

# **Ethnicity Regionalism in Georgia: Peoples' Struggle for Democracy**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Ethnicity is a worldwide phenomenon. It became complex with the emergence of nation states. Central Asian region is full of ethnic complexity and every ethnic group in this region has its own problem which is linked to its historicity. To understand ethnic problem in central Asian countries specially in Georgia, this article tries to understand issues and perspectives of people struggling in this particular region.

**Key Words :** Democracy, Ethnic problem, People, Georgians

## **INTRODUCTION**

It was in 1918 when for the first time the Georgians had total political domination over their historic native land. Before the Bolshevik revolution the urban environment was dominated by the ethnic Armenian businessmen, and together with ethnic Russians, they took over the most coveted government posts. Sovereignty became a chance for ethnic Georgians to acquire eminence. However, statehood did not last long and : in 1921 invasion by the Bolshevik troops took place. Georgia came to be known as a Soviet Socialist Republic, first as part of the Republic of Transcaucasia, along with Armenia and Azerbaijan, and then it became a distinct Union Republic in 1936. However, this consolidation was not received well welcome as it became a threat to the national identity of Georgia and the Russian hegemony as well.

Georgian national identity thus developed as a national 'self' against feared domination of a Russian "higher" culture and against 'Russification'. There was evolution of a system, but, as the titular nationalities, Georgians included, evolved their own definitions of national chauvinism. Majority of the national minorities within Georgia viewed Georgia as a region which was protected to enhance benefits for Georgians. Some of the highest posts in the republic were given to the

Georgians, the biggest allowance for cultural projects, and ingress to economic matrix of illegal undertakings. Intimate kinship relations, coupled with the supremacy of a markedly Georgian caste within the political elite of the Republic, "reinforced the exclusionary character of politics in the republic, the sense of superiority of the titular nationality and inferiority of the non-Georgians".

The sections that follow will engage with imperative demographic, geographical and historical space of the groups and areas that ss damaged Georgian statelessness', and as a corollary the demographic change of Georgia.

### **Georgia and its people:**

Georgia's geo-strategic location at the heart of the Caucasus has made Georgia the field of competition between multiples empires trying to capture hegemony in the area. Georgia was successively conquered by the Arabs, Persians, Mongols, Byzantines, and Ottomans and in 1801 Georgia accepted the imperial hegemony of Russia. During the Soviet rule, Georgia was a federation and a Union Republic. It consisted of three subjects which were political-administrative; two Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs) – Abkhazia and Ajaria – and one Autonomous Oblasts – South Ossetia. The most politically developed administrative body were the ASSRs

because of the presence of executive branches and republican legislatures. Created to give identification to meager ethnic cohorts, the Autonomous Oblasts (and Okrugs) were kept under the ambit of either territories or provinces. As the 1990s began, occurrences in Georgia reflected those that took place in other regions and republics that had taken on independent structures from the Soviet period. It was not Georgia, as a Union Republic, tried to withdraw from the Soviet Union, but it's ASSRs, involving Ajari and Abkhazia, took advantage of the legal excuse furnished by Gorbachev to enhance greater independence, and even separation in the case of the former, through the All-Union Law on the Demarcation of Powers Between the USSR and Members of the Federation' passed by the USSR Supreme Soviet in April 1990.

The Georgians comprise of an antique Christian nation residing in the southern part of the Caucasus. They traditionally name themselves Kartveli and their land as Sakartvelo. Three groups constitute the largest part of the Kartvelian group: Georgians (85 %), Mingrelians (10 %) and Svans (1 %). Every group has a different language within the South Caucasian (Kartvelian) language group. In this way every language is quite unique, and the only language which is written in this group is the Georgian language.

There is ethnic relation among the Georgians, Svans and Mingrelians. It is only language that has been different and distinguished them since the eighth century. The Georgian language is rich in a sense that dates back to the fourth century CE and makes it the oldest in the area.

