

## Chapter 2: Historical background

[H]istorians can provide a more contextual and contingent view of the social and cultural construction of a nation that in its various incarnations over many centuries represented itself in different ways. History is full of experiences, only a portion of which are mobilized at any given moment for cultural purposes or political struggles. (Suny, 1994, p. 335)

In this Chapter, I will focus on the historical contexts and contingencies that consultants draw on in articulating the topics they make relevant in our interviews. Rather than attempting the impossible task of relating “everything” there is to know about the past roughly two hundred years of history in present-day Turkey, Georgia and Greece, my narrative will focus on moments of (dis-)juncture, as well as on opportunities and challenges for identification and belonging. I am particularly interested in how identification(s) were constructed as traceable through time in three ways: through language, because this is what sparked my interest in the community, and through ancestry and religion – because this is both what consultants make most relevant in our conversations, and also how they were assigned to categories over large stretches of time. Furthermore, the analysis should appreciate changes in their interplay and the weight attributed to them in the transition from empires to nation(alizing) states:

While it would be exaggerating to maintain that empires or premodern territorial states were not at all interested in shaping and policing ethnic boundaries, the change from empire to nation-state provided new incentives for state elites to pursue strategies of ethnic – as opposed to other types of – boundary making. (Wimmer, 2008, p. 990f.)

I begin by recounting the migration(s) from the Ottoman to the Russian Empire that my consultants make relevant (Section A.). I then explore the complex dynamics of Soviet attempts at both supra-national homogenization and national particularization (Section B.). Finally, I deal with the post-Soviet encounters with the nation state (Section C.), covering the transition from a multi-national political entity (the Soviet Union) to the Georgian nation state (I.), and the Greek migrations from the post-Soviet space to Greece and the challenges encountered there (II.).

A. Migrating from the Ottoman to the Russian Empire

The ancestors of Greeks living in Georgia today migrated from the Ottoman Empire to what was since 1801 the *gruzinskaya guberniya* “Georgian Governorate” of the Russian Empire.<sup>1</sup> I have already mentioned their region of origin as Pontus, which denotes the territory “roughly between the river Kizil Irmak (west of Trebizond), the Georgian/Turkish borders (east of Trebizond) and the Taurus mountains (Ala/Bulghar-Dagh) in the south” (Sideri, 2006, p. 24). Figure 2.1 depicts the areas of origin based on historical sources and oral histories of the community, as related in accounts collected for this book and during the various documentation efforts outlined in the previous Chapter. It also shows the areas Ottoman Greeks were settled in.

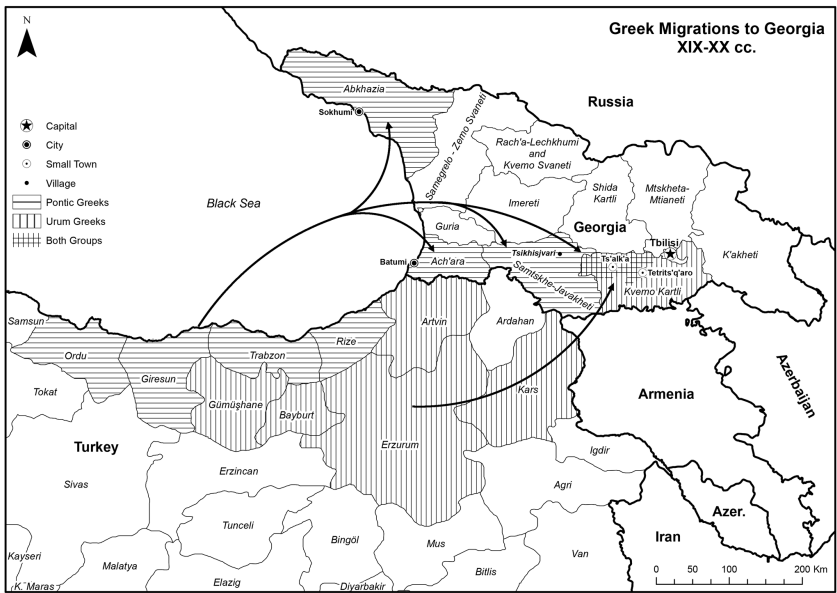


Figure 2.1: Areas of Origin. Map compiled by Nika Loladze (Loladze, 2019, p. 31).

Historical sources date Greek settlements on the territory of the contemporary Georgian nation state to as early as 1000 BC (Kokoev et al., 1999, p.

1 For an excellent and comprehensive history of *The Making of the Georgian Nation* cf. Suny (1994).

23) or 800-600 BC (Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou, 1991, p. 357). Neither these movements nor the settlement of Ottoman Greeks close to mines on Georgian territory in the second half of the 18th century AD (Kokoev et al., 1999, p. 23) are mentioned in the narratives collected in recent research projects. The migrations discussed in this book are thus not the first east-west migration of Greeks onto the territory of the contemporary Georgian nation state. This is corroborated by Fonton (1840, p. 149), who puts the number of Greeks living in the Georgian Governorate at roughly 3,000 prior to the migrations of the 19th-century. Fonton was an eyewitness to General Ivan Fyodorovich Paskevich's military campaign in the Russo-Ottoman War of 1828-29, triggered by the Greek War of Independence. I mention Paskevich because his name comes up with some frequency in the narratives told by members of Georgia's Greek community today. This allows us to specify which of the four main migratory movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries consultants believe to have brought their ancestors to present-day Georgia.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, all four followed armed conflicts involving the Russian and Ottoman Empires.

