

in the case of a feared attack by Turkey, or of possible attempts by Tbilisi to gain actual control over the Javakheti territory. This area has, in fact, found itself outside of the de facto exclusive jurisdiction of Tbilisi. The 137th military base was then stationed in Gudauta, Abkhazia – that is, less than an hour's drive from the Russian border.¹⁰⁰

By late 2007, following a decade of intense pressure from both Tbilisi and leading Western nations, Moscow had withdrawn its last military base from Georgian soil (with the sole exception of the Gudauta base).

6 Conclusion

Level of economic development

Low levels of economic development played no discernible role in the precipitation of the ethnopolitical conflicts in the South Caucasus. As illustrated in Chapter 3, both Azerbaijan and Georgia, as parts of the former Soviet Union, possessed relatively highly developed economies; the standard of living in both countries, including their autonomies, was also relatively high. However, the gradual worsening of the overall economic situation of the South Caucasian region as a whole, which was caused by the Soviet-wide economic decline of the late Soviet era, may well have played a role in lowering the standard of living of the region's inhabitants, thereby fostering their sense of insecurity and so contributing to the intensification of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia conflicts. Subsequently, as with other instances of internal turmoil, civil war types of situations across the region brought about rising criminality, a lack of basic products, and other factors which contributed to an overwhelming feeling of anxiety among local populations: a feeling for which some, at least, apparently blamed their ethnic adversaries. However, clear causal links supported by data are missing in this regard, which makes it difficult to measure the precise impact of the worsening economic situation on the likelihood of civil war initiation. Importantly, the worsening of the economic situation had demonstrably been a factor in the pre-civil war phase of conflicts, where the interplay of a host of other factors contributed to the overall probability of armed conflict initiation. In fact, it is not clear whether proximate causes of interethnic conflict *worsened the economic situation*, or vice versa; it is most likely that the causal relationship between both variables is two-sided.

Facilitating a rebellion? Natural resources, diaspora, and geography

The factor of the presence of natural resources within a given region definitely played *no* role in the course of conflict initiation. Of the three ethnopolitical conflicts detailed in this book, none was characterized by competition for mineral resources, as neither Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, nor Abkhazia in fact possessed such resources. In the case of Azerbaijan, the only South Caucasian nation to have significant natural resources – oil and natural gas – competition for them never played a role in internal Azerbaijani political discourse, let alone in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In fact, the Azerbaijani elites have for a long time seen the nation's oil wealth rather as a tool with which to attract Western attention to the region, in order both to gain considerable financial and political support from key Western nations and to reduce *Russia's* influence in the South Caucasus (especially as Russia appeared to the Azerbaijanis to be favoring Armenia at the expense of Azerbaijan).

Effective U.S. support, coupled with the general strengthening of Azerbaijan's standing on the international scene in the context of extracting and exporting the republic's oil and natural gas situated in the Caspian Sea, was seen as an essential tool for achieving military victory in Karabakh and/or a consequent political victory at the negotiating table. Yet, owing to a variety of reasons, these ambitions never in fact materialized – and, most importantly, they had no impact on either the conflict onset or its subsequent escalation. Azerbaijan's possession of natural resources did play a certain role in the conflict inasmuch as it aroused enormous expectations amongst the post-Soviet Azerbaijani elites that if they could succeed in making effective use of the country's natural resources, the conflict over Karabakh might be resolved to Azerbaijan's benefit. Nonetheless, this factor proved relevant, not in the phase of conflict onset or escalation, but rather during the post-war international negotiations to find a solution to the conflict.

It is a well-known fact that the Armenian diaspora, perhaps one of the most politically well-organized ethnic diasporas in the world, and by far the strongest of all South Caucasian diasporas, played a role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As illustrated in Chapter 3, influential Armenian intellectuals based in Moscow proved essential in rallying public support for the Armenian cause in the initial months of the Karabakh nationalist movement; their support soon proved crucial with respect to the political organization of Armenians within Armenia and

Nagorno-Karabakh, serving as an important motivational factor for their mobilization.¹ Moreover, during the course of the conflict, highly nationalistic Armenian communities in the United States, France, and a number of other countries contributed actively to the Armenian cause, providing recruits and money and ensuring international support. For example, as early as 1992, the Armenian lobby in the United States managed to promote the enactment of the Section 907 caveat to the Freedom Support Act in Congress: this restricted all direct U.S. aid to the Azerbaijani government, as the latter's policy toward Nagorno-Karabakh was termed aggression.²

Interestingly, just like the overwhelming majority of the other Caucasus countries, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia are all largely *mountainous* areas – which might be taken to support the proposition that rough geographic terrain increases the risk of civil war. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes obvious that geography as such was not a contributing factor to either the initiation or escalation of the studied conflicts. Armed conflict in all the secessionist territories was generally mobilized along major traffic arteries: in Abkhazia, aside from Sukhumi and some other urban areas, it was the coastline which, along with the southeast–northwest highway, hosted most military maneuvers. In South Ossetia, battles predominantly took place in and around Tskhinvali, whilst in Nagorno-Karabakh both sides largely concentrated their military activities across the autonomy's central crossroads (Stepanakert, Shusha, and Agdam), even though during subsequent fighting both mountainous and relatively flat areas of outer Karabakh also became battlefields.³

