

“YOU CAN’T BUILD A TOWER OUT OF TEARS!”: IRREDENTA AND STRUGGLES FOR INDEPENDENCE IN THE (POST) SOVIET SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Abstract

This article examines Soviet administrative and nationality policies in the South Caucasus, using the examples of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. From the perspective of Georgia, which was doubly affected, these policies were guided by the imperial principle of “divide and conquer”; from the perspective of the affected ethnic groups—Abkhazians, (South) Ossetians, and Karabakh Armenians—they were characterized by the violation of the right to national self-determination. The latter, along with the right to secession and the principle of territorial integrity, were enshrined in all Soviet constitutions (1918, 1924, 1936, and 1977), yet in late- and post-Soviet reality, they constituted irreconcilable principles of international law. The independence and irredentist aspirations of the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, located on the border with the Russian Federation, received economic, financial and military support from Russia, enabling them to escape Georgian control since the 1990s and, at the latest, since 2008. In the conflict between Azerbaijan and the irredentist movement of Nagorno-Karabakh as well as the Republic of Armenia, however, Russia remained passive or dashed Armenian hopes. The Azerbaijani starvation blockade and deportation of the Armenian population in 2023 were classified as genocide by international and national human rights organizations and marked the end of the De Facto Republic of Artsakh. The last part of this article addresses inconsistencies in international law regarding separatism and irredentism. Using the European examples of Kosovo, Catalonia, and Scotland, the inconsistent approval or rejection of such separatism is explained, and the respective motives are examined. In the concluding discussion, we take as our starting point the assertion by political scientist Stephen Krasner, who speaks of “organized hypocrisy”: states profess adherence to norms of international law but apply them in a highly selective manner.

Keywords: Georgia; Azerbaijan; Armenia; Soviet Union; Abkhazia; South Ossetia; Nagorno Karabakh; Secession; Irredentism; International Law; Remedial Secession; National Self-Determination; Territorial Integrity.

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“You can’t build a tower out of tears!”

This Ossetian proverb is based on the realization that suffering cannot serve as a basis for anything.

Soviet nationality policy was not only painful but also contradictory: on the one hand, it claimed to protect the rights of small nationalities and ethnic groups; on the other hand, this genuine or supposed protection served as a tool for controlling larger ethnic groups. It thus played both off against each other in the interest of maintaining its own imperial power. This was already evident in the four-tier administrative structure: The Soviet Union consisted of 15 Union Republics, including the Russian SFSR as the largest and dominant republic. Below the Union Republics were the Autonomous Soviet Republics, two of which were located in the South Caucasus: the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Republic (8,600 sq km) and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Soviet Republic (5,500 sq km, 9 February 1921–1991; predecessor since 28 April 1920: Nakhchivan Autonomous Region), where Armenians constituted the relative majority of the population, at about 40%, until the Soviet era. They were largely expelled or murdered in the course of the massacres and expulsions carried out by Kemalist and Islamist forces in 1919–1920. Under Soviet rule, Nakhchivan’s autonomous status was intended to strengthen its ties with Azerbaijan while simultaneously allowing for a degree of self-governance.

In addition, Soviet Azerbaijan and Georgia each possessed an autonomous region: Nagorno-Karabakh had been promised to the Soviet Republic of Armenia by the Soviets on several occasions from late 1920 through mid-1921, but was then assigned to Soviet Azerbaijan in June 1921 despite its almost exclusively Armenian population of over 90 percent, after the Azerbaijani head of government had threatened a counterrevolution. Georgia ruled over the Autonomous Region of South Ossetia (approx. 3,885 km²; officially the State of Alania since 2017).

Below the level of autonomous regions, autonomous districts existed as the smallest and least autonomous administrative units of the USSR. These were found primarily in the RSFSR, but not in the South Caucasus.

Secession (breakaway) and irredenta represent fundamentally opposing political aspirations: secession involves the separation from an existing state structure, perceived as liberation, while irredenta involves annexation or unification with another existing state, or the merger of several territories into a new one. The term originates from Italy’s national revolutionary movement in the 19th century: the claimed territory abroad was referred to as *Irredenta* (Italian: ‘terra irredenta’—the [as yet] unliberated land, lost land, literally: the unredeemed). From a politically isolated minority in the Italian-speaking Swiss canton of Ticino, irredentism was also applied to Italian-speaking Switzerland.¹ Let us examine the potential for

¹ Gilardoni, Silvano. „Irredentismus.“ In: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Schweiz*. 21. August 2008, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/017428/2008-08-21/>.

conflict associated with secession and irredentism using the South Caucasian examples of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Apsny (Abkhazia): A Minoritized Titular Nation, a Stable De Facto Republic Under Russian Patronage

The modern state of Abkhazia covers an area of 8,664.59 square kilometers. Along with the neighboring Circassians and Kabardians, the Abkhaz titular nation belongs to the North-West Caucasian ethnic groups. Their homeland on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, together with the mountainous hinterland, provided the picturesque backdrop for a tragedy that led to the presumably permanent displacement of over a quarter of a million people.