The first movement took place after the Treaty of Adrianople (1829), which granted Greece independence, while Russia gave back to the Ottoman Empire much of the territory marked in Figure 2.1 as the area of origin of Urum-speaking Greeks (Eloeva, 1994, p. 458). As a result, about 42,000 Ottoman Greeks and a large number of Armenians fled the Ottoman Empire (Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou, 1991, p. 358).<sup>3</sup> The second and third large-scale migratory movements followed the Crimean War (1853-56) and the Russo-Ottoman War (1877-78) (Kokoev et al., 1999, p. 23). Taken together, these three migrations saw 150,000 Greeks resettle across the Caucasus as a whole (Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou, 1991, p. 360), i.e. not only in present-day Georgia. The latter two migrations in particular must be considered in light of Russian attempts at religious homogenization through population exchange, ousting Muslims and inviting Christians from the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran (Sideri 2006, p. 105; Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou 1991, p. 359f.). A prominent example is the deportation of Circassians to the Ottoman Empire after their defeat in the 1860s and the allocation of formerly Circassian land to Russian, German, Greek, and Bulgarian settlers (Allen / Muratoff 1953, p. 107f.; Richmond 2013). The fourth large-scale migration of 80,000 Ottoman

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2 That is, migratory movements larger than individual or family migrations, which also took place "continuously" along the Black Sea coast according to Sideri (2006).

3 The area marked as Pontic speaking remained under Ottoman control throughout the war.

Greeks, this time very clearly in flight from persecution, occurred during and towards the end of the First World War, when the Russian army retreated in 1917 from what is today Turkish territory (Allen / Muratoff 1953, p. 461; Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou 1991, p. 361; Kokoev et al. 1999, p. 24).

These four waves of emigration from Ottoman territory resulted, at least in part, from mounting pressure on the Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire during and after wars. This is especially the case for the periods following the Greek War for Independence (1828-29) and towards the end of the World War One, which for the Kingdom of Greece and the Republic of Turkey ended only on 24 July 1923 with the Treaty of Lausanne and the *ex post facto* legalization of a population exchange that had forcibly resettled about 1.5 million Orthodox Christian “Greeks” from Asia Minor and about half a million Muslim “Turks” from Greece. Areas exempt from the treaty were Istanbul, Western Thrace and the islands Imvros and Tenedos (Hirschon, 2008b; Meinardus, 2002). While the ancestors of the Greek community in Georgia had mostly left Asia Minor by that time, the treaty is notable because it used religious affiliation as the sole attribute deciding the future national affiliation of the uprooted individuals (Meinardus, 2002, p. 82).<sup>4</sup> According to Hirschon (2008b, p. 8) this was established as the relevant criterion by the Turkish negotiators, reflecting the Ottoman way of categorizing the Empire’s subjects, to which I now turn.

The narrative corpus we have of Greeks in Georgia relates histories of subjugation and persecution: *pod igom turkov* “under the Turks’ yoke” is one of the key phrases used when speaking about the time in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>5</sup> This is very understandably an account of the experiences of displacement following the wars outlined above, especially the Greek secessionist endeavors of the 1820s when Greeks in all parts of the Ottoman Empire were viewed as potentially dangerous (Barkey, 2008, p. 278). Contemporary historians, however, underscore the internal diversity of the Ottoman Empire, with Barkey (2008) even naming it an *Empire of Difference*, i.e. one based not on homogeneity but on heterogeneity, which was reflected in how it created institutions to govern its non-Muslim subjects. Importantly, Barkey (2008) also shows how Ottoman Greeks took part in the building and administration

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4 Cf. the contributions in Hirschon (2008a) for a comprehensive transdisciplinary appraisal of the population exchange and its impact on the uprooted people and their governments.

5 Zoumpalidis’ (2014) consultants in the Northern Caucasus tell similar stories. Cf. also the Section on heritage varieties in Chapter 5 on the narrative of Urum Greeks having been made to “choose between language and religion”.

of the Ottoman Empire, and Fortna (2013) gives examples of Ottoman Greek officials clearly practicing their allegiance to the Ottoman Empire rather than the Greek Kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

Ottoman non-Muslim communities were organized in the *millet* system already mentioned, with the Orthodox *millet-i-rum* being the largest non-Muslim *millet* (cf. Issawi, 1999). Crucially, these “communal differences within the pluralistic Ottoman concatenation of peoples were expressed in terms of religious confession and to a much lesser extent regional and ethno-linguistic identification” (Fortna, 2013, p. 3). Thus, being OTTOMAN ORTHODOX RUM (later: GREEK) was based on a community’s religious affiliation<sup>7</sup> rather than on the language spoken (Mackridge, 2009). Speaking an Anatolian Turkish variety thus did not conflict with belonging to the Orthodox *millet*. Notably, the Ottoman administration’s policies on conversion were also not uniform and depended on how manageable a community was perceived to be:

For the Greeks, the conqueror recognized the Greek Orthodox patriarchate in Constantinople as the most powerful force among the Christian population. The Orthodox Church would dominate ethnically and linguistically diverse populations that followed more or less a uniform Orthodox practice. (Barkey, 2008, p. 131)

Controlling the patriarchate was therefore a measure for controlling the Orthodox population as a whole; communities without such a strong central institution, such as Jews and Armenians, were hence considered more difficult to govern (Barkey, 2008).