However, the factor of geography did play a highly significant role during some specific phases of local conflicts. Geographical proximity with Armenia was a strong motivational factor for the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, as indeed it was for the Abkhazians who, at the conflict onset phase, reckoned upon deriving support from their ethnic kin, the Circassian peoples, who were settled across the Greater Caucasus mountain range; the South Ossetians, too, largely counted upon deriving support from their fellow Ossetian countrymen in North Ossetia, on the opposite side of the Russo–Georgian border. In the course of both conflicts, South Ossetian and, especially, Abkhaz secessionists relied heavily on support deriving from Russia: this either in the form of North Caucasian or Cossack combatants, or else of equipment and ammunition supplies, as well as air support (a fact which is further highlighted below). Moreover, such cross-border assistance proved invaluable for the success of the separatists' military activities and also helped them

to assure the necessary political backing in parallel negotiations and, eventually, in whatever peace talks that might follow the conflict itself. Similarly, Nagorno-Karabakh armed forces relied heavily on military and political support emanating from Armenia. From 1992 onward, when the missing geographical link – the Lachin corridor linking “continental” Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh – had been captured by the Armenians, the army of the Republic of Armenia was involved in active military conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan: to that end, mobilization was declared in Armenia. Without strong support from Russia and Armenia, enabled by Nagorno-Karabakh’s shared borders with Armenia and those of South Ossetia and Abkhazia with Russia, it is extremely unlikely that the – demographically, economically and politically weak – secessionists would have succeeded on the battlefield. Therefore, for *large-n* quantitative studies, it may prove appropriate to focus on *transnational* factors which may well influence prospective ethnosecessionist rebellions: that is to say that the *geographical proximity* of rebellious areas which are located on state peripheries *adjacent to areas which are inhabited by their ethnic kin* (or political supporters) must be seen as a factor which might actively increase the risk of civil war and/or ethnopolitical conflict.

Demographic factors: ethnic diversity, size, and proportions

The respective ethnic diversity and majority–minority population ratios within Azerbaijan and Georgia did clearly prove a factor in the initiation of regional conflicts. Collier and Hoefler’s proposition holds that once a dominant ethnic group exceeds the threshold of 45 per cent, it tends much more readily toward the use of its demographic superiority in order to suppress numerically smaller ethnicities. In the case of both Soviet Azerbaijan and Georgia, majority nationalities made up at least two thirds of each country’s population. However, the hypothetical proposition that the likelihood of ethnic secessionism and civil war increases in a country when a compactly located ethnic minority exceeds a certain demographic threshold, fails to apply to the South Caucasian conflict cases. While Ossetians and Armenians did numerically prevail in both South Ossetia (66 per cent) and Nagorno-Karabakh (77 per cent), respectively, Abkhazians comprised only 17 per cent of Abkhazia’s population: yet, secessionist agitation was still quite widespread amongst them, as they did not hesitate to claim overall national sovereignty. Nonetheless, the argument emphasizing the absolute size of a given population with respect to territory bears no relevance to

the South Caucasus, as both Georgia and Azerbaijan are relatively small countries with small pre-war populations of around 4.5 million and 7 million inhabitants, respectively.

Regime type and regime change

Regime-based theories do hold, virtually unambiguously, when applied to the South Caucasus conflicts. In fact, during the decades of effective Soviet control, latent ethnic tensions, or attempts by local ethnic elites to reverse what they might consider to be an unduly favorable status quo with respect to minority ethnic communities, were extremely rare, as prospective dissidents feared large-scale repression. Under the conditions of the former Soviet totalitarian regime, with civil liberties largely suppressed, expressions of public protest often had dramatic negative consequences – which kept emancipatory efforts at a low-profile. The same situation applied to the ethnic elites within Azerbaijan’s and Georgia’s majority nationalities, who had to take into consideration the possibility of the repression which might have been imposed on them by the central authorities in Moscow had they attempted to curtail the rights or liberties of the ethnic minorities within their respective territories. This consideration, in fact, largely limited the scope of ethnic discrimination in autonomies or areas populated by members of non-majority nationalities, during the Soviet era.

Significantly, in this regard the Abkhaz, South Ossetian, and (Nagorno-Karabakh) Armenian elites all approached Moscow with their respective emancipatory agendas *during periods of Soviet-wide regime liberalization*: thus, petitions were directed to the Kremlin during the peaks of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras. Interestingly, perhaps the most powerful appeal of Abkhaz intellectuals to the Soviet authorities, which sought to achieve the autonomy’s transfer from Georgia to Russia, took place in 1978 – at a point when serious conflict impacted on the relationship between Tbilisi and Moscow, and when demonstrators took to the streets of the Georgian capital to protest the Soviet government’s plans to cancel the constitutional status of Georgian as the republic’s state language.⁴ Similarly, throughout the modern history of the region, latent conflicts have turned violent whenever Russia’s grip over the area has weakened to any discernable degree – as exemplified by 1918–20 warfare among the independent republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia in Karabakh, and in some other ethnically mixed areas of the Azerbaijani–Armenian borderland; and also by the Abkhaz and South Ossetian rebellions during the same period and their suppression by Georgian armed

forces. A similar situation recurred during the late Soviet era, when Gorbachev's reforms heralded an unprecedented liberalization of the public landscape: the gradual weakening of Soviet control in the second half of the 1980s, occasioned by Gorbachev's ongoing regime liberalization, allowed ever more scope – throughout both the South Caucasian republics and their ethnic autonomies – for the expression of ethnic antagonisms, for active nationalism, for emancipatory agitation, and for centripetal aspirations.

Social inequality accounts

As acknowledged by proponents of the relative deprivation theory, social inequality is always relative. Indeed, it was only Georgia's South Ossetian elites who actively aspired to gain the superior status of an autonomous republic as opposed to that of an autonomous oblast. Whereas, by contrast, the status of an autonomous republic was what the Abkhazians already possessed but deemed it unacceptable. Meanwhile, the members of a number of compactly settled ethnic groups in both Georgia's and Azerbaijan's peripheries had long been in favor of the establishment (albeit relatively) of autonomous oblasts, which they saw as a necessary preliminary condition of self-rule, which would enhance their opportunities to promote their ethnocultural rights. However, despite the fact that both Azerbaijan's compactly settled ethnic minorities (Talysh, Lezgi, and Avar), as well as Georgia's Armenian and Azerbaijani ethnic minorities, lacked autonomous status, virtually none of them showed signs of secessionism.

