Yielding to the Sons of the Soil: Abkhazian democracy and the Armenian problem

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Introduction

Virtually all secessionist struggles are fought in the name of the ‘people’ under the banner of the principle of ‘self-determination of the nation’. However, this principle, which entered international law at the peace conferences after World War I, is notoriously ambiguous. The ‘people’ and the ‘nation’ may refer to the entire population of a state, or to a particular ethnic group only. Already in Woodrow Wilson’s 14-point speech of January 1918 there was between the two understandings a tension which has still not been resolved (Buchanan 1991; Musgrave 1997).

Among secessionist states, an ethnic definition of ‘the people’ clearly predominates (Caspersen 2011). The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and Tamil Eelam were both created as safe havens for the Turkish and Tamil minority groups in the islands of Cyprus and Sri Lanka, respectively. Also in four out of five de facto states of the former Soviet Union, the ‘people’ was clearly an ethnic concept. In three of these cases – Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Chechnya – the titular nationality made up a substantial majority of the population, a percentage which increased even further after the war of secession. In the two remaining cases, Transnistria (PMR) and Abkhazia, the demographic situation was different. The PMR had neither a titular nation nor a majority population; the three largest ethnic groups – Moldovans, Russians, and Ukrainians – were of roughly equal size and none of them made up more than 40 per cent of the total. In this case, independence was proclaimed in the name of the ‘multinational PMR people’ (Kolstø and Malgin 1998).

Finally, Abkhazia does have a titular nation, but according to the last Soviet census in 1989 the ethnic Abkhaz made up less than one fifth of the total population. With 45.7 per cent, ethnic Georgians were the largest group, followed by Abkhazians 17.8 per cent, Armenians 14.6 per cent, and Russians 14.3 per cent. Even so, Abkhazia followed the standard pattern of post-Soviet secession and proclaimed independence in the name of ‘the Abkhaz nation’, in the ethnic sense. To be sure, in official rhetoric the Republic of Abkhazia is presented as a ‘multinational country’. ‘Citizens of Abkhazia, irrespective of their nationality or religious confession are equal in their possibilities to enjoy the riches of Abkhazia and the Abkhazian state. In the same manner we are equal in our obligation to defend our country and strengthen our state.’ The constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia, however, requires the president to be an ethnic Abkhaz. While the constitutions of many post-Soviet republics stipulate that the president must be able to speak the state language (= the titular language) (Gubolgo 1994), Abkhazia seems to be the only case where the ethnicity (nationality) of the president is constitutionally regulated. In addition, the Abkhazian language law requires all who work in the state structures to know Abkhazian by 2015 (Clogg 2008, p. 315).

Furthermore, the Abkhazian immigration law gives the ethnic Abkhaz a privileged position in obtaining citizenship, while members of all other ethnic group must undergo naturalization. As remarked by one team of researchers, ‘in the decisive years of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Abkhazia developed into an ethnically defined state entity… it is a fact that ethno-nationalist discourse today dominates the state building project in Abkhazia’ (Trier, Lohm and Szakonyi 2010, p. 9). Among the 35 members of

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1 Strictly speaking, the name ‘Nagorno-Karabakh’ does not refer to any ethnic group, but there was never any doubt that it was established as a homeland for ethnic Armenians.

2 Sergei Bagapsh, president of Abkhazia, as quoted on the Abkhazian official website, http://www.apsny.ru/ethnic/ethnic.php?

3 This is the case also with members of four other Caucasian groups that are closely related to the Abkhaz: the Abaza, Kabardins, Adygs and Cherkess. See Trier, Lohm and Szakonyi 2010, p. 76.
the Abkhazian parliament there were (as of 2007) three Armenians, three Russians, two Georgians and one Abkhaz returnee from Turkey (Turkish Abkhazian is treated as a separate identity) (Trier, Lohm and Szakonyi 2010, p. 88).

Since the war of secession in 1993 the ethnic balance in Abkhazia has undergone considerable change. Many Georgians have fled, and also many others have left the republic for various reasons. In the greatly decimated population the relative share of the Abkhaz has risen, but so has the share of the Armenian population. Official data from a census conducted in 2003 give 94,000 Abkhaz (43.8 per cent), 45,000 Armenians (20.8 per cent), 23,000 Russians (10.8 per cent), and 7,000 others, but these figures are widely distrusted (Trier, Lohm and Szakonyi 2010, p. 30). Within Abkhazia and among Russian and Armenian observers much higher Armenian figures are bandied about. One Armenian NGO spokesperson estimates that there are 80,000 Armenians in Abkhazia as against 100,000 Abkhaz (Sanamyan 2007). A Russian source holds that the total population in Abkhazia is only 200,000, and gives the figure of 65,000 for Armenians and no more than 45,000 for Abkhazians (Rosliakov n.d.). If the latter source is correct, Armenians make up the largest ethnic community in the country by a clear margin – a view also held by some Western researchers.4

Seemingly, what we have in Abkhazia is a clear-cut case of ethnic minority rule, or ethnocracy. On the other hand, after independence Abkhazia has developed a reasonably democratic political system, with a high degree of media freedom, civil society pluralism, and contested elections (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008; Caspersen 2011). All non-Abkhaz may acquire Abkhazian passport provided that they do not hold citizenship in another state,5 and on that basis can participate in elections and in political life in general. In all groups, with the exception of the marginalized and alienated Georgians, many do avail themselves of these rights.6 There have been no reports of systematic vote rigging. "The political spectrum has been opened up sufficiently to give voters alternative options to choose from... Events in the de facto entity in recent years have displayed a certain measure of pluralism." (Trier, Lohm and Szakonyi 2010, p. 11).