There were differences between the *millets*, with members of the non-Muslim *millets* mostly being subject to higher taxation and enjoying inferior economic and social status (Barkey, 2008; Göl, 2005; İçduygu et al., 2008; Prévélakis, 1998). Crucially however, until the advent of the Young Turks at the beginning of the 20th century and their nationalizing mission, there were no systematic attempts at religious conversion, forced linguistic assimilation or other ethno-national homogenization (Barkey, 2008; İçduygu et al., 2008; Fortna, 2013). Barkey (2008, p. 122) contrasts this with policies in the Russian Empire. Her argument that extensive Russification took place in the Russian Empire is questionable, however, since this focused on reli-

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6 For a broader discussion, the reader is referred to the illuminating contributions to Fortna et al. (2013). Although these accounts highlight the fluidity of category memberships especially among the elite, such fluidity was not part of all everyday interactions across the Empire.

7 Conversion was usually only possible for a whole (village) community at once and not infrequently based on political considerations.

gious homogenization alone. Linguistic Russification depended on feudal categorizations, and was largely limited to non-Russian elites in the Empire (Pavlenko, 2008, p. 278f.):

[T]urning everyone into Russians was never a goal of Russian nationality and language policies, nor was language the main criterion for Russianness: it was habitually trumped by social class and religion. The full-fledged membership in the Great Russian nation was offered to Christian elites of all ethnic backgrounds and to all Orthodox Eastern Slavs. (Pavlenko, 2011, p. 348)

This contemporary assessment notwithstanding, the Georgian (literary) elite evaluated the Georgian language as being threatened and rallied for its preservation as early as the 1860s (Hewitt, 1989, p. 127).<sup>8</sup>

The central point here is that the ancestors of the Greek community in Georgia were categorized by their membership in the *millet-i-rum* and thereby solely on the basis of their Orthodox religious affiliation. Being recognized as “Greeks” was made palpable for instance in the suspicion they faced surrounding the Greek War of Independence (Barkey, 2008, p. 278) and ultimately enshrined in the Treaty of Lausanne. As we will see in Section C., this had important implications for their recognition as Greeks by the Greek nation state after the demise of the Soviet Union. Crucially, the Russian Empire also recognized them not only as “fellow Orthodox Christians” but as “Greeks”, a categorization later adopted by the Soviet Union (cf. Section B.).

Upon their arrival in present-day Georgia, the Ottoman Greeks set about turning the new space into their homeland and endured great hardship, as their descendants tell us. This home-making was achieved by remembering and re-creating the homeland they had left: “These migrants began re-mapping the old communities left in Pontos through reinvention of foundation myths, naming the new villages after the old ones, building churches and houses” (Sideri, 2006, p. 32). This re-mapping is still visible in the churches built and the gravestones set during that time, which differ markedly from their Georgian contemporaries. These churches are found in each and every Pontic and Urum Greek settlement I have visited (cf. Figure 4.1), dating back to the first arrival of Greeks to the village in question, mostly in the 19th century. These stony traces make it very implausible that the ancestors of the Greek community in Georgia today were ever predominantly anything but Orthodox Christian, as is sometimes alleged (cf. Chapter 5).

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8 The importance of the Georgian language as a symbol of the Georgian nation will be discussed in Chapter 5.

B. The Soviet Union: Processes of homogenization and particularization

There is much to be said about how the Soviet administration through its 70 years of existence attempted to achieve governability through homogenization of the people inhabiting its vast territory. This involved the centralization of power both organizationally (in the Communist Party), and geographically (in Moscow); collectivization of land and labor; extensive Russification particularly of the education system; and brutal repression of those individuals or collectives perceived as dissenting from or threatening this “unity”. However, attempted homogenization was only ever partial in both intention and implementation. The Communist Party was structured in a way that not only enabled but encouraged (elite) members of the titular nationalities of the individual Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR) to hold positions of power in the institutions of their respective SSR through an elaborate quota-system. Furthermore, “mother tongue” education (alongside compulsory Russian classes) remained in practice throughout the Soviet Union’s existence, albeit not for all nationalities.<sup>9</sup> Rather than taking on the task of tracing these often contradictory practices in all their complexity, I will restrict my account to issues that the analysis of the interview corpus has identified as influential. In particular, the way Soviet citizens were categorized by their national affiliation emerged as an important reference point for (self-)identification.

First, however, a few words on Georgia. Georgia became – not quite voluntary – part of the Russian Empire in 1801 and briefly regained independence after the Russian Revolution, which was to last from May 26, 1918 until the Soviet invasion in February 1921. The political memory of the Georgian Democratic Republic (however much distorted) was taken up, starting in the 1980s, by the campaign for national independence from the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most fundamental thing to understand about the traces left by the Soviet Union is that the concept of an ethno-national group, i.e. of a socio-cultural membership in a community based on ancestry and shared territory,<sup>11</sup> was understood as irreducible and often welcomed (Slezkine, 1994). This

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9 I will discuss the Soviet notion of *rodnoy yazyk* ‘native language’ in more detail below.

10 For the importance of these types of national narratives cf. Hobsbawm / Ranger (1983); Suny (2001); for a differentiated analysis of the political implications of the Republic cf. contributions to Jones (2014).