Contrary to this, the Communist elites in both Baku and Tbilisi sought with varying degrees of success to implement a national agenda, in that they strengthened the economic, demographic, and political weight of their respective populations at the expense of the Karabakh Armenians, Abkhazians, and South Ossetians. However, as pointed out above, instances of ethnic discrimination in the Soviet Union in general, and within the South Caucasus in particular, were never widespread during the Soviet era;⁵ thus, for the majority of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, the South Ossetians, Abkhazians, and members of the other nationalities of the multiethnic Caucasus, the notion of ethnic inequality was rather restricted to the *symbolic* domain, the emotional appeal of which for local populations was enormous. Instead of economic issues,⁶ issues pertinent to the protection of the various ethnic groups' status vis-à-vis majority ethnicity dominated public discourse (i.e., questions such as the use of ethnic history textbooks, or the issue of ethnic language teaching).⁷

For example, although the level of economic development of Nagorno-Karabakh was amongst the highest of Azerbaijan's provinces, it yet remained below the all-Armenian average – a factor which caused discontent in the minds of Karabakh Armenians, who considered this a sign of relative disadvantage. Abkhazians were generally irritated by the fact that in order to finalize a business deal in their own country, they often had to rely on established networks of contacts in Tbilisi; in the end, as they claimed, it was easier for an average Georgian based in Tbilisi or Georgia proper to ensure a lucrative place within Abkhazia's tourist or agricultural sectors than for average Abkhazians, who generally turned out to have lower-status employment within their own country by comparison with Georgians. Hence Abkhazians sought to draw the center of administrative gravity to Sukhumi in order to make sure they, not Georgians, could take important decisions about issues related to their autonomy.

University education was also an issue for local ethnic minorities. Karabakh Armenians had to travel to Baku for university education, and they complained about being ethnically discriminated against in the Azerbaijani capital. In fact, in order to become enrolled in a South Caucasian university, one had to rely on an established network of cronyism, which outsiders generally had little chance of penetrating. Some Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians thus preferred to travel to Yerevan for their studies. Javakheti Armenians and Kvemo-Kartli Azerbaijanis faced a similar problem: for them, their lack of knowledge of the Georgian language played a decisive role, as they were not, therefore, in a position to be able to successfully pass the entrance exams to Tbilisi universities; hence, as a rule, they traveled to Yerevan and Baku, respectively, and often settled there.⁸ Accordingly, this very lack of access to university education in their native tongues was interpreted by some members of local ethnic minorities as definitive proof that Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Georgians sought either to achieve the cultural and ethnic assimilation of these various minorities, or else to drive them out of their respective countries altogether. For these minorities, this clearly was an issue of blatant social inequality.

Ancient hatreds

The notion of primordial ethnic hatreds has featured strongly within the most established accounts of South Caucasian ethnic conflict. In fact, primordial accounts are commonplace within the region when it comes to the definition of ethnic adversaries' supposed "inborn characteristics":

such (usually highly negative) characteristics are often used to justify the subservient position which the ethnic minorities in question are often required to assume vis-à-vis the “guest people.” As elsewhere in situations of ethnopolitical conflict, narratives of *treason* on the part of ethnic minorities, accompanied by lurid conspiracy theories, have been widespread across the South Caucasus, creating climates of intolerance and xenophobia, and fostering lasting ethnic prejudices.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to emphasize that ancient hatreds have largely been a *product of* interethnic tension rather than a *cause of* interethnic tension. Even though a certain degree of interethnic rivalry and friction did latently exist during the decades of Soviet rule – fostered by Soviet-style ethnic fragmentation that was, inter alia, provided by the established practice of ethno-federalism – pre-established ethnic caricatures did not dominate public discourse during the onset phase of local conflicts. For instance, Abkhazians and Georgians clearly competed for political and economic dominance in the Abkhazia autonomy, while the Abkhaz minority aspired for the reversal of the autonomy’s status quo, with the Georgian community opposed to this. Yet, in peacetime, both communities managed, as a rule, to live side by side without violent excesses: a fact attested to by the high frequency of interethnic marriages. In Nagorno-Karabakh, the incidence of violent clashes was also low among the autonomy’s Armenian and Azerbaijani communities: notwithstanding a certain level of latent suspicion, primordial hatreds did *not* dominate their interethnic relationships. As a rule, owing to the Soviet-imposed policies of socialist internationalism, Georgians, Azerbaijanis and others remained largely unaware of previous interethnic grievances (or else such knowledge remained restricted to a relatively narrow circle of intellectuals and well-informed nationalists).

Enemy images did arise (sometimes based upon primordial ethnic hatreds), but only gradually, during the course of conflict – following a general pattern of ethnic mobilization and polarization. Phantoms of the past were deliberately (re)constructed by ethnic intellectuals who, in an attempt to draw historical parallels, pointed to instances of interethnic grievance which had in fact occurred decades, or even centuries, previously. Georgians, for example, were reminded at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s of the Abkhazians’ and South Ossetians’ “treacherous” rebellions in the interwar period of 1918–21, as well as of constant attempts to put Georgian statehood in doubt during the Soviet period; whilst emphasis was placed upon their alleged close collaboration with the Russians, as the latter historically sought to undermine Georgia’s territorial integrity and independence. Similarly, South Ossetians and Abkhazians were told

by their intellectuals of the same rebellions: however, in this context, the narratives differed cardinally, as they had now to serve the purposes of convincing members of both communities about the Georgians’ age-old efforts to subjugate, assimilate, and/or annihilate these demographically small populations. In all such instances of local conflict, the host–guest dichotomy gained momentum, prompting local intellectuals (predominantly historians) to elaborate on existing ethnonationalist narratives with the aim of justifying unshakable myths of ethnic dominance over contested areas since time immemorial, and of refuting the adversaries’ opposite claims. Yet, demonized enemy images, accompanied by epicizing interethnic strife, were yet to come.

