church or the Patriarch have too openly intervened in politics, their level of their support has decreased.

The question that now can be asked is why politicians and political parties seem to accept the Church and its polarizing power and what their options, if they wanted to change something, might be. **For political institutions or the state in general, it seems to be difficult to regain the population's trust in their institutions independently from their trust in or support for the Church.** First of all, there does not seem to be any serious wish, attempt or plan on the part of governmental institutions to emancipate themselves from the authority of the Church. And this is not too difficult to understand: if political institutions (parliament, the president, the government, etc.) want to establish themselves as trustworthy regardless of the trust people might have in the Church, a certain alienation or even dissociation from the Church is necessary. However, actively seeking dissociation from such a powerful entity entails non-negligent risks and potential for conflict no political party or institution wants to take. An example illustrating this is the issue of orphanages run by the Church. Everyone in Georgia knows that these orphanages do not comply with the required standards, but no government or politician dares to criticize the Church because of the potential conflicts that may arise (Tchiaberashvili 2014: lecture). Thus, due to the significant power of the Church in the political landscape, politicians are caught in a sort of vicious circle. They might want to emancipate themselves from the Church but, if they want to preserve their power, the risks are too high.

■ Second, the Church assumes a central position in questions of Georgian nationality and statehood, which leads to the problem that **Orthodoxy is perceived as an element of Georgian identity**. The Church demands (and

gets) a significant way where religious issues such as the rights and treatment of other religions are concerned and it actively pursues its own agenda of expansion, including the suppression of minority religions. This agenda raises serious questions. The equation of Georgian Orthodox religion with Georgian nationality creates potential for conflict, mainly between Orthodox Georgians and areligious Georgians or Georgians of other religions who might be perceived (or perceive themselves) as second-class citizens or not real Georgians. There is no public discussion about the Church and its role, because of the polarization concerning this question in Georgian society. **Possible conflicts about religion could run along ethnic lines**, a dangerous situation for any government (Serrano 2010: 11). The impact of this religious nationalism can be observed in Adjara. Adjara is a region in the southwest of Georgia where the majority of the population are Muslim Georgians. Since the early 1990s the Georgian Orthodox Church has made efforts to make Adjara Muslims convert to Orthodoxy, and in the following years tens of thousands Muslim Adjaris have converted. However, in reality the situation is more complex than it might seem. It can be assumed that many Adjaris sought conversion not because of the Church's active efforts, but because of a conflict of values arising between their religion and the concept of Georgian identity: they perceived themselves to be Georgians, but being Muslim did not fit with the image of Georgian identity promoted by the Georgian state (and Church). Thus if they wanted to be truly Georgian, serve their country and secure their social positions, it was logical or at least sensible to convert (Pelkmans 2010: 116, 119–120; Fuchslocher 2010: 173–174).

■ Third, it is not at all clear whether **religious nationalism is compatible with the idea of liberal modernization**. It is important to state once again that the Georgian Orthodox Church is the only institution which has managed to become a part of Georgian identity. With the wars after independence, the Georgian Orthodox Church

became the incorporation of a new form of nationalist ideology and after 2003, a very strong religious nationalism emerged which positioned itself against projects of modernization supported by the Saakashvili government (Zedania 2011a: 124). Severe tensions exist between this religious nationalism and liberal modernity and it does not always seem to be easy to reconcile Orthodox values with ideas of a liberal society with individual rights. This is clearly shown by the issue of discrimination or rather the enhancing of discriminatory values and points of view in society by the Church.

A striking example is the perception of homosexuality in Georgian society. In a survey, Georgian people were asked who they would least like to have as a neighbour. The majority of Georgians answered that a gay neighbour would be the worst possible outcome (compared to criminals, drug addicts and other negatively perceived groups of people). The explanation given for this outcome of the survey is the influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church on Georgian society, clearly condemning this sexual preference (Tchiaberashvili 2014: lecture slide 14). Another related topic where the influence of the Church seems significant is sexual activity of women before marriage. Already in 1990, Kotthoff (1990: 44) stated that the «cult of virginity» was very present especially in rural areas but also in the cities. This «cult of virginity» seems to have an even stronger position in today's Georgian society. The taboo of pre-marital sex for women is known as «the virginity institute». A survey in 2009 reported that 77% of respondents think it is unacceptable for a woman to have sex before marriage. According to Lomsadze (2013) «[t]he belief is rooted both in Georgia's conservative culture and the Georgian Orthodox faith, which does not discriminate between men and women on the topic.» An impression of the relevance of this issue becomes apparent in the answer of one of our lecturers when we asked him what he would most like to see happening in Georgia. He said that he hoped for a «sexual revolution».

It seems fairly obvious that the Church's tendency to influence people's values and perception of what is good and bad does not just lead to strongly conservative ideas but also to acts that **seriously disadvantage and discriminate against socially despised groups** such as sexual minorities. Such behaviour bears risks of social unacceptance or exclusion for people who do not conform to the exceedingly restrictive rules advocated by the Church.

Religious nationalism as supported by the Georgian Orthodox Church continues to revolve around the central argument that Orthodoxy is the crucial element of Georgia, that liberal modernization is not acceptable for (Orthodox) Georgians, and that the Patriarch is the supreme authority (Janelidze 2013: 8). In this respect, because of the different forms of nationalism followed in Georgia, some tension between Church and state exist, but have never really undermined the strong position of the former, as has been shown above (Zedania 2011a: 125–126).<sup>22</sup> The consequences of this influence might be what some call an «uncivil society» which is anti-modern, anti-Western, anti-liberal, anti-democratic, against equal treatment of other religious groups and clearly opposed to pluralism and progressive values (Zedania 2011b: 18). There are however also authors who underline the fact that despite the religious nationalist discourse of the Church and its influence on society, there are attempts at modernisation in Georgia and that not all secular elements in the state have disappeared (Janelidze 2011: 8–9). Some say that the idea of religion as totally opposed to democracy does not reflect reality and that the Western secular model

is certainly not the only way of achieving a just society. Religiosity might even have a **long-term positive effect of bringing stability, moral guidance and common identity** (Filetti 2014: 219–222).

## | Armenia

Before the final conclusion some of the points on religion in Georgia shall be compared with the situation in Armenia.

### General Information on Religion in Armenia

98% of the Armenian population are Christians, 90% of whom belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church (Hofmann 2010: 15; Motika 2010: 213–214).<sup>23</sup> Legend had it that the Armenian Apostolic Church was founded as early as in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and became the official Armenian Church three centuries later (Hofmann 2010: 18–19; Grigoryan 2014: lecture). The Armenian Apostolic Church belongs to the Ancient Oriental Churches and as such, together with a few other Churches such as the Coptic or the Ethiopian Churches, occupies a special position among the Oriental Churches (Grigoryan 2014: lecture). Similar to the development of Georgian script, Armenian script goes back to the times of early Christianity, when in the 5<sup>th</sup> century the first Armenian script was developed to translate the Bible into the Armenian language (Hofmann 2010: 19). The Armenian Apostolic Church has had a crucial influence on Armenian history and culture; it is a powerful element of integration and plays an important role when it comes to preserving Armenian cultural identity (Hofmann 2010: 18–19).

<sup>22</sup> Zedania (2011: 126) provides an interesting example of a conflict between the state and the Church arising in the context of the restoration of ancient Georgian monuments in Turkey. This is to a certain extent a difference between Russia and Georgia. In Russia the Orthodox Church and the government pursue the same agenda based on common interests.

<sup>23</sup> Religious minorities include: 5% Catholics, other Christians 3%, < 1% Yazidis and Jews (Hofmann 2010: 15).

Taking all these elements together, is not surprising that Armenians understand themselves as a nation defined by their language, culture, religion and script (Iskandaryan 2014: lecture).

### **Religion in Armenia Today and Major Differences Compared to Georgia**

According to Charles (2010: 235–237), religiosity in Armenia is, as in Georgia, not very significant, whilst trust in religious institutions is extremely high.