The main research question in this article is therefore: how has it been possible for an ethnic group which constitutes neither a majority nor a plurality in a state to achieve a virtual monopoly of political power within a political system which exhibits most of the trappings and procedures of democratic rule? The exclusion of the ethnic Georgians from political life in Abkhazia, while deplorable, is perhaps not really surprising since they are so closely associated with the conquered enemy in the civil war and are suspected of sympathizing with Georgian revanchist sentiments. Far more interesting from a theory perspective is the case of the Armenians, who would seem to have abdicated voluntarily from the political scene. The Armenians have articulate spokespersons and channels through which to voice their views – so why have they not been demanding and gaining an influence commensurate to their demographic strength?

In the Abkhazian government there are no Armenian ministers, only two deputy ministers. This pattern is repeated also on the local level. In areas where Armenians live in high concentrations village heads of administration will often be Armenians, but the district heads above them tend to be Abkhaz (Clogg 2008, p. 314). In the city of Gagra, where ethnic Armenians make up approximately 90 per cent of the population,

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4 Svante Cornell, personal communication.
5 Dual citizenship is allowed only with Russia.
6 Of the largest groups in the country 73,622 Abkhaz, 32,363 Armenians, 17,795 Russians, and 12,156 Georgians had acquired Abkhazian passports by December 2009 (Vestnik Kavkaza 2009).
Armenians occupy only 6–7 out of 27 of the seats in the local assembly (Berge 2010, p. 17).

We may at the outset dispel any notion that the interests of the Armenians are so well taken care of by the Abkhaz-dominated government that they have not reason for complaint. In addition to low political representation they also have other grievances. There have been persistent reports about street-level discrimination and harassment as well as exclusion from state jobs. According to one Russian source, ‘most regular employees and NCOs in the Ministry of Internal Affairs are Armenians or Russians, but 99 per cent of the officers are Abkhazians, and so are 100 per cent of the superiors… In the courts an Armenian will never win a case against an Abkhaz. Among the state prosecutors and judges there are practically no Armenians.’ The article ends with an ominous prediction: ‘the Armenian question is a key issue and extremely sensitive. It may at any moment tear Abkhazia asunder from within.’ (Rosliakov n.d.). Similar complaints have been voiced also in other sources, which admittedly are not always sympathetic to the Abkhazian state project (Regnum 2007; Epifantsev 2010). However, also loyal Abkhazian citizens acknowledge that discrimination is taking place. In June 2006 the independent Sukhumi newspaper Nuzhnaia gazeta created a stir when it published an article on raids and racketts against inhabitants of the Armenian settlement Arakich conducted by ethnic Abkhaz from surrounding villages (Nuzhnaia gazeta 2006). In 2005 some mysterious explosions rocked Armenian schools, and while the causes for these remain unclear it is generally assumed that they are somehow connected to anonymous anti-Armenian pamphlets that were distributed at about the same time (Clogg 2008, p. 318).

Official spokespersons of the Armenian community in Abkhazia nevertheless consistently downplay any grievances there might be. In 2003 the Armenian cultural and philanthropic organization Krunk denied reports in the Georgian press that the situation of local Armenians in Abkhazia had seriously deteriorated. Krunk president Galust Trapizonian interpreted reports to this effect as attempts to kindle interethnic tension in Abkhazia (Regnum 2007; Epifantsev 2010). Commenting in 2010 upon similar accusations in the Armenian press, an Armenian member of the Abkhazian parliament refuted such charges as completely nonsensical and deliberately provocative. Sergei Matosian admitted that Armenians occasionally do experience annoyances but he vehemently denied that anti-Armenian sentiments among ethnic Abkhaz were orchestrated from above. ‘If we have any problems, they are absolutely not connected to politics. Of course there are quarrels, and sometimes the Abkhaz allow themselves to describe Armenians in not very delicate language. Naturally, this causes displeasure among our compatriots. But these are isolated incidents at societal level and not an expression of state policy.’ (Armenia Today 2010). However, even if there is no reason to believe that Abkhazian state authorities are the instigator of such harassments, an indirect connection may still be postulated between official policy and street-level discrimination: The weak representation of minorities in Abkhazian government structures might send a signal to society that the Armenians and other non-titulars are not quite fully members of Abkhazian political society and are somewhat less protected by the state.

In this article we discuss four alternative ways to explain the puzzling Armenian submissiveness to the ethnic Abkhaz in Abkhazian politics. These four theories of ethnic marginalization are based on empirical research in other multiethnic countries in which one ethnic group dominates. In order of appearance these theories are ‘control’, ‘ethnic democracy’, ‘business as a safety valve’, and ‘yielding to the sons of the soil’.

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Of these, the first three focus on strategies adopted by the superordinate group and may be arranged along a scale according to which social field/s they open up for minority participation. In ethnic democracies, subordinates are politically and economically marginalized but there are few or no formal restrictions on their participation in the political or the economic field. Regimes that allow business to function as a ‘safety valve’ prioritize political control and accept subordinate participation in lucrative sectors of the economy. Finally, in ‘control’ systems, subordinate groups are firmly excluded from both political and economic influence. The fourth model differs from the three others in focusing not on the political mechanisms employed by the superordinate group, but on the reactive psychological mechanisms adopted by subordinates.