There was unity between Georgians and Russians in terms of religion which was Christianity. Hence, the foremost important attribute that distinguished them from the Russians was language. This language decided the political, economic and social mobility.

During the census of 1926, the Svans and Mingrelians had their own census classification. However, thereafter all three linguistic groupings were placed under the wider ethnic classification of "Georgian". Nevertheless, there existed within Georgia powerful; regional or sub-ethnic identities, comprising of the Imeretian, Ajarian, Kakhetian, Svan and Mingrelian. Since the language spoken by Mingrelians is different and the Ajars are committed to Islam, the difference between the ethnic Georgians and these group are quite clear. However, these regional groupings have not been conferred the position of national minority, as each is

perceived as part of the greater Georgian national majority.

More than 90 percent of all Georgians globally reside in proper Georgia. In 1989, the Georgians made up approximately 70 per cent of 'the republic's total population of 5.4 million. From the fact that mostly all the Georgians live in what they perceive as their hometown it isn't surprising then that Georgians have the highest levels of language retention. More than 98 per cent of all Georgians perceive and believe that Georgian is their ethnic language. It is only a third who consider t their second language to be Russian This data shows a nation with continued and closeness to its language and homeland.

### **Ajaria and it's People:**

The area referred to as Ajaria is situated in Georgia's south-western corner. To it's south lies Turkey and it's western border is the coastline of the Black Sea, and to it's north and east lies the rest of proper Georgia. The ambit of Ajaria traversed right from the Ottoman to the Russian Empire to Turkey to Georgia and then eventually the USSR. The importance of Ajaria as an area can be tracked down to the concluding part of the nineteenth century when Batumi as a capital was developed by Russia, which further went ahead to become the third largest city in the province of Transcaucasia. As an important industrial hub and economic port, Batumi furnished sea access and international rail and later construction of oil pipelines to Baku took place (Akiner 1986: 243). Ajaria in 1922 became an ASSR subordinate to the Republic Transcaucasia. It became part of Georgia in 1936, when Georgia became a full Union Republic, distinct from Azerbaijan and Armenia. The Ajarian ASSR was an aberrant part of the USSR as most of the other independent entities were founded on the premise of nationality or language, but Ajaria was given an autonomous status based on religion.

As said earlier, Georgia's Ajars were not seen as a national minority mostly during the Soviet era. The Ajars till today are seen to be ethnic Georgians, even though they embrace and advocate Islam as their faith. From the sixteenth to the late nineteenth century, there was conversion to Islam during the period of the Ottomans. The Ajars mostly remain loyal to Islam and there are occurrences of few interfaith marriages, mostly Islamic-Christian. The Ajars in the census of 1926 were furnished with their own national grouping, which made them distinct

from the Georgians. However, this category was dismissed for the census of 1939, irrespective the fact that some went on to recognize themselves as separate from the broader grouping of Georgians. When this early Soviet rule existed, Islam in Ajaria was strictly subjugated with coerced shutting down of Madras as and mosques and the 'Georgianisation' of Islamic names. Derlugian called it a 'time of calamitous ethnic homogenization' that, for the most part, seemed to have been successful. Hence, as a corollary of the 'Georgianization' policies, majority of the Ajars were subsumed and came to identify themselves as Georgians.

Due to the termination of the census category for Ajars in 1926, it is not easy to calculate the total the number of Ajars today. The census of 1989 shows that the Ajar Republic consisted of a total population of 381,000. Out of this population, 317,000 was the "Georgians". The number of Ajars, or Muslim Georgians, in this last figure has been estimated to be around 130,000–160,000, or 34–42 per cent of the regional population. On the other hand the total number of Ajars residing out of Ajaria is very meager. As far as national histories is concerned the Ajar-Georgian relationship is complex as most of the Ajars today perceive themselves as Georgians. However, the Georgians on the contrary, are obstinate in accepting that the Ajars belonging to the wider "Georgian" identity because of religious contrasts. For majority of the Georgians, the meaning of being Georgian is being Christian. In this sense the Ajars are not taken as real Georgians because the Ajars are Muslims.