Today, the statute on religions grants the Armenian Apostolic Church a privileged status compared to other religions (Hofmann 2010: 19). It is the national Church and enjoys several privileges such as a general tax exemption (Motika 2010: 215). At the same time, other religious institutions, above all Jehovah's Witnesses, are at a severe disadvantage (Motika 2010: 215–216). Thus, compared to Georgia, where according to most authors the discrimination of religious minority groups has decreased in recent years, in Armenia they continue to encounter difficulties.

An important issue in Armenian politics and political discourse is the Karabakh issue. In this conflict, unresolved to this day, the common (Armenian Apostolic) religion between Karabakhi Armenians and Armenians is often mentioned as a factor explaining the difference and distance to Muslim Azerbaijanis. However, it is striking that although religion is always mentioned, the Karabakh conflict, followed by ethnic purges on both sides, can hardly be classified as a religious conflict. It is rather an ethnic conflict or a conflict between two nations (Armenia and Azerbaijan) in which religion is also a feature through which both sides can differentiate themselves. In general, Islam is not perceived as something negative or problematic in Armenia, which is also demonstrated by the relatively good economic relations between Armenia and Iran (Iskandaryan 2014: lecture; Minasyan 214: lecture).

The Armenian Apostolic Church is also significant in Armenian diaspora. While the Western diaspora defines itself almost exclusively in terms of the Armenian genocide, the Oriental diaspora's identity is also defined by culture, religion and other traditions (Iskandaryan 2014: lecture). However, the Church as an institution is significant for Armenian diasporas all over the world as THE institution on the basis of which a community can exist and continue existing (Grigoryan 2014: lecture). Comparing Armenia to Georgia, there seem to be a lot of common features in the historic emergence and development of the two countries; above all there is an important link between religion, Churches, language and script, which together constitute an important part of each society's identity. An important difference between the Georgian Orthodox and the Armenian Apostolic Church is that the latter is not autocephalous, which may be one of the main reasons why, as we will see below, the Church in Armenia does not take such a prominent role in the political discourse and definition of Armenian «nationhood».

Today, both in Georgia and Armenia one Church is dominant and, despite a guarantee of religious freedom and equal treatment, enjoys a privileged position. Like the Georgian population, the Armenian population also shows a high degree of trust in the Church (54%). However the trust is comparatively lower and the most trusted institution is not the Church but the army (85%) (Charles 2010: 235–241). Unlike in Georgia, where tolerance towards religious minorities has been encouraged by the Saakashvili government and actually increased, the situation for these minorities, especially Jehovah's Witnesses, is still difficult in Armenia, where they face discrimination and rejection. However, *the* fundamental difference (as far as we are able to observe) between Georgia and Armenia concerning religion in state and society is the influence religion (and/or the patriarch) has on politics and political and social discourse. Despite the fact that, historically, religion has played a

significant role in the development of Armenian identity, the role of the Church and religion in Armenia today is quite different from that in Georgia. Above all, there does not seem to be a politicization of religion in Armenia. Religion is certainly important in people's lives. This became apparent for instance in the person of our Armenian guide. He probably would not have defined himself via religion, but he was deeply touched when meeting a monk and former military chaplain living alone in Gandzasar Monastery, and he behaved most correctly when entering and leaving churches. However, the importance of religion in Armenia is to be found on a more cultural level. Religion does not seem to be part of the public discourse; it is an aspect of people's private lives. Or, as one of our guides once stated, as religion in Armenia is almost the same everywhere, it is not necessary to talk about it.

As already mentioned above, it is clear that Armenians, despite their problems with Turkey and Azerbaijan, do not perceive their differences to be related to religion. There are neither problems nor negative feelings against Islam, which is also demonstrated by the good relations Armenia has with Iran. An interesting element is also the solidarity of Armenia with Iraqi and Syrian Yazidis. They do not belong to the same religion as Armenians but this is clearly of no importance. It almost seems that they feel simply united by a common history and destiny as a small, persecuted group of people with an old religion.

## | Conclusion

What can be said about the future development of the Georgian and Armenian state and society? In the case of Georgia, the issue is broken down to the question of whether the Georgian Orthodox Church and the role it takes in society encourages, contradicts or prevents the Georgian modernization and democratization process. Filetti (2014: 234–235) suggests that, since the state

presents religion and the Church as something positive and inclusive, there is a correlation between religiosity and a sense of democracy and that therefore the Church is part of the Georgian nation, nation building and democratization process. On the contrary, others, for instance Zedania or Tchiaberashvili, see the Church as an obstacle to modernization and democratization in Georgia and cast doubt on the notion that the Church could serve as a moral beacon.<sup>24</sup>

Certainly, there is no guarantee that different forms of nationalism such as «civic nationalism» offer a more pluralistic and integrative option compared with religious nationalism. Actually, it was this perception of the nation state that played a major part in the Caucasus War in 2008 against the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Still, it is to be hoped that the close link between national identity and the Orthodox Church in Georgia will not lead to the estrangement and exclusion of certain citizens in the country. Furthermore, it remains problematic that the Church not only tries to advocate its moral standards but takes part at least indirectly in political decisions without having a democratic mandate. The comparison with Armenia shows that trust in religious institutions and the high importance of religion for the identity and everyday life of the population does not necessarily lead to a democratically non-legitimized, dominant and influential position of the Church in political decisions.

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<sup>24</sup> Tchiaberashvili (2014: lecture) states that the Church does not tell people what they should do but just what not to do.

## | Literature and Lectures

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Minasyan, S. Caucasus Institute (Stepanakert, 03.09.2014)

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# I The Georgian and South Ossetian Conflict and the 2008 Georgian-Russian War

## I Introduction

The Georgian-Ossetian conflict can be defined as an ethno-political struggle over Georgia's formerly autonomous region of South Ossetia. The roots of the conflict reach far back into the complex history of the region, and reside in two contradictory narratives regarding the identity and legitimacy of the autonomy of South Ossetia.

The conflicts described in this paper are examined in this framework, beginning with the Ossetian struggle for independence that followed the Russian Revolution, and continuing with the re-igniting of the hostilities in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

While South Ossetians consider their struggle to be a legitimate fight for self-determination and allege that Georgians have committed genocide towards their people (Gordadze 2010), Georgians deny the allegations and consider the casualty figures to be exaggerated. While not denying the brutality of the fighting, they view the ongoing conflict as a fight for the territorial integrity of their nation, which they regard as under threat from Russia, evermore in the aftermath of the 2008 war.

## I The Georgian and South Ossetian Conflict

The origin of the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia resides in two radically different versions of the region's history. The mainstream view in Georgia is that South Ossetia constitutes one of the country's oldest regions, with a particular historical and cultural significance. Georgian extremists go so far as to claim that the region's current inhabitants, the Ossetians, arrived in the regions between two and three centuries ago, and should hence be viewed as «guests» in the land.

On the other hand, Ossetians claim an ancestry going back as far as the Scythians and Alans, thus linking themselves to the territory as far back as 2,700 years. A more reliable historical version is located somewhere

in between, placing the arrival of the Ossetians in the Southern Caucasus between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, as a consequence of the Mongol invasions in the northern regions of the mountainous range (Coene 2010).

However, we have to take into account more than a historical perspective when analyzing the roots of the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia. It can be demonstrated that this conflict does not support two of the statistically best-established traits of general conflict theory: the connection between mountainous terrain and the occurrence of internal wars as well as the association between a low level of economic development and the emergence of war. The Georgian and South Ossetian conflict took place in societies that were in fact not poor. It's true that they emerged in a mountainous landscape, but although this worsened the conflict it was not its cause, as many internal wars took place on highly populated plains (Bunescu 2012). Rather, the cause of the outbreak of the conflict lies within the weakness of the state at the time. Many historians believe that the conflict could have been avoided if the state had been stronger and better controlled. This is why the former Soviet ethno-federal system plays a crucial role in analyzing the conflict, since it results precisely from the collapse of this structure that had guaranteed all territorial components linguistic and cultural autonomy. The birth of a sovereign Georgia with a nationalist policy was paralleled by the growing determination of forces in South Ossetia (and Abkhazia) to achieve their own sovereignty. For Zürcher, the story of the Georgian wars is that of a failed transitional state where the new leadership is not willing to cooperate with the old nomenklatura, nor capable or willing to find a solution for the shadow economy – namely tobacco and alcohol – that endangers the very existence of the state as the only entity that has the monopoly on coercive power (Bunescu 2012).

