

## Autonomy of Abkhazia and Democratic Republic of Georgia

### Introduction

The Georgian-Abkhazian conflict has many dimensions - political, economic, legal, historical, etc. Mostly Georgian and Abkhaz historians consider them only in a narrow nationalistic prism. For the Abkhaz side, the Democratic Republic of Georgia is perceived as an occupying force that repressed the Abkhaz Bolsheviks' struggle for the freedom of Abkhazia. Georgian historians believe that the Abkhaz National Council represented the wishes of the majority of the Abkhaz population, while the Bolsheviks simply pursued Moscow's interests.

Georgian and Abkhaz historians still argue about the period of the First Republic of Georgia - whether it was an occupation or a forced military campaign and about the legal solutions to the problem. All this has a direct connection with the modern period, because the statehood of both sides is legally shaped by the events of 1918-21. Georgian-Abkhaz history, since the Soviet period, was sharply politicized - history was used as a weapon. The aim of the Abkhaz or Georgian historian was not to find the truth, but to try to justify the national project of his own side. The Soviet Union collapsed 30 years ago, but both societies are still fueled by historical narratives that only damage future Georgian-Abkhaz relations, stir up enmity, and hinder the peaceful transformation of the conflict. In my paper, I will try to go beyond the narrow nationalistic narrative when discussing the events in Abkhazia in 1918-21 and analyze it in a broader historical context, specifically exploring its socio-political and security dimensions. I want to show that the actions of the Georgian side, from the beginning to the

end, were not necessarily motivated by the anti-Abkhaz sentiments as such, but by the calculations from the perspective of state security. Dire social conditions in the region; direct military intervention of Denikin's white army and Turks; created a fertile ground for the Bolsheviks, who periodically organized military uprisings and etc. Tiflis's policy, for the most part, was to centralize power in order to prevent it from falling into the hands of the enemy, which in itself created a conflict between the center and the local government. I will try to answer the following questions: what did autonomy mean for the Georgian Social Democrats? What did Abkhazia mean for Georgia's leaders? What were the social and political factors behind the process of defining the status of Abkhazia.

## Autonomy for Georgian Social Democrats

For the Georgian Social Democrats, the secession of Georgia from the Russian Empire has never been an end itself, because they were aware of how difficult it would be for a small and weak country to exist in a world dominated by colonial powers. Before the February revolution, Noe Zhordania and his associates advocated national (cultural) autonomy, but after revolution of 1917 they advocated political autonomy within a new Russian state. In this matter, they largely shared the ideas of the Austrian school in favor of national-territorial autonomy. While the Russian Social-Democrats rejected the idea of national and political autonomies in favor of local self-governance. Over time, Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDP) lost the Georgian wing, nevertheless, differences of positions regarding the subject matter remained among the Georgian Social Democrats, for example, Irakli Tsereteli and Karlo Chkheidze thought that national autonomy meant nationalism; Vladimer Darchiashvili and Ivane Gomarteli stood on the right - demanding autonomy under the cantons of the Caucasus. Akaki Chkhenkeli and Noe Zhordania were centrists, recognizing nationality as an expression of group self-consciousness that in no way excluded class interests.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Jones, *Socialism in Georgian colors*, p.289-290

After the Bolshevik Revolution and the collapse of the Russian Empire, Georgia joined Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR) and then declared independence on May 26, 1918. The February 1921 constitution passed by the Georgian social democratic led government states that all citizens of the state are equal, regardless of their ethnic or religious differences. Abkhazia, Adjara and Zakatala granted autonomy on ethnic and religious grounds.<sup>2</sup> Despite these progressive steps, situation was much more complex: the ongoing wars in the country, uprisings in various regions, the economic crisis and other factors, made the Georgian Social Democrats to partially deviate from their declared values and goals. In these circumstances government did not trust ethnic minorities and was dictating policies from the center, which partially ignored the wishes of local populations.<sup>3</sup>

## Abkhazian Autonomy

Shortly after the collapse of the Russian Empire, Abkhazians mobilized around the Abkhaz People's Council, which initially involved mostly the local nobility. The body initially represented the interests of the ethnically Abkhaz people and did not incorporate local people of other ethnicities (Russian, Georgian, Greeks, Armenians and etc.). The People's Council did not seek to unite with the larger Transcaucasian Federation, especially to Georgia. The leaders of the People's Council saw themselves as closer to the North Caucasus, in particular, to the Circassians as a "brotherly" ethnic group. In May 1917, Aleksander Shervashidze left for the North Caucasus, where he met with the representatives of the Republic of the Mountain Peoples of the North Caucasus. In October of the same year, Abkhazia officially joined the union.