11 As laid out in *Marksizm i national’nyy vopros* “Marxism and the national question” Stalin’s first scholarly essay in 1913 (Stalin, 1950). The second part of this title is echoed in how some consultants speak about the rising Georgian nationalism in the 1990s, when they label it *national’nyy vopros*, as we will see in Chapter 6.

relied on the Marxist notion of a “historical logic” that anticipated a stage of nationhood before progressing into socialism, and the conviction that this process could be sped up by what Hirsch (2005, p. 8) calls “state-sponsored evolutionism”. She defines its aim as follows:

The long-term goal was to usher the *entire* population through the Marxist timeline of historical development: to transform feudal-era clans and tribes into nationalities, and nationalities into socialist-era nations – which, at some point in the future, would merge together under communism. (Hirsch 2005, p. 8f., emphasis in the original)

To this end, they were to be constituted as “kulturell ‘eigenständig’”<sup>12</sup> (Thun-Hohenstein, 2015a, p. 12), even if this meant first identifying – and thereby establishing – the collectives, cultures and languages that were then to be elaborated and supported in a process labeled *korenizatsiya* ‘putting down roots’ “nativization” (Crisp, 1989; Pavlenko, 2008).<sup>13</sup> However, this never meant that the Soviet administration would support all national projects or cultures and languages on its territory. On the contrary, these might equally be attacked and destroyed in the attempt to “‘help’ them to ‘evolve’ (and/or amalgamate) into new official nationalities” (Hirsch, 2005, p. 10).<sup>14</sup> Crucially, *korenizatsiya* was not simply a socio-cultural project invested in developing and supporting languages and “national cultures”. It was intended to reform the administrative and political structure of the vast Soviet Union, in effect transforming “das Russische Vielvölkerreich in administrativer Hinsicht zum ‘multinationalen’ Sowjetimperium”<sup>15</sup> (Maisuradze, 2015a, p. 27). This meant implementing a complex administrative hierarchy of territories of different sizes, shaped on the basis of “national” differences and endowed with different levels of autonomy.<sup>16</sup> This also afforded a certain amount of institutional power to the titular nationalities, i.e. those whose national affiliation coincided with the label of the territory they were living on, and included a quota system for titular nationalities and “national minorities”, for instance Greeks living in the Georgian SSR.<sup>17</sup>

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12 “Culturally ‘independent’”, my translation.

13 *Einwurzeln* in German, cf. Maisuradze (2015a, p. 39f.) for its etymology and what he analyzes as implications for the Soviet imaginary that intimately linked collectives to territory.

14 Cf. Gorenburg (1999) for a careful study of these changes in Bashkortostan.

15 Transforming “the Russian multi-ethnic Empire in its administrative aspects to the ‘multinational’ Soviet Empire.” My translation.

16 Cf. Hirsch (2005) for a thorough account of how ethnographers and ethnographic knowledge helped shape this complex structure.

17 Note that this administrative complexity was accompanied by a complex system of labeling the different points on the hierarchy of hereditary categories: *plemya* ‘tribe’,



These national categories were then enshrined and carried forward not only in registries based on census data, but from 1932 onwards, in the Soviet internal passport. Even when this “cultural technolog[y] of rule” (Hirsch, 2005, p. 275) did not have dangerous consequences, as it did when deciding on the deportation of 40,000 Greeks from Western Georgia and Abkhazia to Central Asia in 1949 (Sideri, 2006, p. 92),<sup>18</sup> it was felt in everyday life:

Every Soviet citizen was born into a certain nationality, took it to day care and through high school, had it officially confirmed at the age of sixteen and then carried it to the grave through thousands of application forms, certificates, questionnaires and reception desks. It made a difference in school admissions and it could be crucial in employment, promotions and draft assignments. (Slezkine, 1994, p. 450)<sup>19</sup>

This practice, together with the titular nationalities’ political and cultural (nationalizing) control of the republics’ institutions, created tensions between titular nationalities’ elites’ aim of homogenizing their republics and their national minorities’ resistance to this agenda (Slezkine, 1994, p. 451). This has been argued to contribute in no small part both to the individual republics’ campaigns for independence and to the difficulties facing the newly independent nation states in their nation building efforts (Arel, 2003; Brubaker, 1996; Suny, 1993).

A key aspect here concerns the language policies of the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> In this field, *korenizatsiya* in the 1920s meant a tremendous effort at “developing” all recognized 192 languages. In some cases, this implied developing alphabets for hitherto unwritten languages. In all cases it implied ensuring the

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*narodnost* ‘people’ (Maisuradze 2015a, p. 32, p. 42 translates it as *Völkerschaft* into German), *natsional’nost* ‘nationality’ and *natsiya* ‘nation’ were taken to refer to different stages of “development” (Slezkine, 1994, p. 450) and not used uniformly over the 70 years of the Soviet Union’s existence. To further complicate matters, *narod* ‘people’ could also refer to “the people” in terms of social class rather than as a national category or one encompassing all “Soviet nationalities”, as in the aspired to *sovietskiy narod* ‘Soviet people’ (Maisuradze, 2015a, p. 42). In my interview corpus, consultants use *narod* most frequently when speaking about a national category, followed by *natsional’nost* and *natsiya*.