Control
In 1979 Ian Lustick wrote a seminal article in which he identified a particular kind of political systems in plural or deeply divided societies called ‘control’. Many researchers had argued that plural societies are inherently unstable (see e.g. Rabushka and Shepsle 1972). This contention had been challenged by scholars who argued that even in plural societies stable, democratic systems can be established by employing various forms of ‘consociational’ mechanisms such as federalism, segmental quotas and pre-arranged power-sharing. Lustick pointed out, however, that many plural societies are stable also in the absence of consociational or any other democratic arrangements. Empirical studies from various parts of the world had shown that ‘in addition to coercion and the threat of coercion, effective control can be based on a wide range of political and economic mechanisms, institutional arrangements, legal frameworks, and sociocultural circumstances’ (Lustick 1979, p. 342). Lustick did not elaborate much on these various mechanisms, but referred, inter alia, to three methods of conflict management which according to Milton Esman, will be used by regimes that are committed to the dominance of one communal group at the expense of another (or others):

1. Proscribe or closely control the political expression of collective interest among dominated groups
2. Prohibit entry by members of dominated groups into the dominant community,
3. Provide monopoly or preferential access for members of the dominant group to political participation, advanced education, economic opportunities, and symbols of status such as official language, the flag, national heroes and holidays, which reinforce the political, economic and psychic control of the dominant group (Esman 1973 as quoted in Lustick 1979, pp. 338–39).

Ethnic democracy
A prime example of a control system for Lustick was Israeli–Palestinian relations in Israel. His claim that the Israeli state – as well as similar regimes – is not democratic has, however, been challenged. In various articles Sammy Smooha has pointed out that the Arab minority in Israel enjoy basic democratic rights such as the franchise and the freedom of assembly and expression. Therefore, the mechanisms that regulate Israeli–Palestinian relations and secure Israeli political dominance are not ethnocratic but must be characterized as a special regime type which he calls ‘ethnic democracy’. An ethnic democracy extends basic rights and freedoms to all its citizens but is nevertheless established of and for a core nation which completely dominates its political life. Ethnic democracy is a diminished kind of democracy, in important ways inferior to liberal and consociational democracy – but still a member of the family of democratic systems.
Ethnic democracy contains the non-democratic institutionalization of dominance of one ethnic group. The founding rule of this regime is therefore an inherent contradiction between two principles – civil and political rights for all and structural subordination of the minority to the majority. The democratic principle provides equality between all citizens and all members of society, whereas the ethnic principle establishes explicit ethnic inequality, preferences and dominance. The organization of the state on the basis of this structural incompatibility constantly generates ambiguities, contradictions, tensions and conflicts – but not necessarily ethnic and political instability. The state belongs to the majority, not to all of its citizens, and the majority uses the state as a means to advance its national interests and goals (Smooha and Järve 2005, pp 21–22).

In an ethnic democracy it is the core nation and not its citizens that possesses and controls the state. ‘The state’s official language, religion, culture, institutions, flag, anthem, emblems, stamps, calendar, names of places, heroes, days and sites of collective commemorations, laws (especially those regulating naturalization, immigration and ownership and business) and policies are biased in favour of the core ethnic nation, and members of the core ethnic nation expect and receive favoured status’ (Smooha and Järve 2005, p. 26). Still, Smooha insists that the democratic quality of this state ‘is not a facade’ since basic procedural rights of minorities are respected. This distinguishes it from Lustick’s control model, where the democracy element is fake or quasi (Smooha and Järve 2005, pp. 16–17).

In Smooha’s view, ethnic democracy is not likely to appear in all deeply divided states. Among the conditions considered necessary for the emergence and sustainability of this regime type he singles out state strength. ‘Viable ethnic democracy cannot possibly be weak. If the state is weak, it cannot control its minorities and cannot guarantee their compliance’ (Smooha and Järve 2005, p. 247). A second important precondition is a solid numerical majority of the core ethnic nation. ‘A minority of over one-quarter is too large to be included in an ethnic democracy because it can use its numerical and electoral strength to undermine the majority’s domactive system.’ (Smooha and Järve 2005, p. 31; see also Smooha and Hanf 1992, p. 45). The 25 per cent limit may, however, be exceeded if the minority lacks strong political consciousness and organization.

The concept of ethnic democracy has been the subject of heated debate ever since it was first formulated. This debate has partly been concerned with the democratic nature of this regime type. Critics have maintained that a regime with so many restrictions for minorities simply does not deserve this appellation (Butenschøn 1993). The other moot point is how well it captures the most significant qualities of the states it is intended to cover. Since it was first launched, the application of the concept has been expanded to include such diverse cases as Northern Ireland before 1972 and interwar Poland. Graham Smith has maintained that it may capture the nature of post-Communist Latvia and Estonia even if one basic feature of the model – the extension of formal political rights to all permanent residents – is missing in these two cases (Smith 1996).

**Business opportunities as a safety valve**

In a study of minority politics in Latvia and Kyrgyzstan Michelle Commercio (2010) launches a model to explain how the titular groups in these two post-Soviet states have

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7 The most important of these objections are summarized and discussed in Smooha and Järve 2005, p. 247.
managed to monopolize political life in the face of a numerically strong and resourceful minority, the Russians and other Russian-speakers. The methods employed to secure their dominant position have in Commercio’s opinion varied. In Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz elite has employed Lustick-style control mechanisms, whereas in Latvia a system of ‘partial control’ has been used. Under the latter system the titulars have limited themselves to monopolizing the political area, while opening up the economic sphere for Russophone participation. ‘The assumption that motivated elites to tolerate Russian participation in the private sector was that economic prosperity would give Russians a stake in the system and therefore foster stability’ (Commercio 2010, p. 160). This avenue for stability management has not been an option to the Kyrgyz, Commercio believes, since the economic resources were so scarce that in the Kyrgyz perception there was not enough to go around: one could simply not afford to share them with the Russians.

Finally, in a third case, Kazakhstan, Commercio sees a movement from ‘control’ to ‘partial control’. The oil-driven Kazakhstani economy has since independence grown enough to allow the Kazakhs give a piece of the cake to the Russians.

The Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Latvian cases indicate that power dispersion is a key factor in ensuring stability in multiethnic states and that at least at first this dispersion need not involve political power. As long as an ethnic minority occupies a satisfactory position vis-à-vis the ethnic majority of the state in question through profitable economic activity, it may peacefully coexist with the politically dominant group (Commercio 2010, p. 177, emphasis in original).

Yielding to the sons of the soil

Commercio’s intriguing model may explain important covarations between economic opportunity and political quiescence in multiethnic states, but leaves some important questions unanswered. For instance, how was it possible for the ethnic Kazakhs and Latvians to establish themselves as the core ethnic nation (to use Smooha’s expression) in the first place, as none of them constituted a clear numerical majority in their country? At the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Latvians made up 52.7 per cent and Kazakhs 40 per cent of the population in their respective countries. In both countries most of the minorities – while ethnically diverse – were Russian speakers and the ethnic situation in the country could be described as bipolar (Kolstø 1999, pp. 15–44).

Countries where two major groups confront each other are often unstable, with both attempting to control the state (Horowitz 1985, p. 38). However, both Latvia and Kazakhstan have remained tranquil since independence.

This tranquil bipolar situation is not unique; it may be found also in other parts of the world. In his study of three countries in Asia and South America with a similar bipolar structure, R.S. Milne found that in each of them state level politics was solidly concentrated in hands of one ethnic group while inter-ethnic violence remained limited. The politically dominant group in all cases was the one which could claim to have the deepest ‘roots’ in the country: the first to arrive, the indigenous nation, ‘the sons of the soil’ (Milne 1981). Even if all inhabitants were granted citizenship the sons of the soils were regarded as somehow the ‘owners’ of the country, whereas the others – the immigrants, the settlers – were seen as guests who were allowed to stay there on the sufferance of the indigenous nation. Importantly, this order of things seems to be have

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8 The three countries studied by Milne were Malaysia, Fiji and Guyana.
been accepted, however grudgingly, also by the non-indigenous groups: their shorter residency in the country gives them fewer rights.

This pattern has been repeated also in Latvia and Kazakhstan. In the post-Soviet cases these perceptions are bolstered by the legacy of the Soviet institutional structure. The constituent entities of the Soviet Union were all named after one ethnic group (the titular nation) – a fact which gave them a claim to ownership and superiority (Brubaker 1996). While the Russians and other Slavs dominated political structures at the Union level, the titulars were overrepresented in power structures as well as in educational institutions within their home republics (Hodnett 1978, pp 101-04; Karklins 1984).

In the Soviet successor states the largest minority group – the Russians and other Russophones – proved highly resourceful in terms of educational levels and occupational structure, but never challenged the titulars’ right to dominate politics (Kolstoe 1995). This informal system could be found also at the level of autonomous republics, with the Abkhazian political structures providing a clear example of this. One source estimates that during Soviet rule in the 1980s, when the ethnic Abkhaz made up less than 20 per cent of the total population, as much as 41 per cent of the members of the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet and 67 per cent of the republican ministers were ethnic Abkhaz (George 2009, p. 104).

Armenians in Abkhazian society. Cohesion vs. fragmentation

The vast majority of Armenians in Abkhazia – some say as much as 95 per cent (Ishkanyan 2004) – come from the Kackar region in Eastern Anatolia. The first Anatolian Armenians arrived in Abkhazia in 1878, fleeing from harassment and persecution in the Ottoman Empire. At that time ethnic Abkhaz who had rebelled against the tsar were deported to Turkey, so in a certain sense one might regard this as a population exchange. No less than 70,000 Abkhaz left their homeland in the Russian Empire in two waves, first in the 1860s and then in the 1870s. This brought down the population density drastically, making room for an influx of settlers. Most Armenians arrived after the massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in the 1890s and during World War I. By the time of the first Soviet census of 1926 the Armenian population in Abkhazia had reached 14–15 percent, a share which remained more of less stable until the dissolution of the Soviet state.

Most Armenians settled in the countryside and engaged in agriculture. The largest concentrations of Armenians are in the north, in the Gagra region and along the coast up to the border with Russia, but Armenian villages are found also in the Gulripsh and Ochamchira districts in the center and the south. In time some Armenians, particularly those with higher education, moved to Sukhumi and other towns. Diana Kerselian, an Armenian member of the Sukhumi city council, believes that the rural/urban split is the most important dividing line within the Armenian community in Abkhazia today. In Sukhumi there are a number of Armenian intellectuals, doctors, and educators; and interethnic marriages between Armenians and Abkhaz are not uncommon.

But due to economic difficulties many Armenians have left Abkhazia’s towns. Sukhumi’s Armenian population is now about 10,000. As a result, most of Abkhazia’s Armenians today are the ones living in rural areas, working the land or engaged in small business…. they do experience some discomfort, being essentially outside the mainstream processes in Abkhazia (Sanamyan 2007).
The Armenians in Abkhazia speak a dialect called Hamshen which is far removed from the standard Armenian used in today’s Republic of Armenia. It is debatable whether Hamshen ought to be characterized as a dialect or a separate language, but in any case Armenians in Armenia will not be able to understand it without having studied it (Trier, Lohm and Szakonyi 2010, p. 67). This means on the one hand that there are few linguistic differences within the Armenian community in Abkhazia, but on the other that people cannot readily avail themselves of media and educational facilities provided in standard Armenian. Armenia offers scholarships for Abkhaz Armenians in Yerevan, but very few go there, also because it is expensive and few Abkhazian Armenians have friends or relatives in Armenia. Cut off from the larger Armenian society in Armenia as well as in the diaspora, basically they must fall back on their networks and group solidarity within the Abkhaz community.