The following episodes show the historic time-lapse of the Georgian and South Ossetian conflict and the absence of effective and proactive intervention by the state. In the modern era, the first conflict of note arose during the period 1918–1921.

### **1918–1920: First Conflicts**

After the 1917 February Revolution, which resulted in the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, Georgia declared independence on 20 May 1918. The Ossetians did not want to stay within Georgia because they had voluntarily joined Russia in 1774, and there were numerous outbreaks of disobedience among the Ossetian peasants, who refused to pay taxes to the Tiflis government. As a result, South Ossetia declared independence on 8 June 1920.

Georgia did not accept that and sent its army to crush the rebellion. The fighting culminated in the town of Tskhinvali, which was occupied by the rebels on March 19, 1918. In 1920, a much larger Ossetian uprising took place, which was supported by the Bolsheviks, who had gathered a military force.

Despite assurances respecting Georgia's territorial integrity in the Treaty of Moscow of May 7, 1920, Soviet Russia demanded Georgia call back its troops from Ossetia. Bolshevik forces crossed into Georgia and helped the local rebels defeat the Georgians. The rebellious areas were effectively incorporated into Soviet Russia. In February 1921, many Ossetians joined the advancing Red Army, which brought Georgia's independence to an end.

In April 1922 the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast was created and Tskhinvali was chosen as its capital. Despite this already harsh and brutal conflict, relations between Georgians and Ossetians remained peaceful throughout the Soviet period, in contrast to Georgia's other ethnic trouble spots, like Abkhazia. During the Soviet period, relations between ethnic Ossetians and Georgians were peaceful to such a degree that there

was still a high rate of interaction and intermarriage (Coene 2010).

### **1980–1990: Culmination**

During the late 1980s the Ossetians founded the Ademon Nykhas (Popular Front). It was a time when several national popular parties and movements emerged. At the time two thirds of the population of South Ossetia was Ossetian and less than one third Georgian. The conflict boiled up again in the spring of 1989, when the leader of Ademon Nykhas sent an open letter to the Abkhaz people expressing his support for their secessionist claims. This resulted in several rumors of skirmishes between Georgian and Ossetian armed groups. Moreover, in August Georgia adopted a new law that established Georgian as the only official language on its territory. Since only a minority of them could speak Georgian, this law led to bewilderment among the Ossetians (Coene 2010).

The consequence was a petition sent to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR from Ademon Nykhas for the unification of South Ossetia with North Ossetia. In November not only did the Supreme Council of South Ossetia demand Ossetic become the official language, but they even called for the status of autonomous oblast to be modified into that of an autonomous republic. Of course, the Georgians reacted furiously to those claims and became active in launching a march to Tskhinvali on 23 November 1989, leading to two days of severe violence.

After that Georgia adopted a law in August 1990 that made it impossible for parties belonging to a limited, specific area of Georgia – such as Ademon Nykhas – to participate in the parliamentary elections that October. The next reaction from the South Ossetians was the eventual proclamation of their region as an independent Soviet republic and independent elections held against the will of Georgia, which in turn abolished the autonomy of South Ossetia (Coene 2010).

### 1991–1992: the South Ossetian-Georgian War

Since neither side was disposed to engaging in negotiations, the abolition of South Ossetian autonomy resulted in an ethnic war. After an incident where three Georgian people were killed, Georgia ordered a state of emergency in Tskhinvali in December 1990. Soon, in January 1991, several Georgian troops entered South Ossetia, blocking the capital for over a year.

The Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev, found it reasonable to intervene by nullifying both declarations of autonomy, as well as the abolition, as these were compatible with the Soviet constitution. However, Georgia was not willing to recognize this intervention in its internal affairs and territorial integrity, which led to the expansion of the state of emergency throughout South Ossetia. The installation of a new government and especially the appointment of Eduard Shevardnadze ameliorated the situation for both sides and increased the willingness to find a solution to the conflict.

Nevertheless, as soon as Ossetians formally stated their wish for independence from Georgia and therefore unification with Russia in an organized referendum, fighting and hostilities began again, culminating in North Ossetia establishing an economic boycott of Georgia. A broad and very fragile ceasefire agreement was reached in 1992 (known as the Sochi Agreement) which managed to end the war but did not succeed in establishing a clear status for South Ossetia. By then Georgia was under huge pressure, since it was facing other violent incidents such as those in Abkhazia

## | From 1992 to the 2008 Georgian-Russian War

### 1992–2003: Attempts at a Peace Process

While the Sochi Agreement of 24 June 1992 ended the war, it did not resolve the dispute about the status of South Ossetia, which after this date became a de facto independent zone (Gordadzé 2010). One of the reasons

for the timing of the agreement was that Georgia hoped to resolve the issue in order to focus on the more problematic areas within its borders, Abkhazia and the Zviadist rebellion in the west of the country (Coene 2010). A joint peacekeeping force, composed of Russians, Georgians and Ossetians, was agreed on. From 1992 to 1995, the peace process was frozen after multiple violations of the ceasefire agreement, but in the following years Shevardnadze's positive stance towards the country's minorities created a rapprochement with the South Ossetian government, led by Lyudvig Tchibirov, that resulted in several high-level meetings culminating in the signing of a memorandum of agreement in 1996, and a joint peace declaration in 1997.

Overall, the years under the Shevardnadze presidency (1992–2003) are seen as having globally eased the tensions with South Ossetia. (Gordadzé 2010). «The lack of armed confrontations, the relative freedom of movement and the development of different illegal traffic along the Trans-Caucasian highway (the transkam), which benefitted Ossetians and Georgians, secessionists and loyalists alike, created a temporary modus vivendi based on the strategy of avoidance of war» (Gordadzé 2010: 59).

### 2004–2008: Renewed Tensions

The «contraband corridor» (Gordadzé 2010: 60) was to become the crystallizing factor for the renewed tensions in the summer of 2004. Georgia's new president, Michael Saakashvili, had promised South Ossetia a high degree of autonomy and offered humanitarian aid in the early days of his presidency (Coene 2010), but this was seen by many Ossetians as contrary to his political message aggressively insisting on the restoration of territorial integrity (George 2009), thus playing to the «cartographic anxieties» of the Georgian psyche (Kachachnik 2012).

Erroneously believing that the fundamental problem of South Ossetians was economic, that contraband was

fuelling separatism in the region and that the government of pro-Russian leader Eduard Kokoity was deeply unpopular (George 2009), Saakashvili launched anti-corruption measures coupled with humanitarian aid to South Ossetia at the end of 2003, which culminated in the closing of the black market at Ergneti in June 2004. However, these measures targeted the «life-line» (George 2009: 179) of the Ossetian community, without adequately compensating the economic losses with humanitarian aid, which additionally mostly benefitted the ethnic Georgian population. This bolstered the Koikoty regime and fuelled a backlash against the Georgian government.

During the summer of 2004, tensions escalated between the Georgians and South Ossetians, supported by the Russian peacekeeping force. At this time «the South Ossetian regime could no longer be qualified as independent. It had simply become the emanation of the Russian administration» (Gordadzé 2010: 67). The Georgians seized Russian convoys bringing military aid to South Ossetia and both parts exchanged gunfire between the villages under their respective control. As the death toll mounted, a ceasefire agreement was signed on 13 August, subsequently violated and eventually enforced three months later.