- 18 They were usually allowed to return to the Georgian SSR, however not the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, in the mid 1950s. Eleni Sideri’s and my Pontic Greek consultants who experienced the deportation have never been able to make sense of them (cf. Loladze 2019).
- 19 This is precisely the type of knowledge my consultant OP refers to when he adduces his passport as proof of his Greekness and concludes his account with *ya znal chto ya grek* “I knew that I was Greek” (excerpt 24, Chapter 7).
- 20 For thorough and differentiated accounts cf. Grenoble (2003); Pavlenko (2008); and the contributions to Kirkwood (1989).

teaching of these languages in schools and the production of textbooks and translations from and into these languages. When the reduction of recognized languages and extensive Russification were implemented in the 1930s, this also meant the transfer of very recently developed Latin alphabets into the Cyrillic script. Russification of the education system was achieved in two main ways. For some national minority schools – for instance those that had been Greek up to that point – the language of instruction was changed to Russian. Secondly, “bilingualism” in Russian was furthered by making it a compulsory subject in all schools and in higher education. Above a certain professional and/or political level, competence in Russian was indispensable, making education in Russian the most appealing choice for families not belonging to the respective titular nationality from 1959, when they were allowed to choose the language of instruction (Crisp, 1989; Grenoble, 2003; Hewitt, 1989; Kreindler, 1989; Pavlenko, 2008).

Russification was thus consequential for Georgia and Greeks in Georgia in two ways. First of all, Russification and “mother tongue” education meant that Georgia’s Armenian, Azerbaijani and Russian minorities would choose education in their native language or in Russian rather than Georgian. Secondly, Russification was especially successful among the smaller and non-titular nationalities, which often led to language loss rather than stable bilingualism. In the census, respondents were asked to give their *rodnoy yazyk* “native language”, which was perceived as a property of the heritage collective rather than the individual respondent (Arel, 2006, p. 9).<sup>21</sup> This not only makes this component of Soviet census data notoriously unreliable (Grenoble, 2003, pp. 28-31), but also furthers the disjunction of language competence and national affiliation.<sup>22</sup>

For the Greek community in Georgia, the Soviet Union, like the Russian Empire preceding it, recognized their self-identification as “Greek” – to the point of persecuting some of them. It furthermore enshrined this category membership in its internal passports as a purely hereditary attribute, having officially discounted the importance of religion for anything including belonging<sup>23</sup> and having decoupled competence in one’s “native language” from national affiliation. It was against this background that the Greek community of Georgia encountered the (making of the) modern nation state.

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21 This despite the very bodily etymology of *rodnoy* (Maisuradze, 2015a, p. 43f.).

22 Cf. Brubaker (2011, p. 1796) for how this *de facto* everyday disjunction was perceived as a threat to nationalizing projects.

23 But cf. Maisuradze / Thun-Hohenstein (2015) for how a religious imaginary was fundamental in constructing the Soviet Union.

## C. Encounters with the nation state

### I. Georgian transformations

In the following, I explore the development of the independent Georgian nation state, which offers a deeper understanding of the positions voiced in the interviews. To this end, I will firstly give a brief summary of the main events in Georgia's existence as an independent nation(alizing) state. Secondly, I will look at the role language, religion and territory have continued to play in the Georgian nation-building project and its implications for the Greeks living in Georgia. Thirdly, I will consider the internal migration from the regions of Svaneti and Ach'ara to the rural districts of Ts'alk'a and Tetrts'q'aro, which is an important point of reference both for speaking about Urum as a heritage variety (Chapter 5) and for drawing boundaries in this context (Chapter 7).

The main historical milestones can be summarized briefly. Mikhail Gorbachëv's aspirations to more *glasnost* 'publicity' in the sense of "transparency" from the mid-1980s onwards "stimulated a rapid escalation of ethnic politics in Georgia" (Suny, 1994, p. 321). These found their outlet not only in more fervent expressions of desire for Georgian independence but also in strengthened claims for greater autonomy from the Georgian SSR on the part of the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast. However, the Georgian nationalist movement saw these as part of "Georgian territory" by virtue of "Georgians" living there.<sup>24</sup> When on April 9, 1989 Soviet armed forces violently broke up a peaceful demonstration by Georgian nationalists in Tbilisi, leaving 20 people dead and many more wounded, the Georgian nationalist movement gained momentum (Suny, 1994, pp. 321-323).

Zviad Gamsakhurdia's nationalist coalition won the first multi-party parliamentary election in Georgia on 28 October 1990, and the Georgian parliament declared the republic's independence from the Soviet Union on April 9, 1991. Before armed conflict broke out on December 22 of the same year and Gamsakhurdia was forced to flee, his exclusionary nationalist rhetoric, labeling national minorities in Georgia as "Moscow's fifth column" and putatively

24 While territorial questions only emerge from the corpus as being contested in Ts'alk'a, for the Georgian nation state the issue of territory remains unresolved. The impetus of the nationalist movement and subsequent Georgian governments was to establish sovereignty over all the lands inhabited by "Georgians", thus striving to make the state's name semantically adequate to the toponym *sakartvelo* 'land for Kartvelians' "Georgia", including those in the autonomous regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

coining the slogan *gruziya dlya gruzin* “Georgia for Georgians” (cf. Chapter 6), had deeply unsettled non-Georgian minorities. The ensuing (civil) wars that were to last until the end of 1993 were “a kind of multi-player chess game” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 66), pitting troops loyal to Gamsakhurdia against his armed opposition, which took over the government newly headed by the former Soviet Foreign Secretary Eduard Shevardnadze. Also opposing Gamsakhurdia (but not necessarily fighting together) were Abkhaz troops, supported by fighters from the Northern Caucasus, Ossetian troops, and various paramilitary groups. Russian troops supported almost all players at different stages apart from Gamsakhurdia (Cheterian, 2008; Suny, 1994; Wheatley, 2005). By early 1995 the Shevardnadze government had gained an effective monopoly on organized violence (Wheatley, 2005, p. 91).