The Abkhazian government provides elementary education in several different languages, including Armenian. In 2010 there were 34 Armenian-language schools in operation, mostly in the countryside, with some 2000 pupils. The number of schools as well as of pupils, however, is gradually shrinking. The schools are underequipped and in poor conditions, and the teachers underpaid. It is not possible to live on a teacher’s salary, and in some cases pensioners volunteer as teachers as a community service. There are no textbooks in Hamshen, so the pupils generally use books imported from Armenia, written in what for them is basically a foreign language (Trier, Lohm and Szakonyi 2010, p. 67; Gogorian n.d.). Higher education in Armenian is provided at two institutions, the Gagra Humanitarian Training College and the Pedagogical Faculty at the Abkhazian state university.

Those Armenians who do not attend Armenian schools study in schools with Russian as language of instruction. More than 7,000 Armenians are studying in Russian schools which are larger and better equipped than the Armenian ones (NovostiNK.ru 2010). As one Armenian explains, parents send their children to these schools ‘not because they are uneducated or unpatriotic, but simply because they want to give their children the best possible education. In the Russian schools Armenians make up 80 per cent. In that way the Hamshen-Armenians continue to be torn away from the pan-Armenian culture.’ (Gogorian n.d.).

Traditionally, the vast majority of Armenians in Abkhazia, as elsewhere, belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church. In the Soviet period, this important ingredient of an Armenian identity was weakened, for several reasons. Under the atheistic Communist regime, religious practice became increasingly infrequent, also because there was no Armenian church in Abkhazia. Since a Russian Orthodox church did continue to function in Abkhazia, Armenians who wished to baptize their children often took them there (Tert.am 2011). Some also got married and began to attend regular services in this church. In time it was assumed that they had converted to Orthodoxy.

After the fall of Communism the Armenian community in Abkhazia, as was the case in other parts of the Soviet population, experienced a religious revival, and an initiative was taken to collect money to build an Armenian Apostolic church in

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9 Hamshen is originally the variety of Armenian spoken by Armenians in the part of Anatolia which Abkhaz Armenians hail from, and is strongly influenced by Turkish. The variety of Hamshen spoken in Abkhazia, however, differs considerably from also this dialect. Having lived for more than a century in Russia/the Soviet Union, Abkhazian Armenians – like Armenians in other parts of the former Soviet Union – have picked up quite a few Russian phrases and idioms (Samaryan 2007).

10 The Armenian Apostolic Church is monophysite. Theological differences with Orthodoxy mainly concern the understanding of the nature of Christ as both God and man.
Abkhazia. Armenian activists complain that this initiative was met with resistance from people who purported to defend the Orthodox identity of the Hamshen Armenians but in reality wanted to set Abkhazian Armenians up against each other.

It is not difficult to guess who is trying to discredit the attempt to unite all Abkhazian Armenians. In the unrecognized republic certain influential people are not comfortable with the unity and independence of the Armenian community. It is no secret that our compatriots who are almost as numerous as the titular nation, are denied access to the real levers of administration in this country… Certain forces simply will not allow the Armenians a place in the sun, in spite of the enormous contribution which they have made to the building of Abkhazian statehood,

writes journalist Artem Erkanian in the Yerevan-based journal *Novoe vremia* (Erkanian 2010). When Erkanian went on to identify more specifically who these ‘forces’ were, he insisted that they should be sought neither among the central political leadership in Abkhazia nor in the offices of the Abkhaz Orthodox church, but rather among ‘officials’ (*chinovnichestvo*).

To the extent that a campaign to split the Armenians in Abkhazia along religious lines really existed it seems to have failed. As one Orthodox Armenian explained, ‘we are Orthodox… but also for us the opening of a Armenian church in Gagra will bring great joy, many of us have already for some time contributed financially to it. I do not doubt that when it is opened all Armenians in Abkhazia will baptize their children there.’ (Shariia 2010). The construction of an Armenian church in Gagra commenced in 2009 and as of 2011 is still underway.

**Armenians in Abkhazian politics**

If the Armenian community in Abkhazia seems quite cohesive in cultural, linguistic and religious terms, political divisions have nevertheless been rather pronounced. Already before the war in 1992/93, two separate Armenian cultural/mutual aid organizations existed – Krunk (‘Crane’) and Mashtots. They differed in geographic focus as well as political orientation. While Mashtots was established in the northwestern town of Gagra, Krunk was based in the capital city of Sukhumi and from its very inception enjoyed good relations with the Abkhazian leadership, in particular with the Ardzindba administration (1994–2005). In the early phase of the war Krunk persistently tried to pressure Mashtots into a more activist stance, but when this finally happened it was more a result of Georgian violence against civilians than of Krunk cajoling.

After the war the two major Abkhazian-Armenian organizations continued to operate in isolation from each other, each with its own agenda. Krunk leader Albert Topolian was co-opted into the Abkhazian political leadership, where he held various positions, including that of deputy prime minister, whereas Mashtots keep aloof from Sukhumi politics (Sanamyan 2007). The impetus for the unification of the two organizations seems to have come during the disputed Abkhazian presidential elections in 2004, when incumbent Raul Khajimba, who enjoyed Moscow’s undisguised backing, refused to concede defeat to challenger Sergei Bagapsh. This was a standoff between two contenders who were both ethnic Abkhaz, but as the situation threatened to get out of control and Abkhazia was on the verge of a civil war, there was growing apprehension that the Armenians might be drawn into the conflict. To forestall such a development Krunk, Mashtots, and a third organization – the Armenian Cultural Centre
– all dissolved themselves and pooled their resources into a new organization, the Armenian Community in the Republic of Abkhazia. The Community would have three co-presidents, one from each of the three founding organizations. The troika decided to maintain a studied neutrality in the fight between the two presidential candidates (Gogorian n.d.).