### **Abkhazia and its People:**

Abkhazia is situated between the shore of the Black Sea and the greater Caucasus mountain range. To its north-west lies the Psou River and to its south east the Inguri River. It is situated in Georgia's north-west region, with the regions of Svanetia and Mingrelia to the east and south-east, respectively; and its northern border is shared with Russia. In 1864, the Russian Empire won control over Abkhazia in its victory of the Caucasus which led to the annihilation of the Abkhaz population. However, at the time of the Bolshevik revolution, Abkhazia could gain the position as a Soviet Republic, a founding member of the Union, on an equal footing to Georgia – a status codified in Abkhazia's Constitution of 1925. However, in 1936, the separate but equivalent position of Abkhazia was annulled when the subordination of Abkhazia to

Georgia as an ASSR took place. Abkhazia's primary material and economic contribution to the economy of Georgia was via agriculture and the tourism industry. Its position along the Black Sea and the resulting tropical climate made it a frequently visited tourist places during the Soviet rule.

Agricultural production mostly comprised of tea, tobacco, wine and citrus,. The port of Sukhumi was also an imperative trading hub for the international haul of goods, and the rail network that linked Georgia to Russia in the north crossed Abkhazia. All through their common history Abkhaz and Georgians have challenged each other's assertion as to whose forefathers made up the real inhabitants of Abkhazia. From the 1950s to the 80s, scholarly discussions among Georgian historians opposed the claims of the Abkhaz that they were original inhabitants of the territory, in a way claiming that Abkhaz had recently settled by displacing the Georgians. The Georgians are regarded by Abkhaz scholars as the "newly-arrived, non-native population of Abkhazia", and an attempt has been made by Abkhaz intellectuals, politicians and academics to prove the earliest history of the Abkhaz in this area.

As opposed to the Ajars, Abkhaz are grouped as a national minority in Georgia. They are considered to be linguistically and ethnically different from the Georgians. As per the census of 1989, the population of the Republic of Abkhazia in toto was 525,000. Abkhaz totalled about 93,000, comprising 18 per cent of the Abkhaz Republic population, in contrast to the Georgians who made up 46 per cent. However, there was an increase in the population of Abkhazs by 9.2 per cent from 1979 to 1989 and an increase in the Georgians by 13.6 per cent at the same time.

Abkhazs constituted mainly were 2 per cent of the entire Georgian population. During the seventeenth and eighteenth century there was conversion to Islam of some Abkhaz and Gurians (whose roots can be traced to the Ajars). Post the vanquishing of two uprisings against imperial Russia (one in 1866 and the other in 1877) large chunks of the Abkhaz population – half of all Abkhaz, and all the Muslims – were either exiled or ran away to the Ottoman empire. Hence, today in Turkey and Middle East more number of Abkhazs reside, ( 100,000–150,000, approx population) than in proper Abkhazia.

Among the Abkhaz, there is presence of Islam as well as Christianity but without any demanding severe taxation. The language of the Abkhaz is not the same

as the Georgians. The language spoken by Abkhaz hails from the North-Western Caucasian branch, and in writing it is the Cyrillic script. This script during the Soviet era, its status was that of a literary language which led to the publication of a huge number of journals, books, and also a newspaper in the language. As the Soviet regime rationalized the multitude of languages, Abkhaz was scripted into Latin. However, there was a change in this post the subordination to Georgia of the Republic, and with the onset of 1938, Abkhaz was scripted in Georgian. This was followed by a quick process of “rapid process “Georgianization”, with Abkhazian being replaced by Georgian as the Abkhazia’s sole language. Even though in 1956, there was restoration of the use of Abkhazianit remains a minor language.