On February 9, 1918, the Abkhaz People's Council (Alexander Shervashidze, Dimitry (Arzakan) Emukhvari, Nikoloz Margania, Colonel Raphael Tskotua and Ivane Tsaguria) visited

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<sup>2</sup> *Stephen Jones, Nation Minorities. P.2*

<sup>3</sup> *Stephen Jones, Nation Minorities, p.1*

Tiflis (Georgia) where they met with members of the Executive Committee of the Transcaucasian Commissariat, the National Council (Akaki Chkenkeli, Konstantine Meskhi, Giorgi Gvazava, Pavle Sakvarelidze, Nikoloz Kartsivadze). They discussed the future "good-neighborly" relations. The Abkhaz side considered itself an independent political entity from Georgia, while Tiflis, on the contrary, wanted Abkhazia to be part of a unified Georgia.<sup>4</sup> The status agreement was unsuccessful, but it was decided that universal free elections would be held in Abkhazia, and the elected People's Assembly would decide on the political status of Abkhazia. In return, the Georgian side recognized the area from Bzipi to Enguri as Abkhazia, thus not questioning the existence of Abkhazia as such.<sup>5</sup>

After the Bolshevik Revolution, Provisional government was overthrown - and soon a civil war broke out in the former Russian Empire. On the one side were the generals of the former Tsar, and on the other side the Bolsheviks. After the visit of the Abkhaz delegation to Tiflis Georgia), on February 21, 1918, Bolshevik uprising broke out in Sokhumi, which lasted for several days, which was ultimately suppressed by the Georgian People's Guard Troops. The similar events took place on April 8, 1918, this time Bolsheviks organized a bigger uprising - they gathered peasantry in Gagra, Gudauta and in Kodori and occupied Sokhumi. The situation was aggravated by the fact that part of the Abkhaz nobility was sympathetic to the Turks - They were afraid of losing feudal privileges, Turkey itself was interested in Abkhazia as a "road" to the North Caucasus.<sup>6</sup>

The Abkhaz People's Council was in a difficult position, on the one hand there was a chance of Turkish occupation, on the other hand a Bolshevik invasion. Abkhazia itself was economically very weak and could hardly resist either threat. Georgia was still interested in bringing Abkhazia under its jurisdiction - moreover, it was not satisfied with sending the Guard to an "equal territorial entity."<sup>7</sup> On June 11, 1918, after Georgia had become

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<sup>4</sup> *Cory Welt, A Fateful Moment: Ethnic Autonomy and Revolutionary Violence in the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921), 33.7*

<sup>5</sup> *Davit Matsaberidze, Conflict Confrontation of Georgian-Abkhazian Nationalisms in the Abkhazian Region in 1918-2012, p.84*

<sup>6</sup> *Papaskiri, Zurab. Essays on the Past of Modern Abkhazia, Plot II (1917-1993) 2007. p. 13*

<sup>7</sup> *Cory Welt, A Fateful Moment: Ethnic Autonomy and Revolutionary Violence in the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921), p.*

independent, another meeting was held between the representatives of the Republic of Georgia and the Abkhaz People's Council. An agreement was signed according to which the Minister of Abkhaz Affairs was appointed to the Government of Georgia on the recommendation of the Abkhaz People's Council; The Abkhaz People's Council was responsible for independent internal self-governance; credits and money were allocated from the budget of the Democratic Republic of Georgia according to Abkhaz needs; Georgia sent army units to Abkhazia, while assisting local authorities in equipping Abkhazian troops.<sup>8</sup>

With this agreement, Abkhazia *de facto* joined Georgia, the process of unification began, although the most important issue was security. In just five days after, another Bolshevik uprising broke out. On June 16, the Abkhaz People's Council appealed to General Mazniashvili and the Georgian authorities for help. As a result, the Georgian army, together with the local Abkhaz cavalry (about 400)<sup>9</sup>, launched a counterattack and ousted the enemy. On June 27, 1918, when the Georgian side launched an attack on the Bolsheviks, the Turks landed near Kodori, most of them were Abkhaz Muhajirs<sup>10</sup>. Tiflis appointed General Mazniashvili as a governor-general. In effect, this violated the June 11 agreement; moreover, despite the Abkhaz protests, Tiflis formally extended the general's mandate and expressed full support. This can be explained by the fact that Georgian Social-Democrats prioritized State security and not agreement with Abkhazians.