However, the Armenian Community did not manage to keep its equidistance to the various factions in the Abkhazian politics for very long. During the next elections to the organization’s leadership in 2007, the Bagapsh administration openly interfered in the nomination process, ensuring that only one candidate was put forward. The new leader Garegin Kazarian hailed from a respected Sukhumi family, but had lived for a long time in Sochi in Russia where he engaged in business – and, most importantly, he was regarded as a Bagapsh stooge (Shariia 2010). It was therefore with a sense of relief that the Armenians in 2010 were able to choose a community leader from among three candidates, and without any overt pressure from the presidential administration. Some commentators, however, have indicated that the main reason behind the freer and more liberal atmosphere this time round was that ‘president Bagapsh regarded all three potential candidates as completely acceptable partners’ (Erkanian 2010).

The presidential manipulations of the Armenian community elections seem to show how important it is for the Abkhazian state authorities to keep the Armenian community in the country under control. The new Abkhazian-Armenian leader, Suren Kerselian, has not voiced any complaints about the Armenians’ lack of political influence. Asked about their presence in the political structures in the republic he notes that Armenians are reasonably well (neplokho) represented at local levels, and in the legislative assembly they have three deputies, one of whom is deputy-speaker (Zhidkov 2011). Kerselian has not in any way indicated that he regards this as insufficient. While he acknowledges that the official figure of 44,800 Armenians in Abkhazia might not be quite accurate, the uncertainty about the correct figures was in his view not a result of any political manipulation but was due to labour migration: ‘A part of the population in Abkhazia constantly moves out of the republic and back again.’ Kerselian has identified the need to assist in the strengthening of the Abkhazian state as ‘the main task of the Armenian community in Abkhazia’ (Apsnypress 2010).

From the rostrum of the Armenian Community, calls have occasionally been voiced for better representation of Armenians in Abkhazian power structures (Erkanian 2010). Those who express such viewpoints, however, underscore that increased influence should not be accomplished through independent political action. Instead, ‘in order to solve this problem it is necessary to collaborate with the leadership of the republic and the regions’ (Apsny.ru 2004). Since this plea was voiced in 2004, however, no improvement has been achieved. As one Armenian social activist in Sukhumi admitted in 2007, ‘in the last election the community did try to increase that number but that did not work.’ (Sanamyan 2007). A kind of informal quota system for minority representation exists in Abkhazia (Sanamyan 2007; Trier, Lohm and Szakonyi 2010, pp. 88-89), but since these quotas give them a poorer share of deputies in elected organs than their demographic weight would indicate, this looks more like a numerus clausus than a programme for affirmative action.

It could be argued that by adopting a loyal position, the Armenians in Abkhazia have achieved a sort of indirect influence over political decisions in the country. Given the demographic situation in the country, Abkhaz politicians need the support of Armenian voters in order to be elected. Even if no Armenians can ever become king, the
Armenians as a group may still be kingmakers if they all vote the same way. During the 2009 presidential elections it was reported that incumbent Sergei Bagapsh primarily campaigned in the Armenian-populated settlements. This was not without a reason: As much as 90 per cent of the ethnic Abkhaz had already made up their mind how they would vote; far from always did they intend to vote for the current leadership. The Armenians and Russians, on the other hand, remained undecided…. (Gasparian 2009).

The reluctant combatant: Armenian involvement in the Abkhaz–Georgian conflict
In the late Soviet period Abkhazia was one of the most volatile regions in the USSR, rife with ethnic tension. In 1978, and again in April 1989, Abkhazians signed petitions and organized demonstrations to demand secession from Georgia (within the Soviet Union) (Mihalkanin 2004). These disputes, however, were played out between ethnic Georgians and Abkhazians, and did not concern the Armenians directly. When Georgian warlord Tengiz Kitovani led his detachments of Georgian paramilitaries into Abkhazia in May 1992 – ostensibly to capture a fugitive Georgian politician hiding there, but also to stem Abkhaz separatism – the initial reaction of many Armenians was to adopt the attitude of a detached bystander.

Neutrality, however, was not allowed the Armenians for very long. Kitovani’s ragtag soldiers, the Mkhedrioni militia, known for their marauding and low discipline, rarely checked the ethnicity of the owner of a house before entering it. In the early phase of the war most of the Armenian-dominated region of Gagra fell under the control of local Georgians.11 The Armenian cultural organization Mashtots strenuously tried to keep out of the conflict, despite vigorous Abkhaz attempts to drag it off the fence. The unarmed Armenian civilians realized that they were in no position to pick a fight with the heavily armed Mkhedrioni and tried to keep a low profile. Many Armenian houses were nevertheless – perhaps for that reason – pillaged. In September 1992 the Armenian section of the village Kolkhida outside Gagra was attacked in a massive anti-Armenian campaign.

During the winter of 1993 Armenians were assaulted by Chechen volunteers who participated in the war on the Abkhaz side, but this was not enough to drive the Armenians into the arms of the Georgians. In late February and early March the Georgian army carried out a series of attacks, with numerous atrocities, against Armenian villages around Sukhumi and Ochamchira (Amshentsi 2010). This marked a turning point: ‘A hastily convened meeting of the leadership of the Gagra community association Mashtots decided to support the Abkhaz war effort officially, and to take up arms on the Abkhaz side.’ (Amshentsi 2010).