In the following years, the Saakashvili government renewed offers of concessions to South Ossetia, while at the same time making overtures to Kokoity's political rival, the pro-Georgian Dimitri Sanakoev, and building up the country's military force (George 2009). In 2006, Kokoity's government organized a Russian-backed independence referendum, which was accepted by 99% of voters in the ethnic Ossetian population, while a contemporary poll in the centrally controlled parts of the region showed 80% were in favour of Dimitri Sanakoev (Gordadzé 2010). Thus South Ossetia was split in two between the Russian and Georgian spheres of control. Between 2007 and 2008, frequent skirmishes erupted between the two sides. Eduard Koikoty's government

was vastly reliant on Russian aid, which in turn depended to a certain degree on continued tension in the region (Gordadzé 2010). From the Georgian viewpoint, although the country was superior in military power to the South Ossetian militias, the military refrained from attempting to control the region in its entirety, fearing Russian reprisals in Abkhazia which would undermine the long-term objective of territorial integrity. On the eve of the war, the Georgian government controlled about half of the South Ossetian territory and protected the ethnic Georgian villages while assisting in the reconstruction of the region (Gordadzé 2010).

### **2008: War With Russia**

The war between Russia and Georgia lasted only five days (7–12 August), but the months prior to the beginning of the hostilities saw a significant increase in security-related incidents in the region. Additionally, in the March of the same year, Russia openly recognised the de facto autonomous regions of Georgia and Abkhazia and sent military reinforcements to the region, in open violation of the ceasefire agreement.

This intensification was at the same time a response to regional contingencies and the larger political picture, in the context of the recent international recognition of Kosovo and eastward expansion of NATO. Experts have also argued that «petro-politics» were also at the heart of the conflict, in particular the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline which began operating in 2005, bypassing Russian territory and thereby linking Georgia directly with the West, thus weakening its link to its northern neighbour (German 2009).

Subsequent research has showed that Russia had planned the invasion in advance, and that a military exercise in July 2008, named «Caucasus 2008», had been used as training for a similar scenario (Vendil Pallin and Westerlund 2009).

The incident that sparked the beginning of the conflict was the destruction of a Georgian police car, which in-

jured six people, on August 1. The subsequent exchange of sniper fire climaxed in the Georgian «liberation» – according to Georgian president Saakashvili – of Tskhnvali and the surrounding villages on August 7. However, the responsibility for the beginning of the conflict remains a contentious issue. The Georgian version maintains that at the time Tskhnvali was captured, Georgian villages were being bombarded by South Ossetian soldiers and Russian troops had already begun the invasion, while the Russian narrative claims they reacted to Georgian hostilities (Coene 2010).

Georgia's military infrastructure was targeted and largely reduced by the Russian military, which advanced as close as 55 km from Tbilisi (Coene 2010). The Russian military was far superior in number to the Georgian armed forces, and their successful strategy consisted of a Soviet-style outnumbering of the adversary. At the same time, the conflict brought to light the flaws of the Russian military, both the out-dated infrastructure and the at times chaotic chain of command (Vendil Pallin and Westerlund 2009).

The international community reacted hastily to the conflict, which was viewed as a «return of history» (Kagan 2008 in Larsen 2012: 2) and provoked a large-scale diplomatic crisis. According to Larsen, the reactions of Western states can be categorized according to three different typologies, ranging to the «traditional hawks», the USA and Great Britain, the «ferveht hawks» in the former Soviet satellite states and the «doves», foremost in Germany, who sought not to alienate Russia in the wake of the conflict while maintaining their lucrative commercial ties to their Eastern neighbour (Larsen 2012: 3). The French position was a special one, as the country was EU president at the time. Nicolas Sarkozy was responsible for brokering a peace plan, which was signed by presidents Medvedev and Saakashvili, as well as the leaders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and entailed the implementation of an EU monitoring mission to the region.

The EU established an Independent Fact Finding Mission headed by Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini, which published a report on the conflict in 2009. Although stating that there was «no way to assign overall responsibility for the conflict to one side alone», the Georgians regarded it as largely supporting the Russian version of events.

In the aftermath of the conflict, Dmitri Medvedev officially recognized the independence and sovereignty of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, paralleling the Western recognition of Kosovo (Larsen 2010), a move that has not been followed by the international community. However, it should be noted that unlike the case of Abkhazia (or Nagorno-Karabakh in relation to neighbouring Armenia), South Ossetia is not self-sufficient, and is consequently reliant on Russian support. Since the ceasefire, Russia has violated the terms of the EU-brokered agreement by building permanent military bases and blocking EU monitoring missions from entering South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and preventing the displaced ethnic Georgian population from returning to their homes (Cornell 2011). In addition, Russia is seen as covertly contributing to the political destabilization of Georgia, and is possibly linked to a series of bombings which hit Tbilisi between 2010 and 2011 (Cornell 2011).

As a consequence of the conflict, Russia improved its strategic position in the Caucasus region while limiting NATO expansion eastwards, thus reaffirming its position as a superpower.

## | Conclusion

This paper was written after a study trip to the Caucasus with the Swiss Study Foundation, in September 2014. During our stay, although we did not visit the regions of South Ossetia or Abkhazia, we had the opportunity to interact with local academics, journalists and politicians, who often talked about these two «black holes» that continue to be included in contemporary Georgian maps as an integral part of the country's territory, de-

spite being completely out of the central government's control since 2008.

According to many, this situation does not seem set to change in the near future, and thus Georgia seems destined to remain in a state of «cartographic anxiety» (Kabachnik 2012) over its lost regions.

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# I Which Roles have Russia, the EU, the USA and other External Actors Played in the Resolution of the Conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia?

## I Introduction

The aim of this paper is to critically analyze the role of the USA, Russia, the European Union and other external actors with respect to the conflict resolution in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The paper considers the status quo in the conflicts as a sort of conflict resolution. The paper concludes that Russia is the dominant external actor with slight differences in the three conflicts.

Before we enter into the discussion, we should clarify what resolution of a conflict of this kind means. The three conflicts have in common that they originate in ethno-political secessionist movements with a violent prologue dating back at least several decades and resulting in a tense status quo which is partly or mainly dependent on the support of external forces. Legally, all three can be localized in the tension between the right to self-determination and a state's sovereignty. Sergey Minasyan offers a set of what one might call *de facto* conflict resolutions. The concept does not address the question of resolution as a situation without major tensions between the parties but rather as a lasting situation achieved on the ground which may be dissatisfying for both sides. Minasyan identifies five scenarios: **1.** an overwhelming military victory of the secessionist movement; **2.** a complete elimination of the whole secessionist movement; **3.** a frozen conflict in which the defeated party is unwilling to accept the status quo and hopes and works to regain its lost territory; **4.** a stable status quo of secession ensured by another regional or world power; **5.** a forced or voluntary agreement on the status of a common state or disapproval of secession by decisive regional or world powers. The conflicts of interest can be localized within this framework, Abkhazia and South Ossetia being examples where an external power guarantees a stable status quo, while the Nagorno-Karabakh case is fairly well defined as a frozen conflict (Minasyan 2010: 7–14).

«The South Caucasus is, if at all, usually treated as a single entity by the broader public and in general there exists quite limited knowledge about this region. The differences, however, between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia could not be bigger and more evident. Apart from differing languages, religions and geographical characteristics one can also discover a high degree of heterogeneity in the political culture and political trends since the disintegration of the USSR» (Iskandaryan 2013: 8). This fact is crucial when analysing the role of external actors in the conflict resolution process, since each of the three countries, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan have very different political relationships with the USA, the European Union and Russia. While Georgia officially follows a pro-Western policy, there is Armenia, which tries to balance international interests, and Azerbaijan, which is very critical of Western democratisation efforts in the South Caucasus (Iskandaryan 2013: 7–8).

This paper examines each of the three conflicts, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh, in their own right. In each case, the status quo is taken as the relevant (*de facto*) conflict resolution. At the end of the paper there will be a more integral approach to the topic in the form of a brief conclusion.