It is difficult to say whether the Abkhaz People's Council represented the interests of Abkhazs and more specifically, of Abkhaz peasants, but the fact is that its members mainly were Samurzakhanian<sup>11</sup> nobles (Shervashidze, Chkotua, Emukhvari, etc.). This suggests that their ethnic identification may not have been Abkhaz at all, as both Megrelians and Abkhazians have historically lived in the area. Decades later, during the Soviet Union, the identity of the

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<sup>8</sup> Papaskiri, Zurab. *Essays on the Past of Modern Abkhazia, Part II (1917-1993)* 2007, p.16

<sup>9</sup> NewsPapaer „Kavkaz“, N130, 1918/06/27.

<sup>10</sup> *Muhajir In Arabic means "exiled". after the defeat of the peoples of the Caucasus in 1864, the Russian government began to implement a previously devised plan - to expel the mountaineers from their homeland, especially on the east coast of the Black Sea. about 700 thousand Circassians, Ubykhs, Abkhazians, Chechens, Dagestanis and other mountaineers were forced to move to the Ottoman Empire. <http://www.nplg.gov.ge/gwdict/index.php?a=term&d=5&t=15454>*

<sup>11</sup> *Samurzakano is a historical region in southeastern Abkhazia, in western Georgia. It included the territory of the contemporary Gal district and part of Ochamchira district.*

Samurzakhanians was aligned with Megrelian identity, and the biggest part of the historical Samurzakhan was named Gali district.

Unlike Samurzakhan, in future Gudauta historically established as the center of Abkhazian nationalism, where the most important public gatherings took place. Gudauta district was also the main stronghold of the Bolsheviks, where they promised peasants land reform and gained support - including armed one. Abkhazia was a highly hierarchical society and most of the land was in the hands of the nobility, and the endless wars made the peasants even more intolerant. At the end of March 1917, in the village of Lykhni, a rally organized by the Bolsheviks gathered about 3,000 people - the assembly said that there should be no alliance with the feudal landowners as they owned many and the best lands, while the peasants had nothing at all. An agronomist Efimov said in his speech: "Your enemies are not trying to do something - they have already begun to act, they have elected a committee with which they want to rule us, and the committee has 4 landowners, one noble, and one I do not know who is at all ... I want to ask you, who participated in their election?" Similar rallies were held in Gagra, Kodori and Ochamchire.<sup>12</sup> Tiflis did not refuse to enact land reform in Abkhazia, but it was done very slow; added to this was the misbehavior of the Georgian army - looting was a common occurrence<sup>13</sup>. These reasons were enough for the part of the Abkhaz peasants to choose their own political position and support the Bolsheviks.

In early October 1918, members of the Abkhaz People's Council, including Raphael Chkhotua, were arrested on charges of plotting a coup and associating with General Alekseev and the Turks. Tiflis later completely dissolved the People's Council and appointed Benia Chkhikvishvili as the commissioner of the Sokhumi district, who was supposed to lead Council up until the elections. On December 27, 1918, the election statute of the People's Council of Abkhazia was issued, granting the right to vote to everyone, regardless of gender, nationality and religion.<sup>14</sup> On February 13, 1919, as a result of the election, 27 out of 40 seats were won

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<sup>12</sup> Georgii Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii, 1910 - 1921*, p.62-66

<sup>13</sup> letter from Aleksander Shervashidze, a representative of the Abkhaz People's Council, to the Abkhazian Minister of Foreign Affairs in Tbilisi, reads: "The burning of houses by the government forces, which is taking place in parallel with the military operation against the Turks, has no justification in the eyes of the people or the state. "Especially when they burn down houses and destroy the property of people who have nothing to do with the Turkish adventure." - Georgii Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii, 1910 - 1921*, pp.208 / 209

<sup>14</sup> Georgian National Historical Archive (GCHA), Fund 1836, Record: 1, Case 201, Folio 147

by the Social Democrats. Shortly before the election, Abkhaz Bolshevik prisoners were released for a convicted uprising. They were allowed to run in the Abkhaz People's Council elections, and several of them even became MPs.<sup>15</sup> The elections were held in Abkhazia amid the military intervention by the Denikin's Volunteer Army<sup>16</sup>.