An Armenian battalion was established, named after an Armenian war hero from WWII, Ivan Bagramian. This battalion gained a reputation as a formidable fighting force. Azeri and Georgian sources accuse the Bagramiantsy of war crimes and atrocities (Guseinov n.d.; Paichadze 2006), while Abkhaz and Armenians hail them as heroes (Amshentsi 2010). As many as 1500 Armenians fought on the Abkhaz side, making up approximately one fourth of the Abkhaz military strength. In the course of the war, 242 Armenian combatants were killed (Ishkhanyan 2004). Hardly any Armenians supported the Georgian side. Claims one self-critical Georgian commentator: ‘the most terrible mistake committed by Tbilisi [during the war] was to offend the Armenians living in

11 The account below basically follows Amshentsi 2010.
Abkhazia. Originally they adopted a neutral position. Only a part of the Armenians in Gagra went over to the Abkhaz side, but our incorrect and senseless policy prompted a large part of them to take up arms against us’ (Apsny.ge 2007).

This story about the Armenian involvement in the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict can be interpreted in various ways. On the one hand it shows that – after some hesitation – the Armenian community did make a firm commitment to throw in its lot with the Abkhaz; indeed, one might even speculate that – given the relatively even correlation of forces between the Abkhaz and the Georgian – this was decisive to the outcome of the war. On the other hand, it can be argued that the Armenians were not really fighting for the Abkhaz cause, but for themselves. Armenian community leader Galust Trapizonian, who has been awarded the medal ‘hero of Abkhazia’ for his war effort, has explained, ‘The Armenians could not fail to participate in the war for one simple reason: this is where we live. From the first days of the war each Armenian defended his home, his family, his honour. Life itself forced us to take up arms’ (Akopian 2003). Aside from the slight exaggeration in the expression ‘from the first days of the war’, this statement also seems to indicate that the Armenians were not fighting for the same cause as the Abkhaz. While the Abkhaz were defending their homeland, the Armenians were protecting their homesteads. A Georgian journalist claims that ‘what the Armenians see as their “patriotism” the Abkhaz interpret differently: according to them, the Armenians acted prudently: they positioned themselves for a place in the sun in the future Abkhazia’ (Papaskiri 2009).

**Economic conditions for Armenians**

Economic issues loom large in Abkhaz–Armenian relations. Many sources claim that most Armenians seem to think that they are doing better economically than the Abkhaz. According to one well-informed Russian source ‘the owners of coffee-bars, shops, and restaurants are in most cases precisely Armenians. If Armenians previously used to dominate in agriculture, then they have now established themselves firmly also in the vacation resort business.’ (Regnum 2007). One reason for this Armenian success in the tourist trade is that some of their most vibrant communities are located on the northwestern coastline, close to Sochi and other tourist destinations in Russia.

Allegedly some kind of tacit agreement exists, comparable to the ‘social contract’ between the Communist leaders and the population in the former Soviet Union: the Abkhazian-controlled state will not interfere with the Armenian businesses as long as the Armenians keep out of politics (Epifantsev 2010). ‘The Armenians do not enter politics, and the Abkhaz do not meddle with their businesses. A stable symbiosis’ (Shevtsov 2009). Rachel Clogg believes that ‘the relative wealth of a number of Abkhaz Armenians […] contribute to a greater sense of well-being in Abkhazia than for other non-Abkhaz groups’ (Clogg 2008, pp. 317–18). This seems to provide support for Commercio’s hypothesis about business as a safety valve, but the evidence is far from conclusive.

Occasionally it is claimed that the Abkhaz control also the business sector in the country: ‘In all Armenian villages and agro-firms the leaders (rukovoditeli) are Abkhaz. They have established a system of extortionate taxes on the Armenians, on each home, each individual, and each fruit tree’ (Rosliakov n.d.). Also some Western observers maintain that ethnic Abkhazians seem to be skimming the cream of the Abkhaz economy. Thus for instance, Tom Trier et al. believe that big business in Abkhazia is dominated by a handful of influential Abkhaz families, who for the most part have built
up their wealth in Russia. These researchers add, however, that small- and medium-scale producers are often Armenians. ‘Armenian businessmen have substantial economic power in Gagra and Gudauta in the fields of construction and tourism, also capitalizing on their close links to successful Armenian businessmen in neighboring Krasnodar krai.’ (Trier, Lohm and Szakonyi 2010, p. 110). Richard Berge writes that ‘Although Armenians are often well established in small and medium size enterprises, the strength of Abkhaz informal networks mean that they have difficulty penetrating into the commanding heights of the economy. This is likely to have a negative impact on the economic situation of the Armenians as well, although this is hard to quantify.’ (Berge 2010, p. 16).

A large-scale survey of public opinion conducted in Abkhazia in March 2010 indicates that Armenians are divided in their views on the economic prospects open to them in the de facto republic. This survey did not ask specifically about economic opportunities in the private sector, but included a question on whether the non-Abkhaz had opportunities to get well-paid jobs and significant posts. Roughly half of the Armenians answered in the affirmative, while the other half denied this (O’Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2011, p. 24). From these survey results John O’Loughlin, Vladimir Kolossov and Gerard Toal concluded that the Abkhaz leadership has been ‘partially successful’ in building a common national identity shared not only by ethnic Abkhaz but also by Armenians and Russians (O’Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2011, p. 25).

