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The Conflict Over Abkhazia—The Interaction of Georgian-Abkhazian Nationalisms

The Role of Institutions and Institutional Actors in the Post-Soviet Developments: 1989-2010

Summary

The study reflects on the peculiar role of institutions and institutional actors in the conflict over Abkhazia from the late 1980s until the Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence after the August War of 2008. It examines the post-Soviet developments through a wider prism of the institutional account. The research explores the internal institutions inherited from Soviet times as the main factors contributing to the crystallization of the conflict. The investigation does not follow traditional chronological descriptions, but analyzes the processes and offers problem-based narration. The research demonstrates that the post-Soviet Georgian and Abkhazian national projects were supported politically, economically and culturally through Soviet-era institutional policies and structural creations. In this respect, the study probes the problem throughout a range of regional, Soviet-inherited institutions (constitutions, supreme soviets, various economic and political decrees), which determined the path-dependence of the conflict.

The following questions are investigated in this study: 1) Which institutions were involved in the flare up and maintenance of the confrontation over Abkhazia?; 2) Through which institutional means did the political and cultural elite contribute to the build-up and maintenance of the conflicting relations?; and 3) In what ways do the political, economic and cultural factors correlate to the build-up and maintenance of the conflict over Abkhazia? In terms of exploring the institutional matrix of the post-Soviet conflict over Abkhazia, the following aspects were analyzed: Constitutions, educational issues, referendum(s), economic sector and military structures.

The main research hypotheses (RH) are broken down into 4 small, interrelated topics: RH 1: Different levels of state-run institutional subordination made the conflict between them inevitable; RH 2: Soviet-era institutions were the cornerstones through which the propaganda of inter-ethnic differences and irreconcilable identities were launched; RH 3: Soviet-era inherited institutions included some competing institutionalized identities and group belongings which were sparked by the policies of Glasnost and Perestroika on the one hand, and overshadowed with the genie of the post-Soviet [majority-minority] nationalisms, on the other hand.

The method of process tracing was chosen as the research methodology, i.e., the reconstruction of Abkhazia's developments from the late 80s to the early 90s of the 20th century in order to uncover the core aspects of its post-Soviet developments. This task was fulfilled through two actions. Firstly, the content analysis of those official documents that were signed regarding the conflicted region from 1989-1993. Secondly, the analysis of core newspapers from the late 80s and early 90s: Sakhartvelos Respublika, Afkhazetis Khma, Communisti.

Theoretically, the institutionalism was addressed as an appropriate development—that which occurs is influenced by institutional structures. It was crucial to deconstruct the

role of communism's institutions and reconstruct their impact on the politics of identity under post-communism.

The study scrutinizes the Georgian and Abkhazian conflict resolution projects of the early 1990s and the early 2000s and explores their main elements. The two discourses of the conflict were portrayed: Discourse on the conflict from Tbilisi: Tbilisi/Sokhumi vs. Gudauta grounded elite units of the Abkhazian ASSR, headed by Vladimer Ardzinba; and discourse on the conflict from Moscow: Clash between Georgians and Abkhazians (formula – Tbilisi vs. Sokhumi). The research comes to the conclusion that the main deficiency and failures of those projects stemmed from the divergent interpretation of future institutional relations between the two ethnic groups and the exclusion of the possibility for creating a joint institutional space for future inter-ethnic relations. In terms of the pre- and post-August War developments, the present study claims that the satisfactory integration of the Russian Federation in any peace plan is a necessary precondition for the regulation of the conflict over Abkhazia.

The study concludes that the attachment of Georgians and Abkhazians with their polities, and the possibility of the diverse interpretations of the soviet-era mutual subjugation of these state-type institutions, made the conflict inevitable. Meanwhile, the institutional exploration of post-Soviet developments over Abkhazia in general, and its conflicting manifestation in particular, should be broadly contextualized within the Soviet nationality policies of the 20s and 30s of the 20th century. The study argues that the overcoming of Soviet institutionally-inherited legacies is the number one problem, although it is also demonstrated that the re-institutionalization of Georgian-Abkhazian relations requires the re-modeling of relations between external actors in the wider geopolitical space. It also asserts that the flexibility of institutional solutions creates some hope for the re-negotiation of the inter-ethnic political relations between Georgians and Abkhazians.

In summation, the conflict over the Abkhazia was institutionally built, constrained and developed; elites were entangled within multiple institutions, i.e., they were institutionalized actors. Soviet contextualization of these institutions is necessary and the solution of the conflict should ground the possibility for creating a new type interaction through the new, neutral [political, cultural and economic], institutions. The involvement of the external state level institution(s) remains the main problem in the implementation of the conflict resolution project(s), whereas the containment of the recognition process of occupied territories and the provision of international support for the implementation of the conflict resolution project should be the main concern for the central authorities of Georgia at its current phase, that is, after the Russian-Georgian August War of 2008.