On March 18, 1919, the first meeting of the People's Council was held. Arzakan (Dimitry) Emukhvari was elected as the chairman. In two days, the Council, Legal Act - at its meeting on March 20, 1919, decided: 1. Abkhazia is part of the Democratic Republic of Georgia as its autonomous unit, about which the Government of the Republic of Georgia and its Constituent Assembly shall be notified. 2. A Joint Commission shall be elected by the Constituent Assembly of Georgia and the People's Council of Abkhazia to prepare the Constitution of the Autonomous Abkhazia and to determine the relations between the central and autonomous authorities.<sup>17</sup> On March 21, 1919, the Constituent Assembly of the Republic of Georgia received the decision of the People's Council of Abkhazia on the status of autonomy. In a document signed by Alexandre Lomtadze, Deputy Chairman of the Constituent Assembly, the Constituent Assembly congratulated its Abkhaz colleagues on the decision.<sup>18</sup> Over time, the process of defining what autonomy implied begun<sup>19</sup> - the Abkhaz side demanded, that a final decision on autonomy, should be made based on a bilateral commission agreement that would include Georgians and Abkhazians – Tiflis rejected the request, the final decision had to be made only by the Constituent Assembly. On October 16, 1920, the Abkhaz delegation presented the first version of the Constitution, they demanded more than the central government wanted to concede, for example, tariff control, self-determination of administrative language, export and trade management, in particular for producers using Abkhazian raw materials - the delegation said that without a control over finances, Abkhazia's autonomy would be just a sham. The idea of dual citizenship (Abkhazian and Georgian) was also rejected. Sokhumi on the other hand, gave Tiflis the right to govern the army, financial

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<sup>15</sup> *Dzhemal Gamakharia, Ocherki iz istorii gruzii, p.470*

<sup>16</sup> *Russian Civil War in the military sense was fought on several fronts. The first White force (against Bolsheviks), known as the Volunteer Army, formed in the winter of 1917–18 in the southern areas inhabited by the Cossacks. Organized by Generals Mikhail Alekseyev and Kornilov, after their death it was taken over by General Anton Denikin. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Soviet-Union/Brest-Litovsk#ref277868>*

<sup>17</sup> *GCHA, Fund 1833, record 1, Case 863, Folio 44*

<sup>18</sup> *GCHA, Fund 1833, record 1, Case 52, Folio 7.*

<sup>19</sup> *Stephen Jones, National Minorities, p.12-14*

and monetary system, civil and criminal law, Post and telegraph. Despite many disagreements, both sides were close to reaching an agreement, however, Tiflis wanted to make a final decision on its own, without the Abkhaz side - as a result, the Abkhaz delegation left the city in protest and refused to cooperate in the future. The central government, continued to decide the fate of Abkhazia – although it tried to take account of the demands of the Abkhaz side and satisfy some part of it. Finally, on December 31, 1920, Tiflis granted Sokhumi the right to govern itself in the following areas: education, health care, local administration, the judiciary, and temporarily, the right to set its own taxes - moreover, land reform could be modified and introduced in Abkhazia. This was an important positive decision; however, it was made without the involvement of the other party. On February 21, 1921, Georgia adopted the Constitution, granting Abkhazia autonomy: Article 107 reads: “The integral parts of the Republic of Georgia - Abkhazia - Sokhumi District, Muslim Georgia (Batumi Province) and Zakatala District - are granted local autonomies. Afterwards, Article 108 reads: "The provisions of the autonomous governments referred to in the previous article will be drafted by a separate law."<sup>20</sup> Adoption of separate laws failed to define the rights and duties of the autonomy of Abkhazia. In exactly 4 days, on February 25, Soviet Russian Troops entered Tiflis.

## **Strategic Importance of Abkhazia**

The Democratic Republic of Georgia, despite its social-democratic ideology, was forced into the logic of state security. For the Georgian side, Abkhazia, due to its territorial location, was critical for the state security. Russia (both the White Movement and the Bolsheviks) embroiled in civil war had no access to Georgia other than through Abkhazia, and the security situation was even more complicated by the Turkish interests. The military situation at that time was very different from today - Russia had only three ways to invade Georgia. 1) Black Sea - The Black Sea was controlled by the Allied fleet (France-Britain) and they would not allow large-scale operations in it. 2) Dariali and Mamisoni Passes - Due to the mountainous terrain, the

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<sup>20</sup> *Constitution of Georgia 1921*. <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4801430?publication=0>

movement of large numbers of troops is difficult and allows for easy ambushes and sabotage.