The Armenian case was exemplary in this regard: in Soviet Armenia, virtually no one was conscious of the so-called Armenian–Tatar War of 1905, of the Armenian–Azerbaijani wars of the interwar period (1918–1920), or the Karabakh rebellions of the same period. Yet, in the minds of ordinary people, Azerbaijanis were to some extent associated with the *Turks*, who were believed to have caused the biggest tragedy in Armenian history:⁹ thus, by 1988, genocide-based anti-Turkish resentments had come to make up the cornerstone of Armenian nationalism. As the conflict escalated, Azerbaijanis became increasingly associated with (Ottoman) *Turks* in the popular consciousness, and Armenian nationalist narratives and primordial characteristics *once ascribed to Turks* began to be applied to Azerbaijanis as well. The Sumgayit and Baku pogroms played a significant role in causing this cognitive shift. In any case, the ancient hatred narratives mastered by ethnic intellectuals amply served the goal of mobilizing communities along ethnic lines, giving ideological sense to their collective action: these narratives fitted well into ethnocentrist paradigms providing clear and simple “parochial” explanations of what was at stake in the conflicts concerned.¹⁰

Security dilemma

A security dilemma clearly was one of the major factors behind the avalanche-like escalation in the Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia conflicts. For instance, following the Sumgayit and Baku pogroms, it was the notion of self-protection which prompted Armenians to early mobilization in both political and military terms. As explained above, established narratives revolving around the issue of the Armenian genocide proved essential in deepening the Armenians’ security anxieties, reviving their (essentially defensive) alliance with Russia, mobilizing their society and the diaspora, and bringing about concentrated

collective action for the sake of a victory in Nagorno-Karabakh. This, in turn, prompted Azerbaijanis to take up arms and form paramilitary units of their own, while simultaneously seeking to reassure themselves of Moscow's (and Ankara's) loyalty to their cause. The fear of physical extinction at the hands of the Georgians made South Ossetians and Abkhazians establish self-defense units which were intended to counterbalance the Georgians' numerical superiority, as the latter were in the process of deploying their own National Guard; in the meantime, the Abkhaz and South Ossetian elites sought to arouse the sympathies of Moscow-based elites.

As tensions between the various ethnic communities in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia intensified, instances of inter-village fighting increased, prompting the Azerbaijanis, for example, to ensure adequate supplies of recruits and heavy weapons so as to counterbalance the established networks for movement of military equipment, ammunition, supplies, and personnel already available to the Armenians. Every effort made by an ethnic adversary to assure its own relative security by increasing its military capability and political standing, served directly to deepen the (reciprocal) sense of insecurity on the part of the ethnic opposition – which in turn helped to hasten the downward spiral of insecurity. This seems to be a pervasive pattern which runs through the entirety of local conflicts.

Besides this, the declining power of the Soviet state itself – which resulted in its eventual collapse at the end of 1991 – had a profound impact on the increasing sense of insecurity amongst ethnic communities in conflict. This feeling of heightened insecurity was especially intense amongst the Abkhaz and South Ossetian communities, since they were acutely aware of their demographic weakness vis-à-vis Tbilisi: thus, as Moscow's grip over the region weakened, their vulnerability to a Georgian attack increased perceptibly. Additionally, whilst in 1989 and 1990 both secessionists and governments in Baku and Tbilisi had been obliged to take the opinions of the central government in Moscow into account, and thus the conflicts eventually abated, the new specter of complete anarchy which followed the breakup of the Soviet Union left the warring parties on their own to confront their fates. Needless to say, this further intensified the adversaries' mutual security dilemma, which then led to more counterattacks, and so the armed conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia further escalated.

The increasingly nationalist rhetorics employed by local politicians also played an important role in further intensifying mutual interethnic security dilemmas. For example, the chauvinistic appeals

made by Gamsakhurdia in order to gain popularity amongst the already-galvanized Georgian population (and so solidify his position in the country as a strong and confident leader and patriot) had dramatic psychological repercussions amongst the Abkhaz and South Ossetian communities. Ethnic cleansing-based statements such as the one made by Colonel Karkarashvili and his colleagues across the South Caucasian frontlines are still remembered amongst Abkhazians (and others), who continually add to it more lurid and dramatic interpretations.¹¹

Symbolic (identity) politics

One of the principal findings of this study has been that of the overall applicability of *symbolic politics theory* in the context of local ethnopolitical conflicts. For the members of the various South Caucasian ethnic communities in conflict, their ethnicity was regarded as primordial, nonnegotiable and crucial for their group's survival; ethnocentrist attitudes grew in importance following the pervasive pattern of ethnic mobilization. The territorial aspirations of Azerbaijan's and Georgia's ethnic minorities were understood by mainstream society in terms of identity politics: it was the nation's identity, honor, and dignity that was thought to be centrally at stake in the respective conflicts. It was not just about a piece of land; a given territory's value was largely *symbolic* and emotion-laden. Thus symbols and ethnic myths evoked by intellectuals – and ruthlessly utilized by politicians – played an enormous role in mobilizing ethnic communities into active conflict.

Importantly, for the national liberation movements in both Azerbaijan and, especially, Georgia, the vision of independent statehood turned out to be largely associated with the strong ethnonationalisms of majority nationalities. In Azerbaijan, pan-Turkist sentiments prevailed, linking the country implicitly to Turkey and the rest of the Turkic world. Georgian intellectuals came to understand the idea of the post-Soviet nation-state as a heavily monoethnic concept, evoking a set of powerful nationalist symbols related to Georgians' past (medieval) glory, their unique language, their race, and Orthodox Christianity – all of which symbols were crafted so as to appear to entail the exclusive dominance of the ethnic Georgians within the borders of the country. Therefore, emphasis was placed upon the symbolic concept of "ethnic revival," which the escalating ethnic conflicts in the countries' peripheries served to further intensify.

Also contributing to this sense of identity-based conflict was the latent conflict within both the various republics' majority and minority

nationalities – conflict that dated back to Soviet times, and that largely profiled along the lines of ethnic dominance and subordination. As outlined above, it was the question of *status*, as well as symbolic issues such as language, culture, and history (and the political use thereof), that shaped the climate of interethnic competition and rivalry in the South Caucasian conflicts. Importantly, both Soviet Azerbaijan and Georgia were multiethnic states where individuals tended to identify themselves *with their respective ethnic groups* (rather than with the nation as a whole): this was especially the case with the Georgians, given their strong ethnonationalism.