## I The case of South Ossetia

### Background

In 1918 the Ossetian people was divided between Georgia and Russia as a result of Georgia's declaration of independence. The tensions between the Ossetian people and the Georgian people never eased. During the Soviet reign a growing sense of mutual mistrust developed, as well as fear of *Überfremdung*. Generally speaking, the conflict between the Georgians and the Ossetians is deeply rooted and was strengthened by the interest-driven politics of the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union

collapsed, South Ossetia tried to strengthen its territorial position, which resulted in armed conflicts that only came to an end with the help of a first ceasefire agreement. That agreement excluded, however, questions of territorial claims (König 2010: 125). In 2004 the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict was believed to have been settled after the ceasefire agreement between Russia and Georgia was renewed. However, the number of violent disputes between the Georgian and the South Ossetian population increased, comparable to the situation in 1992 after the first ceasefire agreement. When the former Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, took office in 2004, tensions between Georgia and South Ossetia grew continuously, which led to months of provocations and eventually to the five days' war between Georgia and Russia. The European Union succeeded in brokering a ceasefire agreement between the two conflicting parties but the consequences of this short war were nonetheless severe. An estimated 300–400 people died and nearly the entire Georgian population of South Ossetia left the region. The territorial conflict remains and with it the negative impact on Georgia's territorial integrity (König 2010: 125).

### **The external actors**

The relevant external powers, each with a different degree of influence in the conflict of course, are Russia, the USA and the EU.

For the sake of clarification it must be said in advance that Russia plays a special role with respect to conflict resolution in South Ossetia, since it was directly involved in the conflict in August 2008. It is not immediately evident whether Russia is truly interested in a quick conflict resolution rather than in maintaining the status quo. «The escalation of the conflict and the brief and destructive war between Georgia and Russia sparked fresh tensions between the USA and Russia that was seriously disrupting Georgia's endeavour to join the NATO alliance» (Giragosian 2013: 118). «This de-

railed relationship between the USA and Russia might have prompted Russia to its rather rushed decision to recognise the «independence» of Abkhazia and South Ossetia» (Giragosian 2013: 118). Furthermore, it is important to note that the recognition of South Ossetia violated international law and did certainly not contribute to a fast resolution of this harmful conflict (Brok 2013: 111). Concerning the long-term results of the five days' war in South Ossetia it is important to recognise that it is not only the damage, destruction and loss of life that remain present. «That war gave Russia the aspired and attractive opportunity to reassert its power and leverage throughout the region, an opportunity that was seized to virtually remake the map of the South Caucasus and to redraw the parameters of the region's strategic landscape» (Giragosian 2013: 118). From a current point of view, with regards to the crisis in Ukraine, one is drawn to argue that it is in Russia's interests to gain power from this situation of instability, with probable thoughts of annexation in the future.

«Was it not possible for the European Union to foresee the escalation of tension between Russia and Georgia? The European Union did observe the gradual escalation of tensions in 2008 but there was no real strategy for a quick and unified response» (Brok 2013: 110). However, it provided support afterwards in the form of an OSCE mission and the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia. It is the task of the EUMM to monitor the adherence to the ceasefire agreement (König 2010: 134). Nevertheless, one should note the economic and political cooperation between the EU and Georgia before the outbreak of war in 2008. During the years 1992 to 2006 the European Commission invested 23 million Euros for reconstruction purposes; however, on the other hand the EU held back for quite some time before it actively engaged in a political resolution of the ever-growing tensions between Georgia and South Ossetia. In 2003, a strong signal came from the EU in the form of the appointment of a special representative

for the South Caucasus, who was supposed to actively support the conflict resolution process, but who, besides some clear rhetoric, was not able to really change the situation (König 2010: 132).

As a third major external actor we should take a closer look at the United States. Is the USA to blame for the outbreak of the war in 2008? One can criticise the USA for not monitoring Georgia's use of its American funding strictly enough. On the other hand, the USA supported the reintegration policies of Georgia with respect to the secessionist region of South Ossetia. Furthermore, it implemented several education programmes for the Georgian military forces (König 2010: 135).

The decisive power in the conflict is without doubt Russia. This was clearly illustrated in the short military conflict, in which Russia met little resistance. Russia alone is able to and does maintain the status quo. Apart from some diplomatic and economic aid there is little the USA or the EU contribute.

## | The case of Abkhazia

### **Background**

After the conquest of Georgia by the Red Army in 1921 the Soviet Republic of Georgia was formed but also a Soviet Republic of Abkhazia. The Soviet Republic of Abkhazia was, however, rapidly reformed as an autonomous region within Georgia. The Abkhazian people enjoyed several privileges and were allowed to occupy political executive positions within the Autonomous Region of Abkhazia. The Georgian part of the population in Abkhazia considered this to be an oppression of the majority by the minority and criticised the formation of an Abkhazian elite. It was this elite that began to fight for a state independent from Georgia after the disintegration of the Soviet Union (Gruska 2010: 105). In July 1989 the first armed clashes occurred when the Georgian government tried to split the Abkhazian

university into ethnic groups (Gruska 2010: 106). In 1992 Georgian paramilitary groups deposed the Abkhazian parliament even though Schewardnadse did not give the order to do so. Schewardnadse hoped to win the subsequent war but the Abkhazian troops were able to push the Georgian troops back with the help of Russian soldiers (Gruska 2010: 107). Since the military victory in 1993 the Abkhazians enjoy quasi independence and have therefore more or less achieved their aim (Gruska 2010: 108).

### **The external actors**

The relevant external actors in this conflict and for the current status quo are again Russia, the USA and the European Union.

In May 1994 the Russian Federation mediated a ceasefire agreement, which was controlled by a CIS group until 2008. As a result of the war in South Ossetia, Georgia resigned from the CIS group and denounced the ceasefire agreement from 1994. After the war in South Ossetia in 2008, Russia recognised Abkhazia as an independent state (Gruska 2010: 107). This act of recognition violated international law (Brok 2013: 111). After the recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state in 2008, Russia deployed around 3000 soldiers in Abkhazia (Gruska 2010: 107). Since then Russia has followed a very ambiguous strategy in the South Caucasus; Russia should be interested in a swift resolution to the conflict, since it could promote economic upturn in the recession-stricken South of Russia. On the other hand, Russia considers Georgia a historical sphere of interest and regards reduced influence in this area as a potential security threat. This might be an explanation for the ambivalent behaviour of Russia. Additionally, it is important to see that Russia was given the role of special mediator in the UN peace talks, even though it actually supports Abkhazia. Since summer 2002 Russia has distributed passports in Abkhazia in order to be able to justify any kind of intervention with the argument

of Russian citizenship, comparable to the situation in South Ossetia in 2008 (Gruska 2010: 108).

What role does Georgia play for the USA and why should or could the USA be interested in conflict resolution in Abkhazia? The USA clearly wants to diversify its energy supply and to reduce its dependency on the Middle East, as well as on Russia. In order to do so, the USA began to build new pipelines that bypass Russia. In order to guarantee these systems it is of the utmost importance to have a stable political landscape in Georgia. It is wrong to assume that this interest in a stable political landscape in Georgia goes hand in hand with American engagement to solve the conflict in Abkhazia, since it prefers the status quo to any sort of unrest that could possibly threaten its pipeline project. The geopolitical competition between Russia and the USA does indeed harm the conflict resolution process, since Russia backs Abkhazia and America stands behind Georgia. It is also the US and Russia that reduce the chances of a diplomatic resolution of the conflict, since their conflicting interests impede the UN negotiation process (Gruska 2010: 109–110).

From the time of the disintegration of the Soviet Union until the outbreak of the war in South Ossetia the European Union financed several extensive reconstruction projects in Georgia but without binding them to concrete political commitments. Furthermore, in 2003 the EU appointed a special representative to develop a coherent strategy for the region. It is striking that the initial goal of developing a coherent strategy towards the region and how to deal with it had still not been reached in May 2009, when the EU signed a new Eastern Partnership agreement with Georgia. This is the result of differing interests of different EU member states that do not want to jeopardize their relations with Russia. However, it is undeniable that the European Union is, like the USA, primarily interested in diversifying its energy supply (Gruska 2010: 109–110).