3) Abkhazia - along the coast. It is also noteworthy that aviation at that time was not developed to the level that could carry out massive air bombardments or airborne operations. As we can see, the only effective way to invade Georgia was from Abkhazia. Indeed, Denikin's army of volunteers, who invaded from Abkhazia in 1919, occupied Sochi, Gagra and stood by the Bzipi River - a position that provided an excellent foundation for penetration into the depths of Georgia.<sup>21</sup> In April 1919, the Democratic Republic of Georgia launched an offensive in the direction of Gagra and recaptured the lost territories - standing by the Mekhadir River and fortifying it with military objects. For Georgia, Abkhazia was vital and was making all the efforts to preserve it. For the Bolsheviks, Georgia was interesting because of Batumi port, which was a kind of gateway to the Mediterranean sea. At first they were organizing internal military uprisings but after they have defeated Denikini's Volunteer army in caucasus They were given the opportunity for direct military intervention, which finally began on February 19, 1921.

Georgian side initially started speaking to the Abkhazian delegation as an equal political entity, but due to external and internal factors, attitudes changed and the idea of centralizing the government became dominant. Moreover, in 1920 Tiflis decides the fate of Abkhazia without their consent. There was no consensus on the issue of Abkhazian autonomy, for example Noe Zhordania was skeptical because he saw it as a potential threat to the integrity of Georgia.<sup>22</sup> The Georgian side was often "late" in the negotiations, giving remarks and, most importantly, rejecting the proposals of the other side, as a result, the degree of trust was falling. Member of the Abkhaz delegation, Vasili Gurjua says: „We understand that Abkhazia's interests are closely tied to those of the Georgian republic, but we do not want to be the stepchild of Georgia, but an equal citizen..."; Akaki Chkhenkeli, from Tiflis side said the same, that the Abkhaz People's Council believes the government is cheating them: "autonomy is promised, they say, but we are deceived." The local social democratic organization made things worse. "In their hearts, they are against autonomy, but they do not say it. Tiflis looks upon Abkhazia

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<sup>21</sup> *Beka Kobakhidze, History of Modern Borders of Georgia, p.6*

<sup>22</sup> *Stephen Jones, Nation Minorities. P.14*

as a stepchild.<sup>23</sup> Although the Georgian side took into account most of the Abkhaz demands, this did not change much - the Abkhaz side no longer trusted Georgians, at the same time, the issue of autonomy was determined without Abkhaz's, which raises many questions about the degree of its legitimacy. In his diaries, Akaki Chkhenkeli writes: "these people [his social democratic colleagues] have no understanding of the regions, their problems and concerns, their values and history. Our policy towards the peripheral regions is awful, we have lost almost all trust among the people there, and our comrades who govern, are blind, cynical - OK, they say, we promised them something, but we do not have to fulfill it."<sup>24</sup> For Georgia Abkhazia had a vital strategic importance for securing the independence of Republic and by that Reason they were trying to centralize its power, Including abandoning their own ideological principles.

## After the independence from Soviet Union

Soviet rule in Georgia lasted near 70 year and in On October 28, 1990, long after the Soviet occupation of 1921, the first multi-party parliamentary elections were held in Georgian SSR, in which the political union "Round Table - Free Georgia" won a convincing victory. At that time, Georgia was in the Soviet legal space, which made it impossible to adopt a new constitution. That is why the new government headed by Zviad Gamsakhurdia reflected the new reality at the legislative level by revising the 1978 Constitution. The words "Soviet Socialist" were removed from the official name of the country and the state was renamed the Republic of Georgia; The symbolism of the state was changed - the coat of arms, the flag, the anthem. The Supreme Council of Georgia was made the supreme body of state power; the leadership of the Communist Party was abolished and a leading role was given to political

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<sup>23</sup> *Stephen Jones, Nation Minorities. P.15*

<sup>24</sup> *Chkhenkeli Diary entry, June 28 th , 1920*

pluralism and a variety of forms of property.<sup>25</sup> The new Georgian state was created in such a way that there was no ideological or logical chain with the First Republic, moreover, they knew almost nothing about it, therefore they did not learn anything from past mistakes. The two Georgian states have pursued almost the same policy towards ethnic minorities - the policy of centralization of power.

