Identity and the conflict in South Ossetia

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South Ossetia, a small, tiny region in the Caucasus has been rebelling against its bigger neighbour Georgia for independence since the fall of the USSR. To date, only few countries recognize this independence, however. Since the USSR times it had been granted an autonomous status, but after the fall Georgia made claim on it. However, this autonomy represented some real practical differences. For example: "*The Ossetians' eastern Iranian language was not compatible with Georgian. As of 1988, 86 percent of Ossetians could not communicate in Georgian*" (Sotiriou, 2019). During the USSR times, the relations between these two groups had been good (Toal et al., 2013). However, after the fall of the USSR the relationship started to deteriorate.

The state-building exercise by Georgia after the USSR collapse meant that various policies were put in place to limit the use of the Ossetian language and ban "*the participation of area-confined parties*" (Sotiriou, 2019). These policies were partly based on the idea that Ossetians were "*ungrateful guests on historic Georgian soil*" (Toal et al., 2013). Which, in turn got interpreted by Ossetian nationalists as "*enduring genocidal polic[ies] by the Georgian state against its ethnic minorities such as Ossetians*" (Toal et al., 2013). The conflict culminated in 2008 with the five-day war resulting in Georgia losing its control over the region (Sotiriou, 2019) and the Russian recognition of South-Ossetia.

Attempting to explain this conflict, this essay will zoom in on ethnicity as a source for conflict. This points to two main strands of theories. Firstly, **the primordial view**, championed by for example Huntington, outlines ethnic differences as a given. And believes that conflict between two ethnic groups is inevitable. These categories are essentially natural and unchangeable. In the article "The *Clash of Civilizations?*" Huntington (1993) outlines that not ideological nor economic reasons, but the differences between these social groups (he calls them civilizations), will be the "battles lines of the future" (Huntington, 1993). On the other side you have **the constructivists view**, which claims that "*not only the content of social categories change over time but [also] the boundaries between them*" (Fearon & Laitin, 2000). This means that social categories are not fixed, nor are they natural or inevitable. Elite or others often "*construct antagonistic ethnic identities in order to maintain or increase their political power*" (Fearon & Laitin, 2000). Therefore, to understand the violence that follows better a follow-up question could be: why do people follow?

Going back to the case of South Ossetia and looking at this case through the eyes of Huntington one would firstly need to assess what "civilizations" these two groups belong to. For this, Huntington defines elements such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and the subjective self-identification. Despite some differences in predominately language and self-identification, Huntington would argue that the Ossetians and Georgians are not two distinct civilizations. He does describe that conflict could still occur but will be mild and infrequent. This however, is not the case, since Georgians and Ossetians at multiple times have had violent conflicts, and Ossetians even talk about four different "genocidal periods" (Toal et al., 2013).

Turning them to the Constructivist stance and looking at how the identities are produced, the hand of the elites become clear. For South Ossetia, Shnirelman (2006) outlines very nicely how the Ossetian over the ages has been shaped by the elites for political gains (Shnirelman, 2006). Georgian elites on the other side pushed the agenda of state-building (at the expensive of minorities) and saw territorial integrity as crucial (George, 2009). It framed any ethnic questions as: "*not a problem of Georgian–Ossetian inter-ethnic relations but Georgian–Russian geopolitical relations*" (Toal et al., 2013). Why do the masses follow this elite narrative and lead to violence? The article from Fearon & Laitin (2000) outlines various possible reasons for this but one has some explanatory power is that, the masses *use* the elites framing of ethnic violence as a "*cover for other motivations such as looting, land grabs and personal revenge*" (Fearon & Laitin, 2000). During the violence in South Ossetia, Sotiriou outlines that property theft, and looting were common (Sotiriou, 2019)

Analysing this conflict purely as an identity conflict however is too narrow. Issues of state building prioritized by scholars such as Wheatley point to the failure of the "*newly independent state to provide basic public goods*"(Wheatley, 2009). Other such as Sotiriou also highlight economic issues such as the growing gap in GDP between Georgia and Russia (Sotiriou, 2019). And again other scholars put emphasis on the internal dynamics of South Ossetia, and the state-building process is working out. (Toal et al., 2013) *(Word count: 745)*

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