Manipulative leaders

The manipulative leaders (elites) theory clearly holds in the context of the South Caucasian ethnopolitical conflicts. Local elites commonly manipulated public consciousness in order to strengthen their own positions on the political scene of their respective countries and to discredit their opposition; simultaneously, they evoked enemy images of ethnic adversaries in order to mobilize their fellow co-ethnics and to prepare the ground for collective action.

However, it is important to point out that, in the initial stages of regional political activism, *two* types of national elites emerged, which, in some instances, competed with each other for power and prestige within their respective territories. In the wake of the dissolution of Soviet authority, the Communist elites of the late Soviet period were confronted with the dramatic increase in popularity of (post-Communist) nationalist leaders who, as a rule, were intellectuals with little or no experience in governance. Both groups' interactions and their stances towards secessionist hotbeds influenced the process of conflict onset. For example, in Georgia, the Communist era elites swiftly adopted nationalist rhetoric, forming an ideological partnership with Gamsakhurdia's post-Communists when it came to what they commonly regarded as their primary national interest: that of the restoration of their grip over South Ossetia and Abkhazia as inseparable parts of Georgia. In Armenia, local Communist elites still sought to take a balanced stance, maneuvering between the nationalist appeals of the Karabakh Committee leaders and their own continuing loyalty toward the Moscow authorities. By contrast, the Soviet elites of Azerbaijan had long opposed the Popular Front nationalists: as such, the established Communist leadership initially refrained from using nationalist rhetoric, instead relying heavily on Moscow's support to anticipate Armenian irredentism, as

evidenced by the joint Soviet–Azerbaijani military operation in the areas north of Nagorno-Karabakh that took place in mid-1991.

In all these instances, it is debatable if the (post-Communist) nationalist elites in Azerbaijan, Armenia, or Georgia in fact used nationalist rhetoric with regard to secessionist autonomies as part of their earlier plans to take over power in their respective countries during the Soviet period.¹² It appears that, at least until the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, they were primarily driven by ideological motives – that is, to secure their ethnic group's political domination over contested territories – rather than by their desire to gain power in their respective countries, as will be detailed below. Whereas the Communist elites were effectively ousted in both late Soviet Armenia and Georgia, the conflict between the Communist leadership and the new nationalist leadership was exposed dramatically in Azerbaijan, where both sides of the political spectrum routinely accused each other of a lack of professionalism and of a lack of patriotic commitment to properly solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. From then on, elites in Azerbaijan and Georgia, who witnessed a number of coup d'états, routinely manipulated public consciousness with regard to the local conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia, in an attempt to gain, regain, or restore their power; by contrast, Armenians remained largely loyal to and united around the prominent members of the Karabakh Committee, which ruled over the country during the years of armed conflict.

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, as mentioned above, the manipulation of public consciousness gained momentum, with nationalist narratives from the past (re)constructed and utilized by local intellectuals and politicians. Additionally, fears of territorial partition and the decline of nation-states were periodically voiced by local elites in Azerbaijan and Georgia: separatist autonomies such as Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia were believed to threaten a dangerous domino effect, which might well eventually lead to the countries' dissolution. In Armenia, the elites stressed the vital importance of achieving a military victory in Nagorno-Karabakh: otherwise, according to them, what they termed “a second genocide” might occur – effectively wiping the Armenian homeland off the face of the earth. An analogous argument was circulated amongst South Ossetians and Abkhazians. The manipulation of ethnic fears through the use of symbols and nationalist narratives proved instrumental for local elites in the mobilization of the masses along the lines of ethnic solidarity.

Importantly, the emergence of (post-Communist) nationalist elites in the South Caucasus not only coincided temporally with the

emergence of secessionist movements on the fringes of Soviet Georgia and Azerbaijan, but the former was largely a consequence of the latter. This is why the political success or failure of local post-Communist elites was to a considerable degree dependent upon how well they coped with the task of ethnic secessionism – or national liberation – either one being at the core of the political agenda that brought them to power in their respective countries. This fact, along with the general awareness that the territorial integrity (or national independence, in the separatists' vocabulary) of their country was at stake, elevated the question of ethnic conflict into the primary source of political propaganda and mobilization. For instance, in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, it was the orchestrated effort of the local elites to gain public support within Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh for the cause of Karabakh secessionism that launched the conflict. While the issue of restoring national independence played a significant role within the internal discourse of late Soviet Georgia, it was coupled with the commitment of the local elites there to restore the country's territorial integrity – a factor that proved essential for the post-Communist Azerbaijani elites, as well, even though the latter did not place much emphasis on obtaining independence until well into 1992. Interestingly, however, in the initial phase of organizing Abkhazian and South Ossetian secessionism, local elites seem to have played a less prominent role: by comparison with the largely pre-organized Karabakh movement, both Ademon Nykhas and Aydgylara seem rather to have been mass initiatives which eventually generated elites. Yet, once established, those elites proved instrumental in mobilizing their co-ethnics, using heavily nationalist rhetoric.

It is worth mentioning at this point that, while researching the relevance of the manipulative leaders theory on the South Caucasian conflicts, it became unclear whether local conflicts – or their consequent escalation – were *caused by* ethnic leaders evoking enemy images in order to mobilize their ethnic kin so as (re)gain power for themselves and/or achieve victory in ethnic conflicts, or whether, in the course of respective conflicts, leaders found themselves in situations of ethnic violence, in which they were confronted with a *predetermined* ethnic conflict agenda, complete with its own ready-made set of values and rules. In fact, ethnic conflicts are not necessarily outcomes of the politics of manipulative elites, as the latter may simply reflect the heavily nationalist societal atmosphere of an escalating ethnic conflict, in which elites are in effect obliged to articulate relevant issues in such a way as to foster solidarity along ethnic lines and so safeguard what they deem their own ethnic community's security. For instance, as mentioned above, there is no

demonstrable evidence to suggest that leaders such as Gamsakhurdia, Ter-Petrosyan, or Elçibäy actually sought to gain power within their respective republics in earlier periods, such as the late 1980s, when the South Caucasus was still part of the Soviet Union, and when none anticipated that state's collapse. Yet, at the time, they each at least partly led ethnic warfare, organizing self-defense units which soon engaged in ethnic clashes. This is all the more obvious for the leaders of the secessionist movements in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, who each had little prospect of personal enrichment or tangible material interest whilst assigned their posts under the circumstances of escalating ethnic conflict; but they each still proved instrumental in mobilizing their ethnic kin around the idea of national independence. In fact, the motivations of national elites in situations of ethnic conflict and civil war may well be best described by using the manipulation argument: that is to say that they focus as much on consolidating their own power and material benefits as on their messiah-style pursuit of their ethnic community's survival.