In late 1991 civil war started in Tbilisi (Tiflis), which was followed by the overthrow of President-elect Zviad Gamsakhurdia and his government. On February 21, 1992, the Military Council restored the Constitution of the First Republic of Georgia, February 21, 1921. But the 1921 Constitution did not meet modern requirements and challenges, and did not work for a single day in practice. However, the introduction of the 1921 constitution had significant consequences. The military coup in Tbilisi, the chaos created by it in the country and the new constitution breathed new life into Abkhazians who were trying to legally break from Georgia.<sup>26</sup> The Abkhaz side, as a result of the introduction of the constitution of February 1921, restored the Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia of 1922, in which it concluded Abkhazia had only an alliance with Tbilisi on a loose confederal basis. Abkhaz historian Stanislav Lakoba has repeatedly criticized the 1921 constitution, including the fact that the Abkhaz Autonomy Law was not legally enacted, obscuring the region's actual status. Specifically, he asks, what did autonomy mean?<sup>27</sup> Vladislav Ardzinba, in a 1993 newspaper interview, said: "The collapse of the Soviet Union and the adoption of the 1921 Constitution created a legal vacuum in which Abkhazia had every right to fill it - to declare independence."<sup>28</sup>

Nearly a hundred years later, After the events of 1917-21 Georgian Abkhazologist Zurab Papaskiri, who was actively involved in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, in 1992-1993 (both academically and politically), in his memoirs, recalls: "Georgian political elite instead of having a dialogue with separatists to get the desired results, unfortunately, chose the language of rallies"<sup>29</sup>. Indeed, Georgia's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, met only once with the

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<sup>25</sup> *Handbook of Constitutional Law, Avtandil Demetrashvili, p.68*

<sup>26</sup> *Davit Matsaberidze, Conflict Confrontation of Georgian-Abkhazian Nationalisms in the Abkhazian Region in 1918-2012, p.58*

<sup>27</sup> *Stanislav Lakoba, v Otvét Istorikov iz Tbilisi p.96*

<sup>28</sup> *Newspaper "Respublika Abkhazii" 11-18/10/1993, N-11*

<sup>29</sup> *Zurab Papaskiri, moya Abkhazia, p.116*

leader of the Abkhaz separatist movement Vladislav Ardzinba - worse, after a military coup, new Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze, never met Ardzinba in person before the war. As in the First Republic, the Georgian side perceived demands from Abkhazs as an act against Georgia that would damage the country's integrity - moreover, in the 1980-90s, any Abkhaz demand was ignored by the Georgian political elites and translated them as a Russian imperialistic demand. Georgian nationalism, which was a response to Russian imperialism, in turn nurtured Abkhaz nationalism. As a result, political conflict escalated into war in 1992-1993. Of course, events of 1917-21 and 1992-93 have different historical background, but still we can see many similarities, for example, with regard to the state security: the central government was largely guided by the security argument; sides did not know each other, did not know what was their goals, they did not even talk to each other. Most important similarity of these two events is a chaotic political context in the region and the local elites which did not have experience of governing the country. Century has passed since the events of 1917-1921, but still sides of the conflict are not talking to each other and even this is justified again by the argument of state security, from both sides. In fact, state is more secure when there is a dialogue and mutual trust between the societies.

## Conclusion

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The chaos and endless wars in the former Russian Empire, changed the agenda of Georgian political elites from beginning to end. The declaration of independence was forced, and the ruling elite found themselves in a situation where they did not know how to act. The Georgian Social Democrats were in fact learning step-by-step how to build a state, hence the attitude towards ethnic minorities, in a completely new context, was not homogenous; on the contrary, as I tried to show in my paper, it was actually shifting over time. This is very clear even in the last stage of the decision - on the one hand, Abkhazians were refused to participate in the discussion, and on the other hand, Tiflis have accepted all the demands that the Abkhaz People's Council made. Abkhazia played a critical role in the security of the republic, so

maintaining it as part of Georgia was crucial. The central government was looking Abkhazians suspiciously due to foreign and domestic factors, so it tried to centralize power in order to make important decisions for itself. Similar processes took place in the 1990s, when the political elites of independent Georgia simply did not know how to run a state. As in the First Republic, the Georgian side perceived demands from Abkhazians as an action against Georgia that would damage the country's integrity, so there was no communication between the two society and sides did not know what was their goals.

From the hindsight, Tiflis made a mistake; they should have been more committed to the regions, because, eventually, the events of 1917-21 shaped the conflict in the future. On the other hand, we must also remember the historical context in which they lived and this was widespread poverty, endless wars, economic failures, collapse of empires, etc. When the Georgian social democrats were imagining social-democratic future, they couldn't foresee the future would be of political cataclysms. From such point of view centralizing government could have been justified, because for Tiflis main task was not to build a developed and democratic country but to survive and Abkhazia as a territory played a vital role in securing the independence.

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