In contrast to the Georgians, who emphasize Abkhazia's connection to Georgia, the Abkhaz perspective underscores Abkhazia's autochthonous nature and autonomy throughout its entire history.² Georgian claims to Abkhazia stem from the dynastic ties between the two countries that have existed since the early Middle Ages: From the late 8th to the 10th century, Western Georgia was under the rule of the Abkhazian Kingdom, which was governed by a branch of the Bagratids; in the 10th century, Georgian was introduced as the official and liturgical language in Abkhazia.

Until the mid-18th century, Christianity and Islam—the latter had been successfully proselytized under Ottoman rule—coexisted alongside pre-Christian and pre-Islamic practices. Under Russian rule, religious affiliation formed the dividing line along which Abkhaz nobles were oriented either pro- or anti-Russian. Since an anti-Russian stance generally went hand in hand with adherence to Islam, no religiously motivated anti-Russian alliances of convenience with the Christian Georgians emerged.

The *muhajiroba*—the expulsion and mass exodus of North Caucasian Muslims in the 1860s—contributed significantly to the consolidation of Islam. After Abkhazia came under Russian rule from 1810 to 1829, large segments of the local Muslim population joined the North Caucasian resistance against Russian rule and, along with the Circassians and Ubykhs, suffered the consequences of the final military defeat in 1864. Of an estimated total population of up to 500,000 before 1864, 400,000 Muslim Abkhazians were forcibly resettled or fled. They found refuge as religious refugees, as *muhacirler* (*muhajirun*)³, into the Ottoman Empire, provided they survived the crossing in overcrowded ships as well as hunger and epidemics upon arrival. In their place, the Tsarist authorities settled Christian refugees from the Ottoman Black Sea regions, primarily Armenians and Pontic Greeks, as well as Georgians from Mingrelia, which borders Abkhazia; at the same

² Evers, Frank. *Mission Information Package South Caucasus*. Hamburg: CORE (Centre for OSCE Research; Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH); October 2003, p. 37.

³ Originally, the term “Muhacir” referred to a companion of the Islamic religious founder and prophet Muhammad during his flight in 622 CE.

time, the Orthodox counter-mission was intensified: 21,336 Muslim Abkhaz are said to have been converted to Christianity between 1866 and 1902.⁴ However, the return of descendants of the *muhacirler* from Turkey, as well as intensified ties with North Caucasian Muslims, have led to a modest resurgence of Islam in recent years. It is difficult to determine the actual number of Muslims and returnees in post-Soviet Abkhazia. In the two mosques in Aqwa (Ak̄a; Georgian: Sochumi; Russian: Sukhum) and Gudauta, approximately 200 Muslims are said to practice their religion. The material support for mosque construction and the repatriation assistance for the descendants of former *muhacirler* from Abkhazia, which were discussed in December 2008 at a meeting between the Deputy Mufti of Abkhazia, Timur Dsyba, with the head of the Turkish Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı), nevertheless alarmed parts of the Russian media⁵, as did the alliance between the Abkhaz and militant North Caucasians, which Russia fears⁶. According to the 2011 census, 60 percent of Abkhazia's inhabitants are Christian Orthodox, 16 percent are Muslim (Sunni), and 24 percent are non-denominational or belong to other religious groups.⁷

As early as the beginning of the 20th century, the Abkhaz had become a minority in their homeland. The Abkhaz diaspora, estimated today at 500,000 to 600,000 people, consists predominantly of the descendants of the *muhacirler* living in Turkey. The marginalization of the Abkhaz in their country of origin remained unchanged in the decades that followed. The last Soviet census in 1989 revealed that in the Autonomous Soviet Republic of Abkhazia, the titular nation numbered 93,300, ranking second after the Georgians (239,900), closely followed by Armenians (76,500) and Russians (74,900). In the post-Soviet census of 2003, Abkhazian authorities reported a total population of 215,962, comprising only 45,953 Georgians, 94,606 Abkhazians, 44,870 Armenians, 23,420 Russians, and 1,486 Greeks. This was rejected as exaggerated not only by Georgian authorities but also by organizations such as the *International Crisis Group*; the latter estimated Abkhazia's total population in 2006 at between 157,000 and 190,000, similar to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2006: 177,000).⁸ The last census in 2011 recorded a total population of 240,705. By that time, Georgians (Mingrelians and Swans) formed the second-largest minority group with a population of 46,455.⁹ Unofficial sources estimated that the Abkhaz and Armenian communities were

⁴ Sanikidze, George; Walker, Edward W. *Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia*. Berkeley: University of California, 2004, p. 20 ff. - https://iseees.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/2004_04-sani.pdf

⁵ Mel'nikov, Andrej. „Рука Анкары: Турция предлагает мусульманам Абхазии свою поддержку“. [The Hand of Ankara: Turkey Offers Its Support to the Muslims of Abkhazia.] *Novaya Gazeta Religii*, 3 Dec 2008.

