

An Introduction to Breakaway Regions of the Former Soviet Union

By Fiona Allison



When the Soviet Union began to collapse in 1989 many of its satellite countries found themselves in an unfamiliar position of independence. Most had previously been part of the Tsarist Russian Empire, and had enjoyed a brief respite from dominance during the chaos of the Bolshevik Revolution. By the early 1920s, however, most were back under Russian rule. During the Second World War as Nazi Germany advanced east, some countries came under Nazi control for a short period of time. By the war's end Stalin had gained control of a huge part of Europe, creating the vast Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. After years of domination, when the independence that these countries strived for actually came, they struggled with the transition and the rapidness of the change. The separatist activity in former Soviet states can be attributed to ethnicity, cultural identity and nationalism. Rising nationalism was one of the many factors instrumental in the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, ethnic minorities – both sub-national and ethnic Russian – feared for their future status in these nationalistic fledgling states and tensions quickly rose. Under Soviet rule, local cultures had been repressed in favour of Russian cultures, while people were encouraged to speak Russian over their native tongue. This explains why the question of language became such a symbolic factor in the push for independence. An additional factor in the rise of tensions was that every Soviet state had a percentage of ethnic Russians inhabitants who suddenly found themselves in newly independent, nationalist states that were keen to dispose of most things “Soviet.” For example in the 1989 census 30 percent of Estonia's, 22 percent of Ukraine's and 34 percent of Latvia's populations were ethnic Russian.¹

This Discovery Guide focuses on two former Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs), Georgia and Moldova, and the problems they have had with ethnic minorities and separatist activity. This Guide does not discuss the recent conflict in Georgia, but gives the background and history of its breakaway regions to aid understanding of the conflict and the possibility of future conflicts. Although several countries in the former Soviet Union have had territorial disputes and clashes with their ethnic minorities this Guide concentrates on two case studies that illuminate the larger situation.



A man pulls a cow in front of an Abkhaz tank in the remote Kodori Gorge of Georgia's breakaway Abkhazia region outside the town of Chkhalt'a on August 14, 2008. Viktor Drachev/AFP/Getty Images

¹ *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*. 1993 Eds. Ian Bremner and Ray Tarras. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia



Georgia has two breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which have proved difficult for the tiny state, with a population of just over 4.5 million, to cope with.² During the twentieth century sporadic outbreaks of serious violence between the ethnic groups and the Georgians had occurred in these two regions. The origins of the Abkhazian people are unknown, although the Abkhaz language is a Caucasian one.

Their religion makes it hard to place their origins because some are Eastern Orthodox and others are Sunni Muslim. The Ossetians are an Iranian people although they are mainly Christian. The national language is known as Ossetic but virtually all Ossetians speak Russian. When Georgia briefly gained independence from Tsarist Russia in the confusion of the Russian revolution, the ethnic minorities were given special status and Abkhazia was granted autonomy. However, faced with Bolshevik rule, Georgian nationalism grew and the minorities once again were threatened. The Russian Bolsheviks easily exploited the tense situation in Georgia, associating the national Georgian government with the rival Mensheviks. Between the years 1918-1920 a number of bloody uprisings occurred in South Ossetia between the Ossetians and the Georgian National Guard. The Russian Bolsheviks supported the Ossetian separatists. During these battles it is estimated that approximately 5,000 people were killed. Controversy remains over the conflict, as Ossetians claim that Georgia was pursuing a strategy of ethnic cleansing in the Ossetia region, an accusation Georgia stringently denies. By 1921 the Ossetians were aiding the Red Army, which was advancing into Georgia to reincorporate the country back in to Russian domain. Although Ossetia was granted Autonomous Region status and Abkhazia became an Autonomous Republic, policies were put in place by the Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, Lavrentii Beria, to “Georgianise” the residents; for example, all ethnic language schools were closed down in the regions, thus fuelling further anger amongst the minorities. This was at a time when other SSR’s were having their language and alphabets “Cyrillicized.”

² CIA – The World Fact Book – Georgia; CIA last updated November 2008.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gg.html>



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Ossetia

Throughout the Cold War ethnic relations in Georgia remained fragile, but it was at the collapse of the Soviet Union that they deteriorated. The ethnic minorities in Georgia were becoming more alienated as Georgian nationalism grew at the prospect of independence and the end of Russian dominance. The abolition of the South Ossetian autonomous region by the Georgian government in December 1990 was justified by the Ossetians' "settler status." The Georgian government asserted that Ossetians only began to arrive in Georgia in the nineteenth century and that they were illegally granted an autonomous region

by the Bolsheviks in 1922 as a reward for their anti-Georgian activity during the civil war of 1918-1921. In 1990 the Georgian President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, called on South Ossetians to return to their "real" homeland in neighbouring North Ossetia in Russia.³ Little evidence supported the claim that South Ossetians didn't belong in Georgia, which appeared to be a move to further quash any minority rights. There were several sporadic outbreaks of violence between Ossetians and Georgian authorities that year, and in 1991 these tensions escalated into a war lasting until 1992, leaving an estimated 3,000 people dead with many more injured and displaced.