Additionally, the escalation of violence in and around rebellious provinces had its own psychologic, which was based around increasingly fraught local ethnic antagonisms that had to be addressed by ethnic leaders. Importantly, both Elçibäy and Gamsakhurdia increasingly toughened their respective nationalist and militarist rhetorics *following* conflict escalation.¹³ Possibly, the growing radicalization of the masses placed these leaders in a position in which talks about peaceful solutions to ethnic disputes, or of compromises with ethnic adversaries, would have been politically untenable. In any event, objectively verifiable data are extremely difficult to obtain when it comes to determining the real motives of individual actors – the power elites within each given conflict – just as it is equally difficult to clearly distinguish between structural and individual factors influencing the progress of any given ethnic conflict.

Expanding the theory

Distinguishing between onset-based and process-based causes of civil war and ethnic conflict

This book has illustrated that what I term onset factors do not necessarily suffice to cause ethnic civil war. The factors of regime type, social inequality, and economic (under)development each act so as to shape the background of ethnic conflict; as such, they may persist for years, or even decades, until a triggering event leads to the outbreak

of interethnic hostilities. Importantly, factors that cause the onset of ethnic conflict do not necessarily bring on its further escalation into war. Even after escalation, however, it is incumbent upon either regime or ethnic dissidents to actually make use of a perceived window of opportunity to socially mobilize, militarily organize, and technically maintain sustainable violence – a factor that particularly holds in the case of ethnic dissidents whose in-group coherence and institutionalization, unlike that of the state, is not necessarily given in advance, yet whose attempts to reverse what they regard as an unfavorable situation is key for them to launch secessionist movements. Once the process of large-scale violence, that is, civil war, has commenced, then what I term process-driven factors come to play a tremendous role in shaping the ideological and security-based foundations of the conflict in question, increasing the spiral of violence.

In-group cohesion

Each of the three ethnic autonomies in the South Caucasus engaged in secessionist activities.¹⁴ By contrast, neither Azerbaijan's nor Georgia's ethnic minorities (despite each lacking autonomy) raised separatist – or irredentist – claims. Thus, for example, both Lezgis and Avars, compactly settled as they each were along the state borders with Russia, largely refrained from voicing irredentist demands to join with Dagestan, Russia's multiethnic republic with autonomy status in the Northeast Caucasus, where the majority of their ethnic kin lived. Azerbaijan's Talysh minority, who inhabited the country's southeast region, hesitated to raise claims to secede to Iran, with which they share a similar language, and where hundreds of thousands of their ethnic kin live. Similarly, Georgia's large Azerbaijani and Armenian communities inhabiting the country's southern provinces have proved largely immune to manifestations of irredentism, even though secessionists' positions used to be quite strong among Javakheti Armenians.

Two major lines of explanation suggest themselves in this regard. First, the aforementioned facts may support a thesis that ethnic autonomy in fact raises the risk of secessionism and of civil war. Indeed, some observers have advanced the argument that the very act of providing Azerbaijan's and Georgia's ethnic communities with definable political-administrative borders in line with the Soviet-imposed practice of ethno-federalism served as a background cause for secessionism: the experience of actually administering ethnic autonomies turned out to be an institutionalized first stage for subsequent aspirations for the establishment of independent nation-states, or of joining with ethnic

kin abroad.¹⁵ The existence of elements of (quasi)statehood – elements such as clearly defined borders, political and economic jurisdiction within those borders, proto-national symbols, or a certain degree of self-government organized among networks of cultivated ethnic elites – all contributed to forging a sense of in-group cohesion which enabled Abkhazians, South Ossetians, and Karabakh Armenians to eventually claim outright sovereignty over their respective territories.¹⁶ Indeed, the ethnic autonomies concerned did provide, in practice, for an institutionalized framework that, aside from symbolic issues, allowed for the establishment of state-like centralized networks, usually policed by representatives of local ethnic communities: the Soviet authorities generally placed importance upon the provision of a certain degree of self-rule within those ethnic autonomies. Importantly, these networks created ethnic elites which largely came to adopt emancipatory agendas on behalf of their co-ethnics, thus becoming heralds of secessionism.

Similarly, as the conflicts progressed, these elites proved instrumental in fostering and consolidating public support amongst their already mobilized ethnic kin: in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, secessionist movements were effectively policed, if not entirely organized, by local ethnic elites. Whereas, the conflicts in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia crystallized along the fault lines which existed between the Communist and post-Communist national elites, the local elites of the rebellious autonomies displayed considerable unity when it came to championing their ethnic interests, both inside and outside their respective autonomies. All this ensured a tremendous degree of group cohesion, which was then further cemented by what Stuart Kaufman has termed *fears of minorities* as Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, Abkhazians, and South Ossetians became increasingly conscious of their relative vulnerability in the face of the numerically superior Azerbaijanis and Georgians.

The second line of explanation focuses on the degree of external support, or the lack thereof, even though the issue of (instrumentally assured) group cohesion also played a role. For instance, at least as regards Georgia's Armenian and Azerbaijani communities, it is obvious that their apparent loyalty toward their country's territorial integrity may at least partially be explained by the fact that since both Armenia and Azerbaijan had engaged in a violent conflict with each other, their governments placed the utmost importance on assuring a positive relationship with Georgia, a strategically located neighboring country whose importance lay in its capacity to ensure a secure route for supplies from Russia, Armenia's key ally. For Baku, also, Georgia's

strategic importance stemmed from the situation of geopolitical isolation in which Azerbaijan found itself once its relationships with Iran and Russia were severely damaged in the course of the Karabakh war: as the Azerbaijani elites sought to ensure the exports of the country's oil to Western markets, Georgia provided the single geographical link to Turkey and the wider world. Under these circumstances, both Baku and Tbilisi pointedly refrained from instigating centrifugal sentiments amongst Georgia's Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnic minorities. Thus, the lack of external support, which in other circumstances seems to have played a vigorous role in causing ethnopolitical conflict within the region (see below), then proved decisive.