For the civilian population, these first tumultuous few years of independence were as difficult as one can imagine. The stories told, not only by the consultants I interviewed for this book, center on the loss of livelihood in terms of lack of paid employment as well as basic foodstuffs, water, gas, and electricity. This was augmented by fundamental uncertainty over the political future and the very immediate danger posed by (not always political) armed conflict. Especially in rural Ts’alk’a, there were also reported incidents of organized armed banditry on the roads (Skopeteas / Moisiidi, 2011). Years of widespread mismanagement, corruption and finally blatant electoral fraud in the parliamentary elections of November 2003 brought demonstrators – encouraged by opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili – out to the streets. Shevardnadze resigned on November 22, 2003. In January 2004, Saakashvili was elected president. For the duration of his presidency – until he lost the October 2012 parliamentary elections – Saakashvili maintained what can be summarized as a staunchly pro-Western, anti-Russian political orientation, culminating in the Five-Day War with Russian-backed South Ossetian forces in 2008. “Pro-Western” is not to be conflated with “democratic”, however: from the outset, the aim was not to increase democratic participation, but rather to establish law and order, create an attractive business climate, and bring recalcitrant regions back into the fold, thereby positioning Saakashvili as “founding father of the nation” (quoted in Wheatley, 2005, p. 208). In other words: “he attempted to introduce liberal measures by means of autocratic methods and illiberal discourse” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 208).

Saakashvili achieved early successes: in 2004, he faced down the ruler of Ach’ara, Aslan Abashidze, thereby extending the Georgian state’s control to a formerly autonomous region, which had often been considered a potential third breakaway region. The penal code was made more severe and a far

reaching police reform was implemented with the aim of eliminating (low level) corruption. This was accompanied by extensive economic liberalization.<sup>25</sup> Many of these successes were highly publicized in the West, making Georgia the poster-child for “successful” post-Soviet reforms. My consultants generally speak highly of Saakashvili, especially of his “law and order” approach and the police reform. The first is credited with having stamped out (low level) criminality, the second as having made encounters with police officers more predictable, both furthering the perception of personal safety.

In addition to these reforms, two language specific policies were adopted, which impacted the lives of my consultants along with other national minorities living in Georgia. The first is the educational reform carried out in 2005, which specified that Georgian should be either the sole language of instruction or compulsory language of instruction for some subjects. This most strongly affected schools in regions with compactly settled minorities.<sup>26</sup> In these regions, Russian had long functioned as the language of inter-ethnic communication and many schools had used Russian, Armenian or Azeri as languages of instruction. Russian was taught as the default second language – and there had only been the compulsory one lesson of Georgian per week (cf. Chapter 5). The reform was implemented so rapidly that children in such regions could not acquire the necessary competence (Wheatley, 2006b, p. 33). Moreover, it was carried out using textbooks that did not account for the divergent Georgian competence of children living in the urban centers (usually very high) and those living in the rural areas (usually quite low) (Korth et al., 2005, p. 41). The second language-related policy introduced in 2005 requires all government employees to pass a Georgian language exam. In regions inhabited primarily by national minorities, this resulted in a demographic shift among government employees, with said minorities being replaced by (ethnic) Georgian speakers, furthering the perception of alienation and forced assimilation (Nilsson / Popjanevski, 2009, p. 17). This was exacerbated by the fact that public institutions from local administrations to courts had to be officially addressed in Georgian only (Wheatley, 2006b, p. 37).

These measures point to the importance of the Georgian language not simply as a medium of communication but, unsurprisingly, as a symbol of

25 For a recent critique cf. Gugushvili (2017).

26 Regions in the South-West for Azerbaijani (especially districts in Kvemo Kartli, Kakheti and Shida Kartli) and Samtskhe-Javakheti for Armenians. The Russian-backed breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are *de facto* independently governed, and were therefore not affected by these reforms.

the Georgian nation.<sup>27</sup> This was also visible in its immediate instatement as official language in Georgia's brief independence 1918-1921 (cf. Smith et al., 1998; Suny, 1994). There are two further lines of analysis linking the Georgian language to contemporary nationalizing efforts. Smith et al. (1998, p. 193) underscore perceptions of the "perseverance" of the Georgian language, which has been documented as a literary language for a comparatively long time. It thus allows the construction of a narrative of continuity, tracing the *Making of the Georgian Nation* (Suny, 1994) through times of foreign rule and fragmentation. Closely linked is another element providing a narrative of differentiation and endurance: the autocephalous Georgian Orthodox Church (Suny, 1994, p. 334). In Maisuradze's analysis, this prepared the ground for the later Georgian nationalizing project in its emphasis on the language of religious practice and he thus calls it "eine Art 'präsekularer' Nationalismus"<sup>28</sup> (Maisuradze, 2015a, p. 34).<sup>29</sup> It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Georgian Orthodox Christianity was immensely influential in the Georgian movement for national independence (Maisuradze, 2015b, p. 315).