As South Ossetia has turned increasingly towards its counterpart North Ossetia in Russia for support, Georgia has turned to the West. This has intensified since the 2003 election of President Mikhail Saakashvili, who has sought to forge closer ties with the United States and NATO. President Saakashvili has been outspoken and clear in his determination that Abkhazia and South Ossetia will always remain part of Georgia and their independence will never be granted nor recognised. Georgia has had its military budget boosted by funds from the United States and its military has been trained by US forces, which has greatly concerned the minorities. The two world powers thus have a stake in Georgia: with Russian support for South Ossetia against Western support for Georgia, there is a distinct risk that a relatively small disputed territory will fuel international political conflict. Currently it is doubtful that the South Ossetian issue will be resolved any time soon. It has been an area of conflict for over a century and for the foreseeable future that seems unlikely to change.



Zviad Gamsakhurdia, First President of the Republic of Georgia in the post-Soviet era
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zviad_Gamsakhurdia

³ *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*. 1993 Eds. Ian Bremner and Ray Tarras. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abkhazia>

Abkhazia, too, has seen its share of violence with the ethnic Abkhaz pitted against the Georgians. Although Abkhazia had been granted autonomy status in 1931, Georgian was made the official language of the region in the 1930s, and many Georgians were resettled there to dilute the Abkhaz population, although this only increased tensions. Because of these measures, by 1991 only a fifth of the population of Abkhazia were ethnic Abkhaz, the remainder being made up mostly by Georgians.⁴ During 1992 and 1993

conflict between the two was particularly brutal, and this time Georgian forces accused the Abkhazians of genocide against the Georgian population. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) officially declared that the Abkhazian forces and their allies pursued a strategy of ethnic cleansing. In many conflicts however, atrocities were committed by both sides. The Abkhazians were supported by large numbers of volunteers from Chechnya and the North Caucasus. Georgia claims that Russia also lent its support to Abkhazia, another factor which is disputed today. During this brief but horrific conflict tens of thousands of people were killed and around a quarter of a million Georgians fled from Abkhazia, of whom a significant number perished in the difficult terrain and cold weather.



The OSCE Mission to Georgia's unarmed Military Monitors in the Georgian-Abkhaz area
<http://www.osce.org/georgia/16289.html>

Abkhazia adopted its own constitution in 1994 and declared independence officially in 1999, although this has not been recognised by any other country, which has made its declaration effectively meaningless. United Nations and Russian peacekeepers remain in the area, although the peace is a fragile one with sporadic shootings and kidnappings. There seems to be no end in sight to this situation as Abkhazia has also turned towards Moscow for support, while Georgia has vowed to never recognise the region as independent. Another stalemate has been reached.

⁴ BBC News, World, Europe, Regions and Territories: Abkhazia; BBC News. June 2008.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pt/fr/-/1/hi/world/europe/3261059.stm>

Moldova and Transdniestr

Another breakaway region in the former Soviet Union, which has also not been recognised internationally, is the Transdniestr area of Moldova. Moldova is different from other states in that it was never an independent country before the Soviet Union but was a principality of



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moldova>

Romania. Part of Moldova as it is today used to belong to the historic regions of Bukovina and Bessarabia, the latter of which was occupied by both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany during the Second World War. In the post war period Stalin created the Moldovan SSR using 70 percent of Bessarabia, with the remainder of the region contributing to form the Ukraine SSR. There have been disputes since over a small area of land which used to be a part of Ukraine but was incorporated into Moldova. Therefore when Moldova declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 it was at first only recognised by Romania, Lithuania, Georgia and Armenia, and not Ukraine. Moldova's problem with the

Transdniestr area, so called because it is on one side of the Dniestr River, began with the implementation of a new language law. As with Georgia, the question of language was an important one for Moldova - as under Soviet rule, Moscow had been adamant that Moldovan was a separate language from Romanian and instead implemented the use of Russian, despite the fact that the Moldovan language is virtually the same as Romanian. Russian was made the official language in Moldova to exert Soviet authority, as neighbouring Romania was pursuing policies independent to those of the Soviet Union. In August 1989 Moldova became the first Soviet republic to declare the language of the indigenous people, Romanian, to be the official language.⁵ However, according to the 1989 census Moldovans accounted for only 64 percent of the population, the remainder including 14 percent Ukrainian and 13 percent Russian.⁶ The language law provoked disquiet among the minorities, many of whom didn't even speak Moldovan. What alienated the minorities further was that when Moldova did first declare independence, some groups wanted reunification with Romania, although that idea has since dissipated. Once a draft of the new language law was published Moldovan nationalism was fervent, as the republic could regain its national identity. The draft law stipulated a return to Latin script from Cyrillic, and it declared Moldovan and Romanian were one and the same language. This further angered the minorities, whose main language was Russian, in the Dniestr area, who feared for their rights and future in a state that was gripped by nationalism. The Ukrainians in the Transdniestr area were highly Russified and so had common cause with the Russians there. Joined together they made up a large minority group, 27% of the population. In 1990 the group declared the Transdniestr area a republic independent of Moldova, and at-