For Azerbaijan's Avar community, the lack of secessionist aspirations may be interpreted in the light of a combination of factors. First, this community only comprises approximately 50,000 people, who inhabit villages and towns both along Russia's borders and inside Azerbaijan. The majority of the Avar population is dispersed across the country's northernmost provinces. Secondly, and most notably, they lacked external support: even though, at some points, irredentist sentiments did reportedly gain some salience amongst them.

The situation of Azerbaijan's Lezgi community is somewhat more complex. Lezgis inhabit the country's northeastern areas along the borders with Russia: according to some estimates, this community comprises as many as 300,000 people. At the beginning of the 1990s, Lezgis formed a political organization, called Sadval (Unity), which advocated the secession of Lezgi areas from Azerbaijan, and its incorporation into Russia's Dagestan, or else the creation of an independent Lezgi state called Lezgistan.¹⁷ In 1994, terrorist attacks carried out in a Baku subway claimed the lives of 27 people. According to Azerbaijani investigators, Armenian secret services were behind the attacks, which were formally attributed to Sadval. Additionally, the Russian authorities seem to have provided Sadval with a certain degree of support, which was withdrawn once Aliyev came to power in Baku. As described in Chapter 5, Sadval's headquarters in Dagestan was closed down in 1993, by way of a friendly gesture, and the organization's representatives faced dismissal. As Moscow strategists entertained hopes of achieving their goals in Azerbaijan, the Lezgi card was not played by them for the time being, as a tool to exert pressure on Baku. Again, lack of external support eventually proved essential in keeping Lezgi irredentism at bay.¹⁸ In fact, it appears that the assumption that *autonomy* in itself caused secessionism in the South Caucasus lacks robust evidential support: because an entire range of factors were at work during the

conflict onset phase, clear causal relationships between independent and dependent variables are difficult to establish. Importantly, both the Lezgi and Avar communities lacked local ethnic elites and also an awareness of concrete borders defining what should be regarded as their ethnic homeland within Azerbaijan's northern areas. Therefore, I would argue that the possession of discrete political-administrative territorial entities, and of ethnic elites experienced in policing these entities, strengthens the in-group cohesion of a given ethnic minority: which may then itself prove essential for the process of politically organizing ethnic kin and of prompting collective action – thereby increasing the probability of ethnic rebellion. Hence, *external support* for secessionist movements seems to have been one of the major drivers of ethnopolitical conflict across the region: this factor is explained in further detail below.

External support of secessionist movements

The issue of external influence remains largely underestimated within the field of contemporary civil war and ethnopolitical conflict research. Yet, all of the cases of ethnopolitical conflict in the South Caucasus dealt with here illustrate that *external support to secessionist movements* proved crucial – either for the onset phase of ethnopolitical conflict, its escalatory phase, or both. Indeed, of the three regional ethnic wars, in at least two cases – those of Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia – attributes of international conflict were clearly identifiable. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Armenia and Azerbaijan found themselves in the situation of war, followed shortly by Georgia and Russia.

Aside from this, it was the elites of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, not those of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, who first vocalized the issue of the autonomy's possible secession from Azerbaijan. Significantly, the Karabakh Committee (comprising influential members of the Armenia-based Armenian intelligentsia) was established earlier than the Krunk Committee, a similar organization gathering together Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians. The Armenia-based Karabakh Committee – not Krunk – proved to be the ideological flagship of Nagorno-Karabakh secessionism, spreading its activities across Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Armenian communities in Russia and abroad. Moreover, as the armed conflict escalated in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, local Armenian armed forces relied heavily on the Armenian Republic's recruits and military and financial capabilities, which from time to time were boosted by military and fuel supplies provided by various Russian authorities.

Similarly, as described above, in both cases of Georgia's internal conflicts, the *Russian* authorities emerged as full-fledged participants, providing at least partial, and occasionally considerable, political, economic, and military support to the South Ossetian and, especially, Abkhaz separatists. If the formal threshold of a thousand battlefield deaths per annum is adopted to define a state of civil war, then it is unlikely that either the South Ossetian or Abkhaz conflicts would, in fact, have escalated into true civil wars had there been no military or logistical relief emanating from Russia; in all probability, these conflicts would have remained in their low-scale phases, being identified rather as ethnic riots and the like. This is especially true with respect to the Abkhazia conflict, in which the initial assault carried out by Georgian armed forces in the summer months of 1992 proved sufficient to occupy the major part of the autonomy; it was not until the advent of massive Russian-backed support for the separatists, in late 1992, that Abkhaz military forces returned to the battlefield and eventually managed to reverse the course of the war.¹⁹

Power asymmetry-related opportunity, institutionalization of violence, and path to ethnic civil war

Additionally, this book has shown that it was not the level or scope of the *grievance* to which members of a given ethnic minority thought they had been subjected (i.e., grievances such as social discrimination) that necessarily prompted dissidents to mobilize and take collective action in an attempt to achieve secession: as mentioned above, social inequality is always relative, and its perceptions are subjective. For instance, although the ethnocultural rights of Georgia's Azerbaijani or Armenian communities, or those of Azerbaijan's Talysh, Avar, and Lezgi communities, were respected to a considerably lesser degree than those of the Abkhazians (who enjoyed the status of autonomous republic), it was the *Abkhazians* who leaned toward secessionism (even though they already had an autonomous republic). The greed argument also fails to adequately explain the region's ethnic conflicts: the opportunity to loot and/or attain material wealth appears to have played no role in motivating the secessionism of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, the South Ossetians, or the Abkhazians. Hence, I disagree with the argument that the desire to rebel is conditioned by economic factors: in many instances of civil war or ethnic conflict, (*irrational*) arguments of ethnic hierarchy or status, or of fear and the need for self-defense, or of retaliation and survival, in fact prevailed.