Summarising the role of the external actors in the con-

flict resolution process, one can say that the current situation in Abkhazia is quite in favour of Russia, since this way it can retain and control its sphere of interest and remains the decisive military power in the region. The USA and Europe are interested in conflict resolution but do not take a firm stand on that matter (Gruska 2010: 109–110). The USA and the EU place greater emphasis on stability than pushing for Western values.

## | The case of Nagorno-Karabakh

### **Background**

At the dawn of the Soviet Union a centuries-old conflict between Armenians and Azeris broke out again. The Armenian majority living in the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast intensified their efforts to separate from Azerbaijan and to unite with Armenia. The conflict escalated into a civil war on Azerbaijani territory in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union. Karabakh-Armenian and Armenian forces fought against a newly independent Azerbaijan, the latter often on the edge of complete inner chaos. The joint Armenian forces managed to gain control over most of Karabakh and also over the corridor that separated Karabakh from Armenia. In 1994 a ceasefire was agreed that has lasted ever since. As a consequence of the war, 1.1 million people were displaced among the majority Azeri population. For the last twenty years no solution beyond the ceasefire has been reached, neither by the conflict parties directly nor by means of external mediation. As a consequence, both sides have remained prepared for yet another war and there are continually incidents along the line of contact, with casualties on both sides (Auch 2010: 113–122). Even though Nagorno-Karabakh insists on its sovereign status (which has not been internationally recognised by a single UN member state), in reality it has extremely close ties to Armenia, even on the edge of integration. Cornell 2011: 135–137; Iskandaryan 2008: 545–549).

### External actorsü

The set of external actors involved consists of the typical threesome of the USA, Russia and Europe, supplemented by the two regional powers Turkey and Iran. Due to its proximity and military power, Russia is the decisive security factor in the region. Georgia painfully experienced where antagonising Putin's Russia can lead. Russia sees the South Caucasus as its zone of interest where it wants to exercise a crucial influence. It is thus very convenient for Russia to have a pending conflict in which both sides have to rely on its support (Cornell 2011: 155–157; Iskandaryan 2008: 532–534; Steinbach 2010: 100–102). In this situation Russia works to maintain the equilibrium between Armenian and Azerbaijani military forces. This means in practice predominantly support of Armenia in the form of a military base and preferential treatment in the supply of arms while charging full prizes when selling huge amounts to Azerbaijan. A second aspect is Russia's economic influence. There is, on the one hand, strong involvement in the Armenian economy and a rivalry in the oil and gas export sector with Azerbaijan. Not too long ago, Armenia decided to join the Eurasian Customs Union as part of a coherent policy in line with appreciation of Russian military support (Freizer 2014: 4, 8; Steinbach 2010: 100–102).

The Turkish view on the conflict derives mainly from history. Turkey still refuses to recognize the genocide committed against Armenians, which is the most important element of Armenian identity. Turkey has always had a strong affinity with Azerbaijan for ethnic, linguistic and religious reasons, and hence the two countries are natural allies. Consequently, Azerbaijan enjoyed strong Turkish support in the conflict and could count on concerted political pressure on Armenia such as the closing of the borders. Additionally, there are energy interests linking Turkey and Azerbaijan, with two big pipelines pumping oil and gas from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Turkish harbours. Nevertheless, attempts were made to

normalize the relations between Turkey and Armenia in 2008/09 by trying to leave aside the prior sine qua non issues of recognition of the genocide and Nagorno-Karabakh. This led to intense protest from the Azerbaijani side and finally came to nothing, apart from the fact that there was suddenly a little room for negotiation at all. A certain reconciliation between Armenia and Turkey would considerably weaken the Azerbaijani position but to date Armenia remains in the tight grip of the two simply due to its geography (Minasyan 2010: 33–36; Steinbach 2010: 94–98).

The stance of Iran differs significantly from that of Turkey, even though there are close cultural ties such as the predominance of Shia Islam in both countries and about 15 million Azeri living in the North of Iran. Iran indeed has very good relations with Armenia and complicated relations with Azerbaijan. The reason for that lies in the pro-Turkish orientation of Azerbaijan as a traditional regional opponent of Iran and the fear of Pan-Azeri politics that might threaten the stability of the latter. On the Armenian side, the cooperation is much appreciated and they can count on Iranian support as long as it serves to contain Azerbaijan's ability to act. As a result there exists for example cooperation in the energy sector, exchanging Iranian gas for Armenian electricity (Iskandaryan 2008: 532–536; Fürtig 2010: 88, 89).

The good relations with Iran and Russia frequently become an obstacle to Armenian relations with the USA and Europe. The pipeline projects from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Turkey were initiated by Washington to exclude Russia and Iran and to gain access to Caspian and Central Asian oil and gas in order to supply the USA and Europe and bypass Russia and Iran. On top of this there is military cooperation between Azerbaijan and NATO. Even though the political system in Baku is not particularly appreciated by the West, energy interests and political antagonism tip the scale towards cooperation with Azerbaijan and stability in the region (Von Gumpfenberg 2010: 62; Steinbach 2010: 99, 100).

Apart from energy interests, it is especially the EU approach that is quite value based. Since no resolution to the conflicts seems to be in sight, the EU works to effectively freeze the conflict to avoid the resumption of active hostilities and at the same time tries to support civil society working for a future change of attitudes (Minasyan 2010: 27–31).

On the level of diplomacy, by far the most important player is the Minsk Group, founded in 1992 and linked to the OSCE and which brings together the three major international powers engaged in the region. After an initial rotation principal, a permanent co-chairmanship of France (often seen as representative of the EU's stance), Russia and the USA became entrenched. Even though the interests of these three powers frequently run contrary to one another there is at least minimum of consensus on this conflict, namely that any restart of hostilities in the region is unacceptable (Minasyan 2010: 27–29). Yet the reasons for that conclusion as well as the influence on the ground differ substantially. Nevertheless, Russia, as the decisive military power in the region, sometimes bypasses and sidelines this negotiation platform; the most famous example of this is the ceasefire agreement (Cornell 2011: 132–134). In general, given the stability of the status quo, the conflict is far from one of the top priorities of the external actors (Minasyan 2010: 31).

In summary, there are four powers in favour of the status quo, Russia in order to maintain its influence, the EU and the US because of their energy interests and a lack of a realistic alternative, and Iran because the pending conflict weakens Azerbaijan. The only power in favour of change (forcing Armenia to cave in) is Turkey, but even in this case the historical antagonism towards Armenia and the close coalition with Azerbaijan has started to wane slightly. The status quo was reached with only little external interference and was only later stabilized by external actors. The situation might even be similar if they were absent. Given this constellation, the status

quo is likely to remain stable for some time as long as there is no substantial shift of attitudes inside of Armenia or Azerbaijan.

## | Conclusion

A number of similarities and differences can be observed in the role external actors played to achieve at least medium-term stable constellations in the conflicts of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh. In each case the decisive security factor is Russia. Russia has the military power and presence, supply channels for arms and economic power to checkmate any other external power in the South Caucasus. In the cases of South Ossetia and Abkhazia the dependence on Russia is total, whereas in the Karabakh conflict Russia is less engaged but maintains the military equilibrium. The interests of the USA and EU are oriented towards economic, primarily energy interests, and hence favour stability over pushing for Western values and conflict with Russia. In the Karabakh case several layers of interests overlap: Russia is driven by a desire for influence, the USA and the EU are interested in energy and alleviated democratisation, Turkey is motivated by its historical alliance with Azerbaijan and economic factors, and Iran pursues strategic antagonism towards Turkey and Azerbaijan. But since Russia, the USA and the EU agree up to the point of ensuring a ceasefire, the influence of Turkey and Iran is limited.