We will see in Chapter 5 that some of my consultants in the rural districts of Ts'alk'a and Tetrts'q'aro bemoan their lack of competence in the Georgian language, which they perceive – concurring with dominant views – to be important for being GOOD GEORGIAN CITIZENS. For the others, their competence enables them to underscore their belonging to Georgia. The fact that Orthodox Christianity is taken to be such a quintessential aspect of being GEORGIAN, and in particular the narrative tracing this religious affiliation back to Byzantium, sets a precedent by which it is relatively easy for members of the "co-religious" Greek community to assert their being GREEK by similarly tracing their identification to Orthodox religious affiliation, regardless of their language competence. Thus, their religious affiliation together with the perpetual reassertion of their "Greek" ancestry throughout Soviet times, enables them to self-identify as GREEK and to have this self-identification recognized and not questioned.

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27 The theoretical underpinnings to these kinds of group-making projects will be explored in the following chapters. For now, suffice it to say that language has been viewed as an important symbol of national unification and nationalizing projects (Anderson, 1991; Billig, 1995; Blommaert, 2006).

28 "A type of 'pre-secular' nationalism." My translation.

29 Cf. also Fuchslocher (2010), who argues that scholars underscoring the importance of language and print capitalism in the formation of the nation, as most prominently Anderson (1991) or Gellner (1983), miss the importance of the autocephalous Orthodox Churches in instilling a sense of (national) belonging in their believers.

Only in rural Ts'alk'a do Urum Greek consultants report challenges to their GREEK self-identification based on their language use, as well as to their "right to the land", echoing the nationalist territorial sentiments outlined above. I will explore how consultants talk about dealing with these challenges in Chapter 7 and focus here on the background of what was fundamentally an economic conflict over land and housing spurred by the mismanagement of public funds. In the late 1990s, as large numbers of Greeks (had) left Kvemo Kartli (cf. next Section), internal "eco-migrants" fleeing landslides in the highlands of Svaneti and Ach'ara settled in "empty" Greek and Ossetian villages. They acted in accordance with a 1998 presidential decree that allocated a large amount of public funds to the purchase of "abandoned" houses. The funds, however, disappeared after only a small number of houses had been bought, leading to conflicts over houses and agricultural land. Nevertheless, informal networks and the prospect of employment on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline led to further migration to Ts'alk'a. By 2005-06, this process was generally better managed, with internal migrants being allocated money to buy the houses they inhabited.<sup>30</sup> By 2006, the number of Georgian internal migrants in Ts'alk'a amounted to about 6,500 (Wheatley, 2006a, p. 9f.).

Framing this conflict in ethnic terms as per Brubaker (2004) was facilitated by linguistic difficulties. The *lingua franca* of the region had been Russian, a language the internal migrants from fairly secluded and exclusively Georgian-speaking regions were not competent in. Nor were most Greeks, Armenians and Azerbaijanis living in Ts'alk'a fluent in Georgian.<sup>31</sup> Importantly, while both Svans and Ach'arians self-identify and are officially recognized as ethnic Georgians, they are far from a homogeneous group.<sup>32</sup> Georgians from Svaneti are predominantly Orthodox Christians with some Pagan traditions and speak Svan, a Kartvelian language related to but substantially different

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30 This is reflected in consultants' narratives that predominantly speak of conflicts having ceased, cf. Chapter 7. For a thorough account of the political and economic contexts cf. Wheatley (2009).

31 The numbers given by Wheatley (2009, p. 8) indicate that almost 70% of respondents from national minorities living in Ts'alk'a assessed their Georgian competence as being restricted to "some basic words" at best. My rural consultants assess their Georgian competence to be much higher (Table I.).

32 This does not preclude them from being portrayed as homogeneous by consultants in some instances, or from having their Georgianness questioned on the basis of their (putative) religious affiliation, cf. Chapters 5 and 7.

from Georgian<sup>33</sup> while the Georgians displaced from the highland regions of Ach'ara are predominantly Georgian-speaking Muslims, who sometimes face quite strong pressures to convert.

Overall, we can conclude that while the journey from the Soviet Union to the Georgian nation state has been very challenging and at times quite dangerous, the belonging of the Greek community to and in Georgia as well as their self-identification as GREEK is narrated as having been questioned only around the presidency of Zviad Gamsakhurdia – and sometimes later in Ts'alk'a. Greater challenges to their identification and belonging are told as having arisen in Greece, which I turn to now.

## II. Emigration to Greece

In the funeral oration which he gave in 1872 for his university colleague, Konstantinos Asopios, [Konstantinos] Paparrigopoulos asked rhetorically 'What is Hellenism?'. To which he gave the answer: 'the Greek language'. 'What then is the Greek language? Hellenism' (Clogg 2002, p. xvii, citing Dimaras 1986, p. 260)

This quote foreshadows an important part of how the encounter between the newly immigrated post-Soviet Greeks and the modern Greek nation state would play out. The experiences they relate in the interviews frequently center on their not being recognized as “genuine Greeks” unless they speak Standard Modern Greek (SMG) at a high level of competence (cf. Chapter 7). Greece is not an exception among the Western European nation states, as a recent poll suggests: while 50% – a rather high number – of Greeks in Greece consider “being born in Greece” to be “very important for being truly Greek” (Stokes, 2017, p. 3),<sup>34</sup> “being able to speak our national language” is considered to be “very important for being truly Greek” by 76% of respondents (Stokes, 2017,

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33 Ethnologue: <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/sva>,  
Glottolog: <http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/svan1243>,  
WALS: [http://wals.info/languoid/lect/wals\\_code\\_sva](http://wals.info/languoid/lect/wals_code_sva) [accessed on 6/25/2020].  
For recent research on the Svan community in Kvemo Kartli cf. Voell et al. (2014); Voell (2016).