As per to the census of 1989, 94 per cent of Abkhazs identify Abkhaz as their main language, and the rest 79 per cent consider their second language to be Russian. This figure shows the depth of the cultural schism between the Georgians and Abkhazs. Only 3 per cent of Abkhazs claim a language apart from Russian to be their second tongue. Even though this language division can be interpreted as the consequence of Abkhaz hostility towards Georgians, such an exposition would not be correct. The division is more because of the lack of communication between the nations. Of the ‘Georgians’ who live in Abkhazia, comprising mostly 45 per cent of the population, do not have Georgian as their language but instead Mingrelian. As per an estimate in 1979, approximately 44 per cent of Georgians and 25 per cent of Abkhaz residing in Abkhazia failed to interact with each other. There was reinforcement of language division, if not fully explained, by the territorial distribution of populations. The issue of language indicates a deep division between these two ethnic groups as the effort to force Georgian on the Abkhaz led to wide protest, especially at the discrimination in favour of Georgian speakers in access to govt offices, higher education and professions.

### **South Ossetia and its people:**

Ossetians reside in the central Caucasus region on either side of the Caucasus mountain range. This region which was geographically bridged did not during the Soviet rule have a single administration, with North Ossetia being Russia’s part and South Ossetia becoming a part of Georgia. The North and South Ossetia are linked via an external northern border of South Ossetia with

North Ossetia. Ossetians trace their roots to the Alans as their descendants and believe that they were in Georgia since the thirteenth century when the Mongols drove them to the south. Even though the majority of Ossetians are Eastern Orthodox Christians, they are not new to Islam’. There is presence of a meager minority of Ossetians who are Sunni Muslims. This stems from the fact they had a common history and knitted well with other groups of Muslim in the area as well as their own Sunni Muslim ethnic kin. 98 per cent of Ossetians consider Ossete as their language and Russian is claimed as a second language by 60 per cent of them.

Ossete is a North-East Iranian language and is divided into two dialects: Digor and Iron. Iron is the literary language and is spoken by the majority of Ossetians, almost exclusively among the Ossetians in South Ossetia. The language in the nineteenth century was scripted into Cyrillic, and later into Latin for a short time. As far as Abkhaz was concerned, it was scripted into Georgian from 1930(?) to 1954, but again reversed to Cyrillic. As far as Abkhaz language was concerned the forcing of the Georgian script was seen and understood as a step towards cultural hegemonism of the Georgians. As per the census of 1989 around 164,000 Ossetians were residing in Georgia. Hence, “the majority of Ossetians do not live in South Ossetia, but they reside in districts bordering the South Ossetia Oblast.

In 1922, the formation of The South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast’ took place well within the Transcaucasian Republic. In 1925, there were efforts to unite the North Ossetia (then an Autonomous Oblast’ of Russia) and South Ossetia (and join Russia). However, these attempts were futile.

This campaign was just one of the corollaries of the area’s malevolence to Georgian rule and show of commitment to Moscow. Ossetia during the Soviet rule was identified as the most ‘Sovietized’ and pro-Russian areas of the FSU. As far as Ajari and Abkhazia were concerned, South Ossetia was directly subordinated to Georgia when Georgia acquired full independence, distinct from Azerbaijan and Armenia. As it was given the reduced position of an Autonomous Oblast in the Soviet Union, the degree of autonomy and institutionalization in South Ossetia was much less than in Ajaria and Abkhazia.

### **Conclusion:**

Georgia has its own unique position when it comes

to dealing ethnic issues in the central Asian region. The Georgian people are facing problems of economic imbalance and political conflict among different ethnic communities. There are international political economic concerns also which are shaping the fate of this region. There are challenges for exploitation of resources for economic development. As different ethnic groups have their own interest in this region. Seeing these complexities one can say that people struggle in this region is associated with the local realities as well as international political and a strong political will and visionary programmed for overall development that is inclusive in nature is answer for this problem

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