Indeed, the actual level of grievance is of less importance than the vision of perceived gain when a rebellion is started at a favorable time and place – that is to say, the factor of opportunity. In this regard, two findings are of importance. First, as outlined in the periodization scheme of conflict escalation and illustrated in the empirical chapters of the present book, the path from phase A (latent conflict) to Phase B (sporadic violence) is usually spontaneous, as it is triggered by the incidence of interethnic bloodshed, which in turn contributes to the overall radicalization of the ethnic communities in conflict. In Armenia, for instance, it was the pogroms of Sumgait, which took place in February 1988, that fostered the requisite sense of ethnic solidarity and which prompted the desire for active mobilization against a “treacherous” enemy – all driven now by fears of a “second genocide.” A few days before the Sumgait event, two ethnic Azerbaijanis were murdered by Armenians during a quarrel. This event was the first to be reported by the local media, and it quickly gained salience amongst Azerbaijanis, first in Nagorno-Karabakh and then across the country. A series of violent clashes which soon followed further radicalized both Azerbaijanis and Armenians, marking the shift of the conflict from its latent phase to the phase of sporadic violence. In the case of the Georgian conflict, the killing of at least 15 ethnic Georgians by local Abkhazians during the Sukhumi riots of July 1989 marked the gradual transformation of the latent conflict into the phase of sporadic violence, even though minority Abkhazians generally had tended to keep a low profile until the massive Georgian invasion that followed three years later. Similarly, an awareness of Georgian demographic and military superiority certainly played a role in the initial phase of (latent) conflict as South Ossetians generally sought to avoid violent confrontation with the Georgians. In fact, the first incidence of (reported) interethnic bloodshed occurred during the course of the march on Tskhinvali, which then triggered subsequent intercommunal fighting in nearby areas – thereby shifting the conflict to the phase of sporadic violence.

Second, these case studies of South Caucasian conflicts have illustrated that, unlike the initial – and largely spontaneous – phases of sporadic violence, civil war is an outcome of a conscious decision on the part of agents of violence, local ethnic leadership to make use of what they deem to be an opportunity to either eliminate the embryo secessionist rebellion completely, or – in the case of ethnic separatists or irredentists – to effectively achieve secession. In both cases, civil war stems from a calculation of relative power asymmetry: that is, the perceived strength of the

in-group and the weakness of the out-group, where a favorable political constellation and/or external support that would make the secessionist movement viable, play a crucial role. Indeed, whereas the situation of latent conflict endured in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia until well into the second half of the 1980s, it was the events of cognitively significant bloodshed which finally triggered these conflicts. This, as mentioned above, shifted them first to the phase of sporadic violence, which in turn heightened ethnic polarization, and consequently intensified the sense of security dilemma amongst the members of each ethnic community with respect to their ethnic opponents. To put it another way, the path from ethnic riot to civil war leads through the institutionalization of violence, which is carried out by local elites. In order to maintain a sustainably large-scale armed conflict, a certain degree of centralization allowing for social mobilization, recruitment, military command, and financial, political, and logistic support is necessary, both on the side of insurgents and that of the regime.

In fact, it was in the aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet state that the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh escalated into a large-scale war in the winter of 1992. Similarly, the Georgians launched a concentrated assault in Abkhazia in August 1992, less than eight months after the dissolution of the U.S.S.R.²⁰ In the same manner, perhaps the most concentrated Georgian assault on Tskhinvali, with the massive use of artillery, took place in the middle of 1992.²¹ Interestingly, in both cases Armenians and Georgians proved instrumental in exploiting the window of opportunity provided by the collapse of the Soviet state. Being aware of their military and organizational superiority, the Armenians seemingly deliberately chose this point to carry out a massive preventive strike on Azerbaijani strongholds, occupying the strategically located town of Shusha and the Lachin corridor. Similar arguments appear to have induced the Georgian assault on Abkhazia, as Georgian military commanders were well aware of the Abkhazians' relative weakness at the time; and so in carrying out a preventive strike, the Georgians apparently sought to occupy the autonomy's territory within a short period, thus preventing Moscow from using the Abkhazia issue as a tool in its negotiations with Tbilisi – a fact evidenced by the use of the South Ossetia conflict by certain high-ranking Russian officials in order to exert pressure on Tbilisi.²² In all these cases, the efforts were fundamentally driven by the anarchic situation prevailing during the initial post-Soviet period, in which widespread security anxieties and the desire for self-protection – coupled with the sudden perception

of opportunity – prevailed in the strategic thinking of Georgian and Armenian political and military leaders.

Obviously, once the proposition is accepted that the path to civil war leads through the institutionalization of violence, whereby the perception of a window of opportunity then plays a pivotal role in motivating one of the actors of violence to strike first and so precipitating armed conflict, then one must attempt to define the very notion of opportunity. In fact, the perception, in practice, of what constitutes opportunity may vary significantly: the conscious decision to launch a military attack, based on the notion of opportunity, will reflect a wide array of necessarily subjective judgments as regards one's adversary's weaknesses and strengths as well as one's own, – and also a host of other factors pertinent both to domestic and external policy (along with behavioral categories such as personal prejudices, fears, preferences, cultural norms, group dynamics, risk perceptions, and so forth.)

Thus, a decision which seemingly is being taken on rational grounds, may well in fact be the outcome of *miscalculation*: hence, purely rationalist game theory based models may well fail when it comes to scholarly attempts to define – and/or anticipate – a civil war initiation. Kitovani's and Ioseliani's assault on Abkhazia may have not occurred at all had they reckoned in advance that Abkhaz forces would have been heavily supported by the Russian authorities, and had they possessed the information that Ardzinba-led Abkhaz elites enjoyed close ties with Russian army and secret service officials.

Again, ethnic civil war seems to be but one possible outcome – and not necessarily a predictable one – of a variety of possible outcomes resulting from contentious interrelations between state and ethnic dissent: but ethnic civil war is by no means the only possible outcome.