34 This is “rather high” because, with the exception of Hungary (52%), being born on the territory of the corresponding nation state is evaluated as much less important by the other surveyed European states: Italy and Poland at 42%, Spain 34%, UK 32% France 25%, Netherlands 16%, Germany 13%, Sweden 8% (Stokes, 2017, p. 3). The usual caveats for large-scale, comparative, quantitative studies apply.



p. 8).<sup>35</sup> A point not stressed by our consultants is the importance of religious affiliation for being GREEK in Greece: in the same study, Greece leads in this category, with 54% of respondents considering religious affiliation to be “very important for being truly Greek”, which all other surveyed European countries evaluate as much less important (Stokes, 2017, p. 20).<sup>36</sup>

In this Section, I will first briefly explore the process of emigration from Georgia and then return to the questions of identification and belonging in terms of “Greek” ancestry, language and religion. The last census carried out in the Soviet Union puts the number of Greeks living in the Georgian SSR at 100,300 in 1989 (Geostat, 2013, p. 22). This number fell drastically to 15,200 in 2002 (Geostat, 2013, p. 22)<sup>37</sup> and further to 5,500 according to the latest census carried out in 2014 (Geostat, 2016). Importantly, not only members of national minorities emigrated but many Georgians also left the country, due to the wars described in the previous Section and the dismal economic situation (Geostat, 2013; Kokoev et al., 1999).<sup>38</sup> Greece and Cyprus were the main destinations for emigration, but not necessarily the *final* destinations, as demonstrated by communicative networks established from our interview data (Loladze, 2016, pp. 187-89). This migration was greatly facilitated by the Greek government, which officially recognized the “Greek descent” of all those registered as Greeks in the former Soviet Union and initially made it very easy to obtain Greek citizenship (Hess, 2010; Kaurinkoski, 2010).<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Greek immigrants were institutionally supported, for instance with low interest rates on mortgages and access to the healthcare and welfare system (Loladze, 2016, p. 177).

This official recognition and support, especially in the time immediately following the end of the Soviet Union, was not necessarily matched on the level of everyday interactions with “Greek Greeks” (Hess, 2010; Hionidou, 2012; Kaurinkoski, 2010; Vergeti, 1991). In other words: “the same people

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35 Note that in this evaluation Greece is not an outlier in comparison with the other surveyed European countries: Netherlands 84%, Hungary 81%, Germany 79%, France 77%, Poland 67%, Sweden 66%, Spain 62%, Italy 59% (Stokes, 2017, p. 8).

36 Note that this is true even in comparison with Poland (34%) and Italy (30%).

37 This includes the 14,000 Greeks living in Abkhazia in 1979 (Hewitt, 1989, p. 138), who also all left during the war in 1992-93, judging from the information we were able to gather.

38 For a thorough exploration cf. Loladze (2016, 2019).

39 Similar to the policies in Germany, the process of obtaining citizenship became stricter and more exclusionary over time. For a comparative account of “co-ethnic” migrations following the end of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia cf. contributions to Čapo Žmegač et al. (2010).

who were called ‘brothers in diaspora’ when they lived in Georgia were transformed into ‘aliens’ or ‘second class Greeks’ when they decided to ‘return’” (Sideri, 2006, p. 27). While perceived differences in behavior also played a role, language competence and use was the difference made most relevant in establishing this boundary between post-Soviet Greeks and the societal majority. There are two interrelated ways of looking at this. The first is to focus on the importance of the Greek language as a symbol of the Greek nation, and thus an indispensable attribute for determining category membership or exclusion. This view is taken by Mackridge (2009) and expressed by Sideri:

the purity of the language was a foundation stone of the Kingdom of Greece in the 1830s. Language remains a prerequisite for integration into Greek society, affecting all the migrants living in the country. (Sideri, 2006, p. 141f.)

In order to become Greek, then, one has to speak SMG – crucially, Pontic Greek does not suffice, as we will see in the analysis. As the above-mentioned poll indicates, the Greek societal majority is not alone in this evaluation in Western Europe. These experiences are, for instance, mirrored by the difficulties faced by another “co-ethnic” immigrant group: post-Soviet German migrants to Germany (Hess, 2010; Mandel, 2010; Panagiotidis, 2019; Rosenberg, 2010).

The second way of looking at this issue would be to ask why Orthodox Christianity and “Greek ancestry” were not considered to suffice for recognition as “Greeks”. This is particularly vexing given that Greek law considers “Greek ancestry” a sufficient prerequisite for Greek citizenship, and that the Greek societal majority accords religious affiliation such importance as a marker of “being truly Greek” (Stokes, 2017). Orthodox Christianity is, in fact, frequently adduced as the other pillar of GREEKNESS (Mackridge, 2009). In the words of Richard Clogg: “from the outset, Orthodox Christianity and the Greek language have been deemed to be the key determinants of Greek identity” (Clogg, 2002, p. ix). Why, then, is this being “co-religious” not accepted as a sufficient prerequisite for the post-Soviet Greeks being recognized as GREEK? This points to an analysis of boundary-making as put forward since Barth (1969), in which it is not merely a “list of attributes” that determines inclusion and exclusion but which of these is perceived as salient enough to be made relevant as the one determining where (and how) to draw the boundary. In Chapter 7 I return to the question of why religious affiliation and ancestry are trumped by language competence and use in the contemporary Greek context. At this point, however, I move to examine the

theoretical background on identification, belonging and boundary-making that I have constantly alluded to in this Chapter.