⁵ *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*. 1993 Eds. Ian Bremner and Ray Tarras. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

⁶ *Ibid.*

tempted to forge close ties with Moscow. Immediately the Moldovan government declared the move illegal. The region remained unmoved by this and announced it was to hold its own parliamentary elections.



The Transdniestr flag includes a communist hammer & sickle on one side
<http://flagspot.net/flags/md-dnies.html>

Before the Russians and Ukrainians announced their secession another group in Moldova had already declared their own independent region. Although only making up 4 percent of the population in 1989, the Gagauz minority was a very determined one. The Gagauz are an Orthodox Christian, Turkic-speaking people, although their exact origin and when they arrived in Moldova is unknown. For the Gagauz too, the reason for their separatism was the language law, for those that were bilingual; their second language was Russian, not Moldovan, and they felt particularly excluded from the new Moldova. The Gagauz announced their breakaway in August 1990, a move that the Moldovan government immediately denounced. Despite this and the fact that their independence movement, Gagauzi Khalk, was outlawed, the Gagauz went ahead in planning their own elections. In 1991, when Moldova held its first independent presidential elections, the Transdniestr and Gagauzi separatists not only refused to participate but held their own elections a week earlier on December 1st. Moldova experienced unrest with its minorities although not on the same scale as Georgia and mainly with ethnic Russians. In addition there were industrial disputes as the Transdniestr area contains the majority of Moldova's heavy industry. Because Transdniestr has created its own economy, bank and currency, this has left Moldova without the industries previously based there. On the other hand Transdniestr is impoverished because of its international isolation. These disputes have drastically affected Moldova's economy and the country remains one of the poorest in Europe. Sporadic violence occurred, especially after a Russian killed a young Moldovan during an argument over the new state flag. His funeral became an excuse for a nationalist rally. As the Moldovans became increasingly nationalist and anti-Soviet, the ethnic minorities became more anti-Moldovan and pro-Soviet, causing a deep ideological rift in the republic. The violence escalated between Moldova and Transdniestr in March 1992, on the very same day that Moldova was granted membership to the United Nations, a sign that its independence had now been recognised internationally. The killing of a Dniestr militia man - allegedly by Moldovan police forces - was the spark that inflamed the conflict along the banks of the Dniestr River. The small Moldovan forces were outnumbered by the Transdniestr forces who were boosted by Cossack volunteers and had arms supplied by the Russians, although it is disputed whether Russian troops took part in the conflict. Moldova was assisted by supplies from Romania. It took four months and the deaths of an estimated 700-1,000 people before a ceasefire agreement was reached. The towns of Transdniestr were left in ruins. The ceasefire agreement was reached with the provision that peacekeepers, mainly Russian but also from the UN, remain in the area to retain the fragile peace, and they are still stationed there. The non-recognition of

the Transdniestr region has not stopped it from creating a state flag, as well as its own parliament, president and currency. The Transdniestr region is full of Soviet-era regalia, the Hammer and Sickle is on the state flag and a statue of Lenin stands outside the parliament building. Transdniestr still appeals to be made a part of Russia. As with Georgia there does not appear to be an easy solution to the situation in Moldova, as Transdniestr will never give up its fight for independence and Moldova will never recognise it.

The collapse of the Soviet Union showed how important ethnicity and national identity are to people. A crucial factor is that Georgia and Moldova had little if any; independence in the past, their own cultures and language had been suppressed for so long under Russian hegemony that when they were independent they embraced nationalism in a vehement manner. The people of countries like Georgia and Moldova had been a minority group themselves within the entire Soviet Union and felt they needed to protect their own rights above those of the ethnic minorities.



A woman and her daughter laying flowers at one of the common graves in the small Transnistrian city of Bendery during a memorial ceremony, June 19, 2008

Vadim Denisov/AFP/Getty Images

Currently there appears to be no way to resolve the problem of the breakaway regions as neither side is willing to step down. As long as Georgia and Moldova refuse to acknowledge their respective separatist regions, and while Russia aids or encourages separatism, the separatists will be determined as ever to gain recognition. It seems unlikely the regions will maintain their fragile peace, despite the UN presence. However, whilst former Soviet States look towards the West for economic and military support, it is likely the breakaway regions will lean further towards Russia, signalling further political and possibly military conflict.