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# I The Role of the EU in the South Caucasus

## I Introduction

For centuries, the South Caucasus has been a demarcation line and as such a place of interest to great powers. The Caspian Sea with its wealth of resources and hence the role of the South Caucasus as a transport corridor westwards readily explains the region's importance to the European Union (EU) despite its lack of direct borders. After the independence of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan – the three countries in the South Caucasus – the EU became a point of reference, be it in cultural, economic, political, or security-related terms. This pinpoints a wide range of leeway for the role that the EU can play in the South Caucasus and which forms the focus of this essay.

The EU sought to bundle its relations with all its neighbours and formalized this intention by introducing the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004. The goal was to avoid creating new borders after that year's EU enlargement and to induce stability in its surrounding areas. The idea was to exert influence through «normative power» based on the EU's norms and values. This was the sort of power that the EU allegedly possessed and which the neighbouring countries would follow (cf. Makarychev and Devyatkov 2014). However, it soon became apparent that the ENP was not able to cope with the diversity of countries on the southern shores of the Mediterranean and the post-communist East (cf. Lehne 2014: 6). This is why, in May 2009, the EU launched the Eastern Partnership (EaP) aimed at six countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. This initiative works within the framework of the ENP but goes beyond it, deepening the bilateral track by pursuing the conclusion of bilateral Association Agreements (AA) as well as developing sectoral co-operations, and facilitating visa regimes with the partner countries. The AA itself rests on two pillars, a political and an economic one. The first includes a

number of political reforms which will allow the EU to promote its norms and rules; the second takes the form of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). The DCFTA has crystallized into a point of contention, since from a technical perspective such a FTA is not compatible with other market integration projects, namely the Russian-dominated Eurasian Customs Union (CU) (cf. *ibid.*: 8). Therefore, it soon became apparent that it would develop into an either-or decision for the partnership countries.

Regarding the framework of the ENP/EaP, practitioners and scholars have pointed to conceptual and practical limitations. Many provisions have been directly copied from the accession conditions of the Eastern enlargement. However, since a clear membership perspective for the EaP countries is lacking, this setup creates several tensions that are hard to reconcile (cf. Korosteleva 2012: 5). The obvious one occurs because of the asymmetric nature of the relationships between the EU and the EaP countries which renders the term «partnership» rather inapt. The use of conditionality, i.e. the use of conditions attached to the provision of benefits by the EU, infringes the declaration of joint ownership of reforms. Furthermore, there is an inherent tension between the functional and the geostrategic perspective of the EaP. The geostrategic nature, long denied by the EU, has grossly manifested itself in Ukraine since 2013.

We should also pay attention to dimensions that are not explicitly dealt with by the framework outlined above. On the one hand, there is the dimension of resource security that leads to the EU's lenient position on Azerbaijan. On the other hand, there is the role of the EU in terms of conflict resolution. This concerns namely the disputed territories and de facto independent states of Nagorno-Karabakh (fought over by Armenia and Azerbaijan), South Ossetia, and Abkhazia (fought over by Georgia and Russia). The EU has left this issue in the hands of the Organization for Security and Co-Opera-

tion in Europe (OSCE). Despite or maybe because of the co-chairmanship of France in the designated OSCE Minsk Group, the EU has not taken an active role in the process and has abstained from linking the conflict resolution to any provisions in the respective AAs (cf. *ibid*: 11).

Tensions within the EaP and the mutual exclusivity of the economic part of the AA with the CU tightened around the Vilnius Summit in November 2013. Armenia opted for the CU and Ukraine decided not to sign the DCFTA. Only Moldova and Georgia stayed on. The course of events in recent months has shown that despite the adoption of a common framework, the relationship between the EU and its partnership countries diverges substantially. While Georgia has meanwhile signed the AA, Armenia «cannot», and Azerbaijan «does not want to» (Kasčiunas and Keršanskas 2014: 10). This paper aims to explain this divergence and will argue that it can be attributed to the countries' specific economic and security-related position as well as the internal political situation. By looking at the domestic conditions, we will also show that the apparent sidings of Armenia with Russia and of Georgia with the EU are not so clear-cut. Based on this observation we will attempt a prognosis of the role the EU will continue to play in the South Caucasus, followed by some concluding remarks.

### | Three countries, three different developments

#### **Georgia**

In rhetoric alone, Georgia's decision for the «West» is clear enough and was first made explicit by the tenure of president Mikheil Saakashvili after the Rose Revolution of 2003. The subsequent reforms were hailed by the US and Europe as being conducive to a successful transformation of a post-Soviet country which could by that time be called a failed state. However, part of the funds

intended for state-building were directed to strengthening the ruling party's own power position, increasing authoritarian tendencies.

These developments contributed to Georgia's embarking on a trail towards confrontation with Russia that led to the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 over the de facto independent territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Subsequently, the already hampered political and economic ties between Georgia and Russia reached their nadir. Despite incurring substantial economic losses, Georgia succeeded in diversifying its exports and thus lowering its dependence on the Russian market. In the course of events, the Georgian leadership became even more certain in their opting for the West. On the one hand, this nicely coincided with the EU's launch of the EaP. On the other hand, the war with Russia dramatically decreased Georgia's prospects of NATO membership. The latter aspiration still remains an unresolved issue.

However, by 2012 the domestic balance of power had shifted and Bidzina Ivanishvili's coalition, «Georgian Dream», won the parliamentary elections and a year later the presidency. Despite the fact that Ivanishvili has officially left politics after one year as prime minister, he is widely assumed to have a huge influence on the current government. This circumstance becomes particularly relevant considering Ivanishvili's alleged pro-Russian orientation. The allegations stem some pro-Russian statements and from the fact that his huge fortune originates from business activities in Russia. However, despite easing ties with Russia, the Georgian Dream government adhered to deepening relations with the EU and finally signed the AA in June 2014 (cf. Sharashenidze 2013: 5).

With the AA signed, the focus can shift back to domestic reforms, a constantly expressed concern of the EU. While Georgia is a model of how effectively technical assistance can translate into tangible results (cf. issues such as border control), strengthening the rule of law

seems to be an entirely different matter. This became internationally visible with the charges against the former president Mikheil Saakashvili and other high-ranking government officials (cf. Fuller 2014). While the Georgian Dream government rightly points to the principle that «no one is above the law», many experts consider the cases to be politically motivated and point out inconsistencies in the investigations and trials (cf. *The Economist* 2014).

Having already administered some successful reforms during the Saakashvili era, under the new government Georgia was willing and able to carry on its way towards closer relations with the EU. Nevertheless, there is still a clear need to implement further reforms and resolve the country's security issues.

### Armenia

On the third of September 2013 Armenia changed its foreign policy drastically and all without warning. After a meeting between the Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, Sargsyan announced that Armenia would join Russia's CU instead of signing the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU. Sargsyan did not give any further explanation other than saying it was in Armenia's interest. For many Armenians as well as foreign and Armenian analysts, these interests can be pinpointed to two issues.<sup>25</sup>

The first is the conflict with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Only some days before the meeting between the two presidents, Russia announced a \$4 billion weapons deal with Azerbaijan, sending the message to Armenia that if she wouldn't join the CU, Russia could not protect her from Azerbaijani military threats. In addition, the EU could not give any security guarantees.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is far from being resolved, as made clear by the recent shootings and dead soldiers on the border between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan. This is why the Armenian government needed to take Russia's threat seriously.

The second Armenian interest is its large diaspora living in Russia. The 2010 census records roughly 1.2 million ethnic Armenians in Russia, unofficial estimates suggesting an even higher number. The Armenian diaspora is not only seen as a part of Armenia, but is also of great economic relevance. Cash remittances account for about 15% of the Armenian GDP and about 90% of these remittances come from Russia (cf. Central Bank of the Republic of Armenia 2013). They are thus an important part of the Armenian economy. During the conflict with Georgia in 2008 Russia showed that it was willing to implement harmful acts of discrimination against the Georgian diaspora. The same could happen to Armenians (cf. Emerson 2014).

