



Mass demonstration and civil encounter in the street of Tbilisi, 1991. From the collection of Ani Gagua

GEORGIA

by Irakli Khvadagiani

Different realities on the periphery of the USSR

After Gorbachev announced “Perestroika” Georgian society changed profoundly. Key elements of these changes were a rapidly developing economic crisis and deficit in everyday life, political amnesty which allowed political prisoners, already legendary leaders of Anti-Soviet groups, to return home, as well as the urgent escalation of national/ethnic hate in nationally diverse areas, particularly in Abkhazia.

Georgia’s position on the periphery of the USSR had meant that everyday social and economic realities differed vastly from those within the more centralized republics of the USSR. Corruption was extremely dominant in the Soviet state and communist party system, and this, combined with the mass robbery of State goods, clan networks, symbiosis of Party, underground economy and criminal elites, and exclusive ethnic nationalist sentiments drilled in through education and culture as a tool of ensuring loyalty to the regime, created a very complex everyday reality. The disproportion of wealth between cities and rural areas, particularly the non-official privileges of the urban social elites, the ease with which “intelligentsia” state security and police members and underground “kings” could break the law and become incorporated in corruption network, meant that the urban populations could enjoy marginally more freedoms, even though this was a fragile comfort at best and unsustainable at worst.

Ethnic diversity and the critical situation of minorities in the late USSR

At the end of the 1980s, around 55% of the 5,4 million population was living in cities and 45 % in rural areas. The main national groups were Georgians, Armenians, Russians, Azerbaijanis, Ossetians, Greeks, Abkhazians, Ukrainians, and Jews. On its territory two Autonomous Soviet Republics were located – the Abkhazian ASSR and Adjarian ASSR – as well as one autonomous district of South Ossetia. According to the communist ideology and totalitarian system, other than ethnic minorities, official identification of other minorities was troublesome – the state was officially atheistic, gender and sexual diversity was punishable, society and healthcare system was oppressive towards people with disabilities, and the dominant ideology blocked any attempts at creativity that deviated from the official framework. As a heritage of Stalin’s approach, all “tra

ditional” religious institutions since 1943 were openly controlled and administered by the Soviet state, parallel to wide infiltration by the KGB. The regime was forcing religious institutions to take part in Soviet foreign propaganda campaigns, calling for the “World Peace” offered by Communist rule.

The first protests in 1988 and inter-ethnic tensions



TV Broadcast during the protest demonstration in Tbilisi 1991.
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From 1988, the first non-sanctioned anti-Soviet demonstrations emerged in Georgia. Initially, the protest movement was focused on confronting several giant infrastructure projects (the magisterial railway, the giant dams), and on protecting the cultural heritage. Concerns around ecologic issues were intensified by the variety of global man-made catastrophes, like the Chernobyl explosion, or local natural disasters: snow and flood in the Svaneti mountains and huge landslides in Adjara mountains, meant lot of locals became ecological refugees, so the Communist authorities displaced them in Southern Georgia, areas dominated by the Armenian and Azeri minorities, which fueled continuous tension between them over the following years.

At the end of 1988, a wave of mass protest against the reforms of the Soviet constitution, which was considered a means of blocking the union republics from leaving the Soviet Union officially, swept over the country. At the same time ethnic tensions worsened irreversibly in Abkhazia, “South Ossetia”, and the Lower Kartli region, over the question of self-determination of parts of the population there on the one hand and independence of the Georgian state from the USSR on the other hand. In April 1989, this ultimately led to mass demonstrations emerging in Tbilisi. The local communist authority, fearing the demand for Georgian independence, called Moscow to interfere and the USSR army and special units suppressed the peaceful demonstrations on the night of April 9th, 1989 by using chemical weapons against civilians.



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At the same time, tensions in ethnically diverse regions were deepening into disintegration and confrontation. Extreme nationalist rhetoric from all sides meant that ethnic and religious minorities (Russians, Ossetians, Jews, Armenians, Estonians etc.) either started to flee from the areas of ethnic tension or later were unofficially forced to leave.

Street demonstration in Tbilisi at the end of the 1980s.
From the collection of Ani Gagua.

Re-establishing an independent Georgia in 1991



Street demonstration in Tbilisi at the end of the 1980s. From the collection of Ani Gagua.

In the first multiparty elections in October 1990, the opposition block led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, won the majority. The Supreme council organized a referendum on independence on March 31st in 1991 and an overwhelming majority voted for re-establishing the independence of Georgia, which was then declared on April 9 1991. After winning the presidential election Gamsakhurdia was faced with the challenge to reanimate a collapsing state apparatus and to deal with complex internal and foreign hindrances, having only resources available. The Kremlin backed local paramilitary and criminal groups, and opposition parties launched an attack on the Government's house on 22nd December 1991. Zviad Gamsakhu-

rdia was forced to leave Georgia. The official dissolution of USSR Georgia spiraled into with complete disintegration and the emergence of ethnic wars, which led the country to total disaster and what has been termed the so-called "Dark 1990".

Bloodshed and war in South-Ossetia and Abkhazia

At the beginning of 1992, Forces organized a coup d'état and declared themselves the "Military Council" made the former foreign minister of the USSR, Eduard Shevardnadze "head of State ". In 1992 according to an agreement between Shevardnadze and Boris Yeltsin, "peacekeeping troops" were placed in so-called "South Ossetia" and conflict started to be frozen. That same year, on August 14th, 1992, Georgian military units entered the Abkhazian autonomic republic, in order to prevent its secession from Georgia and suppress Gamsakhurdia's local supporters too. Armed clashes between Georgian units and Abkhazian paramilitaries, backed by Russian troops, lead to a year of bloodshed and fighting in Abkhazia. It ended September 1993 with the fall of the capital city - Sokhumi - fell. Hundreds and thousands of Georgians and other nationalities were forced to leave Abkhazia and thousands were killed or injured. The Abkhazian population suffered heavy losses during the war and the breakaway region was left in social and economic collapse.

The following collapse of political, civil institutions, the extraordinary authority of the criminal underworld, the dismantling of the economy, war, humanitarian and refugee crises shocked Georgian society. The majority of the population lost their savings due to hyperinflation and manipulation of state reserves. In 1995 the state finalized their campaign of "privatizing" former Soviet state property. Officially it was considered an opportunity to grant citizens a fair share of state wealth, but within the frame of economic collapse, war and criminal rule, the remaining state wealth ended up being absorbed instead by the minority: the elites associated with ruling political elites and the criminal underworld. Corruption, criminal rule, radicalism, poverty, and social depression became an everyday reality in Georgia.

A long road to rights for minorities

Ultimately, the 1990s made little positive change for those trapped in the vulnerable layers of society. As a result of societal collapse, the wars and failure of statehood, the scale and number of vulnerable groups increased to include the masses of internally displaced people, ecological migrants, and unemployed citizens, who had fallen victim to the failure of Soviet centralized industries. Together with ethnic, religious and sexual minorities they shared complex challenges: ignorance, aggression and isolation. Although an independent Georgia started in the 1990s to adopt legislation guaranteeing equality and social security of citizens, which included the country joining various international frameworks depending on the rights of minorities, in everyday life, the corrupted and failed state mostly wasn't able and not motivated to implement those values. The only progress in defending the rights of minorities, bringing their voices in mainstream public discourses, was associated with newly formed civil society organizations and the self-organized groups of minorities themselves.



Ruins of the Parliament and Government house after the coup d'état in Tbilisi 1992. From the collection of Ani Gagua.