Conclusions: Assessing the Power of Explanatory Models of Ethnic Marginalization

Control: The active interference of the Abkhaz presidential administration in the internal affairs of the Armenian community, as outlined above, might perhaps be interpreted as evidence that the Abkhaz elites are willing to use what Ian Lustick has called methods of ‘control’ to perpetuate their near monopoly of political power in the republic. Lustick’s interpretative grid, however, is not necessarily the best way to penetrate the maze of Abkhazian ethnic politics. The control model presupposes that the dominant group employs a heavy dose of coercive means – violence and the threat of violence – in order to subjugate other groups. This may be a reasonably correct description of the treatment of the ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia although we have not made enough research on the Georgian–Abkhaz situation to draw any strong conclusions. With regard to the treatment of the Armenians, manipulation of elections to offices in their community organizations has certainly taken place, but nothing that qualifies as serious arm-twisting. It does not seem that much pressure has been necessary to ensure that the Armenians will ‘keep in their place’.

Rachel Clogg has argued that the non-titulars in Abkhazia are caught in a vicious circle. Having less representation and less political influence, they feel more vulnerable and for that reason tend to be more, not less loyal, to the authorities and far less vocal in expressing concerns than ethnic Abkhaz (Clogg 2008, p. 314). No Armenian community leader has at any point stood forth to challenge the Abkhaz hegemony.

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12 This was confirmed in the authors’ interview with Natella Akaba, chairperson of the Public Chamber of Abkhazia, Sukhumi, September 2010.

13 Predictably, many more ethnic Abkhazians believed that there was no economic discrimination of non-Abkhaz in Abkhazia.

14 This has been suggested by for instance Berge 2010, p. 12.
Instead, the two main positions in the internal Armenian debate have been on the one hand that the Armenians should not engage politically at all, on the other that they should support the Abkhaz regime. The important question therefore remains: why have the Armenians not made any serious attempts to translate their numerical strength into political power?

**Ethnic democracy:** The ethnic democracy model is meant to describe political systems that employ softer and more democratic means of ethnic dominance than what is found in ‘control’ regimes. Since so little actual coercion is used by the ethnic Abkhaz to secure political dominance in Abkhazia, this would appear a likely candidate for an explanation, as has indeed been suggested by at least two well-informed observers of the Abkhazian scene (Caspersen 2011, pp. 350-52; Berge 2010). However, the problem with the ethnic democracy model is that, according to its own proponents, it is not supposed to work in this country. Abkhazia clearly fails to fulfil two basic preconditions for a stable ethnic democracy: state strength and demographic preponderance for the politically dominant group. Under circumstances of minority rule, Sammy Smooha assumes that apartheid-style control mechanisms will be required to keep the subjugated groups in place – but nothing of the kind can be found in Abkhaz–Armenian relations.

**Business as a safety valve.** Marginalized groups may stay out of politics because they are given opportunities to secure a decent income and improve their life chances by engaging in business and other economic activities. In the Abkhazian case, this theory seems to have some explanatory potential, but only up to a point. The Armenians and other non-titulars in Abkhazia are certainly not excluded from economic opportunities in the same way as from political participation, but also in this field the available (admittedly scanty) evidence indicates that informal mechanisms favouring ethnic Abkhaz are at work. Armenians may be found in many of the most lucrative economic sectors such as the tourist business, but virtually all nouveaux riches seem to be Abkhaz.

**Yielding to the sons of the soil.** To explain the Armenian abdication from politics in Abkhazia, therefore, we have to look at sentiments and behaviour among the marginalized group just as much as among the superordinate group. This is true not only of Abkhazia, we believe, but of all ethnic systems. Any study of ruling techniques employed by dominant groups ought to be supplemented by an analysis of the preferences and attitudes that guide the actions and reactions of the subjugated groups. In this article we have focused on one such explanatory framework – the pervasive perception that rights in and ‘ownership’ of a country are linked to residence time and ‘rootedness’. According to Abkhazian minister of foreign affairs Maksim Gundjia, ‘What makes Abkhazia is the Abkhaz… The Armenians say things, but they do not push to change the situation.’ Importantly, in very many countries this seems to be a perception that is shared by the indigenous and immigrant population.

One Georgian source explains that, unlike the Georgians and Abkhaz who fight over a piece of territory in Abkhazia, ‘the Armenians do not question whose land this is. Instead, their disagreements [with the Abkhaz] concern the economy. This is serious, of course, but nothing compared to the distrust and confrontation between Abkhaz and Georgians’ (Tsiklauri 2007, emphasis added). In our view, this quote points to an important psychological mechanism that seems to regulate Armenian–Abkhaz relations in the de facto state.

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15 For an early forceful statement of this position see Schermerhorn 1970.
16 Authors’ interview, Sukumi, September 2010.
During the war of secession, the Armenians participated actively on the Abkhaz side, but they fought ‘for the wrong reasons’: out of pragmatism, not patriotism. The Abkhazians were defending their ancient homeland, but although the local Armenian communities in Abkhazia have been there for more than a hundred years, they do not feel the same attachment to the soil. These sentiments seem to linger on also after the war. Abkhazia is the land of the Abkhaz where the Armenians are welcome to live and their services – including military services – are appreciated, but Armenians should not aspire to an equal position in the rule of a state which is not theirs. Importantly, this seems to be an attitude which is not only widespread among titulars but is accepted also by the non-indigenous population. Compared to the Georgians, the Armenians in Abkhazia are not regarded as occupiers or intruders, but neither can they aspire to a status equal to the autochthonous nation. By contrast, Georgians tend to see Abkhazia as ancient Georgian territory.

The four explanations discussed here are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The ‘business safety valve’ and the ‘sons of the soil’ may be regarded as parallel mechanisms pulling in the same direction. Together they may explain why the ethnic democracy model may work also under circumstances where it, according to its own proponents, should not. ‘Ethnic democracy’ describes strategies of domination ‘from above’; ‘sons of the soil’ may account for counterintuitive reactions ‘from below’.

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