These possible explanations for the u-turn in Armenia's foreign policy should not come as a surprise to the EU. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should have been on the EU's strategic agenda.

«Look on the map» is often heard from Armenian officials and researchers.<sup>26</sup> Armenia is, in contrast to Georgia and Azerbaijan, a landlocked country with two of its four borders closed. The closed borders to Turkey and Azerbaijan leave only open borders to Georgia and Iran. Armenia is therefore strongly exposed to geographical, security and political constraints. To balance these constraints, for years Armenia followed a policy of complementarity. Its economy was directed towards the EU, its security towards Russia, and for transport it held close ties to Georgia and Iran. Armenia was therefore in favor of a «both and» solution, rejecting an «either-or» policy (cf. Hovhannisyan 2013: 2). But, as stated in the

<sup>25</sup> For example by Michael Emerson (2014), Armen Sahakyan (2014), Minasyants (2014) or the Hovhannisyan (2013).

<sup>26</sup> For example Tevan Poghosyan, Member of Parliament or Alexander Iskandaryan from the Caucasus Institute.

introduction, especially the DCFTA and CU are mutually exclusive and Armenia was faced with an either-or situation.

In the end, Armenia valued national security higher than the economic potential of the EU. Perhaps if the EU had not urged Armenia to make a decision, looked at the map and developed a more individual approach allowing Armenia to continue to some extent its politics of complementarity, things might have developed differently.

### **Azerbaijan**

Azerbaijan is another peculiar case and has so far abstained from both integration projects proposed by the EU and Russia. The country could afford to do this due to its wealth of resources. The EU depends on Azerbaijani oil and gas as well as pipelines and transport routes connecting the Caspian Sea to Europe. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan is criticised for not respecting fundamental freedoms and disregarding the OSCE recommendations in their electoral legislation. Azerbaijan can be described as an outright authoritarian regime, a fact that is sometimes blatantly ignored when economic interests or issues in relation to energy security are concerned. Thus, the AA is still the declared goal of both parties and negotiations continue, but seemingly with a long way to go.

During the Vilnius Summit, Azerbaijan signed an agreement regarding visa facilitation and again underscored its willingness to sign the economic part of the AA. This is a case in point, as the Azerbaijani elite is not interested in political reform that would threaten their strong power position (cf. Valiyev 2013: 9). However, this deal is not on the table, as the EU regards both parts as integral to the agreement. Even if that were not the case, the fact that Azerbaijan is not a member of the World Trade Organization would still render a DCFTA with the EU impossible at present.

The relation with Russia is also marked by ambiguity. Although joining the Russian-led CU would certainly bring some benefits (boosting exports and lowering the import price of food products), the Azerbaijani elite is reluctant to do so. This can be attributed to the desire firstly to protect the non-oil sectors (especially agriculture), secondly to protect the position of the local oligarchs that rely on the monopolistic nature of the Azerbaijani economy, and thirdly to protect Azerbaijan from Russian pressure in general (cf. *ibid.*). Indeed, public opinion is also more favourable towards the EU than towards Russia (cf. *ibid.*: 10). However, Azerbaijan predominantly depends on Russia for the purchase of weapons. Since the conflict with Armenia is still high on the agenda and military spending is rising steadily,<sup>27</sup> this is by no means an unimportant factor.

To conclude, Azerbaijan has had reasons as well as the means to balance and thus hold back demands from both the EU and Russia.

### **| Outlook**

As we live (again) in unpredictable times, making a prognosis, a difficult enough undertaking in itself, is complicated further. While for Georgia the direction just seems to be clear but nevertheless vulnerable, the issues at stake for Armenia and Azerbaijan are intimately connected with each other and rather openly subject to the influence of Russia.

### **Georgia**

Georgia is now committed to the EU by the AA that was signed in June 2014. However, as Sergi Kapanadze (2014: 43) argues, «[...] Russia still has the means to influence Georgia's foreign-policy choices by attacking strategic bilateral vulnerabilities that include wine ex-

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Sultanova (2012).

ports, remittances, investment, winter oil supplies, domestic divisions, and the occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia». Therefore, Georgia's development also depends on how much pressure Russia will apply and whether it can resist it. The latter hinges on the materialization of domestic reforms (foremost strengthening the rule of law and further economic diversification) as well as unambiguous support from the EU. A further indispensable prerequisite concerns Georgia's security situation, which Lincoln Mitchell (2014) aptly describes as follows:

**«Georgia [...] now has the very difficult task of remaining, broadly speaking, pro-west while at the same time pivoting away from dependency on the west for security assurances. Another way to look at this is that at the last NATO summit [in Wales, September 2014], Georgia got half measures and half guarantees. The challenge facing the leadership now is to find that other half.»**

If Georgia finds sufficient security guarantees, it is likely that the EU will have a reliable partner in the South Caucasus. This in turn could enhance the EU's influence on Georgia's domestic reform agenda.

### Armenia

Even though Armenia chose the CU, it still tries to retain its ties and shows interest in the EU. Armenia's participation at the Vilnius Summit and the signing of a joint declaration could be a sign of this.

Nevertheless, as long as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is not resolved, the geopolitical balance will not change. In addition to the further integration of Armenia into the CU, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) makes formalised collaboration between the EU and Armenia more difficult. Even so, the integration into the EEU is also not without tension. Recently questions arose whether Nagorno-Karabakh will be part of the EEU. While Belarus and Kazakhstan categorically oppose this, it is vital for the economic and political relations between Arme-

nia and Nagorno-Karabakh (cf. Grigoryan 2014).

In the short term, relations between the EU and Armenia will «follow the logic of the pre-EaP framework with more focused sectoral cooperation» (cf. Hovhannisyan 2013: 4). In the long run however, the CU/EEU do not provide development mechanisms as good as those of the EU, and neither Armenia nor the EU should forget about each other. Especially as in 2012 54% of Armenians supported EU membership (cf. *ibid*: 12), it would seem that the EU should still be engaged in the civil society and democratic developments and not break all ties.

### Azerbaijan

While the authoritarian tendencies in Azerbaijan harden, with no change in sight, the circumstances are shifting. Georgia and Turkey are moving towards the EU, Armenia along with other Eurasian countries towards the CU. As Azerbaijani local oligarchs have their businesses in Azerbaijan and Turkey – but not in Russia – there is no internal driver for any integration project. However, pressure is on the rise. There are signs that the EU will try to counteract the outgrowth of authoritarian politics in Azerbaijan (cf. Abbasov 2014). Furthermore, it becomes clearer that despite being an important contributor to European energy security, Azerbaijan is far from having as much leverage over the EU as it pretends to (cf. *ibid*). If Nagorno-Karabakh is kept outside the Russian-dominated EEU, thereby also hurting Armenia (cf. Grigoryan 2014), the regime in Azerbaijan will try to sell it as a victory. On the downside, Russia might demand something in return.

Azerbaijan is the last country to refrain from choosing sides but as economic and political pressure rises, it might have to choose sooner or later.

## | Conclusion

To protect Georgia's pro-European choice the EU needs to mind the Russian leverage points over Georgia and try to counter them by perhaps even reconsidering a membership perspective for Georgia. For Armenia the EU will have to find a way to preserve ties given its decision to join the Russian integration project. Regarding Azerbaijan, the EU needs to clearly weight its political and resource-related interests and act upon them. Hence, the EU needs customized strategies for the different countries of the South Caucasus that are all included in the EaP but will face very diverse challenges in the years to come. As has been suggested by Kasčiunas and Keršanskas (2014: 12–13), one mechanism could consist of «deeper integration – higher conditionality» with intermediary steps in between. As this essay has also shown, the role of the EU in the South Caucasus cannot be sensibly discussed without considering security-related issues and hence the Russian factor. If the EU wants to play a role in the region, it has to narrow the gap between rhetoric and action. Only a clear strategy and its unambiguous implementation can contribute to stability in the South Caucasus, which is in many respects of the utmost importance to the EU as well as to its partner countries.

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