⁶ Smirnov, Andrei. “North Caucasus Rebels Seek to Expand into Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Azerbaijan.” *North Caucasus Weekly*, Vol. 9, Issue 36, 26 September 2008.

⁷ <http://www.portal-credo.ru>.

⁸ <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Abkhazia>.

⁹ “Abkhazia in numbers 2011”. 2011.

roughly equal in number.¹⁰ By January 2025, the estimated total population of Abkhazia stood at 244,000.¹¹

Most citizens of Abkhazia have dual nationality: “Russia has (...) issued passports to the citizens of Abkhazia since 2000 (as Abkhazian passports cannot be used for international travel) and subsequently paid them retirement pensions and other monetary benefits. More than 80% of the Abkhazian population had received Russian passports by 2006. As Russian citizens living abroad, Abkhazians do not pay Russian taxes or serve in the Russian Army. About 53,000 Abkhazian passports had been issued as of May 2007.”¹²

Status issues and cultural conflicts defined Abkhazian-Georgian relations throughout the 20th century. In the spring of 1921, Abkhazia and Georgia were, for a brief period, on equal footing in terms of status: Georgia as an independent republic, and Abkhazia—which had been militarily conquered by the Soviets—as a Soviet Socialist Republic, which a year later was incorporated as such into the Transcaucasian Soviet Republic. Ten years later, in 1931, however, Abkhazia lost its status as a Soviet republic and, in violation of the agreement concluded with Georgia in 1921, was placed under Georgia’s authority as an Autonomous Soviet Republic. There, Abkhazian schools were closed in 1946. Abkhaz intellectuals who complained to Stalin in a letter of protest were reprimanded by the Party, without the school closures being reversed.

After World War II, the head of Stalin's secret police, Lavrenti Beria, continued the settlement policy in Abkhazia that had been initiated in the 19th century. Alongside numerous Georgians, Russians also settled in Abkhazia as part of this renewed resettlement of non-Abkhazians. In 1977, 133 Abkhazian intellectuals protested to the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Leonid Brežnev, against the forced Georgianization of their people and, for the first time, demanded annexation to the Russian Federation. Moscow unsuccessfully attempted to resolve the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict by improving the economic situation. The Aidgylara (“Unity”) People’s Front, founded in December 1988¹³, demanded the restoration of the former Soviet Republic of Abkhazia, thereby triggering Georgian counter-demonstrations as well as strikes in Georgia and Abkhazia. Tbilisi’s attempt to establish a branch of Tbilisi University in the Abkhazian capital of Aqwa exacerbated the conflict with Abkhazia beginning in May 1989; by the end of June 1989, protest demonstrations and strikes led to numerous armed clashes and prompted the deployment of special forces. In July

¹⁰ Tekushev, Islam. “An unlikely home”. *openDemocracy*, 5 January 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/unlikely-home/>.

¹¹ Kemp, Simon. “Digital 2025: Abkhazia.” *DataReportal*, 3 March 2025, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-abkhazia>

¹² “Abkhazia”, *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abkhazia>.

¹³ Beissinger, Mark R. *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 224.

1992, Abkhazia's representative body, the Supreme Soviet, declared the region's independence.

This was followed by the militarization of the conflict: allegedly to pursue the ousted president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and his supporters, as well as to regain control of the railway links from Russia, Georgian armed forces and paramilitary units entered Abkhazia on 14 August 1992. Supported by its North Caucasian allies and by Russia, Abkhazia withstood the poorly coordinated Georgian attack. During the thirteen months of fighting, war crimes were committed on both sides, most notably on 27 September 1993 during the recapture of the capital, Aqwa, by Abkhazian and Chechen forces. The massacres on that day and the following days claimed the lives of 7,000 people, including 100 prominent figures. The total number of victims of the 13-month Georgian-Abkhazian war, the associated massacres, and war crimes is estimated at 10,000 to 30,000 Georgians and 3,000 Abkhazians.¹⁴

“After the secessionist war and ethnic cleansing—ethnic Georgians, who had made up 46% of the pre-war population in Abkhazia, were forced to flee—and with the infrastructure and economy in shambles, in the first years following the 1993 Russia-brokered ceasefire, Abkhaz authorities and society alike remained in survival mode (...). The situation was further aggravated when Russia joined the CIS-sponsored economic blockade of Abkhazia.

Only toward the end of the 1990s did the situation begin to improve, primarily as a result of Russia easing the blockade. Although the final sanctions were not formally lifted until 2008 (...), from around the turn of the millennium, Moscow gradually adopted a more openly pro-Abkhaz position (...). This culminated in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, which, although mainly fought in and around South Ossetia, also spilled over into Abkhazia, where local forces, with Russian assistance, took control of the last remaining part of the former Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic still controlled by Tbilisi.”¹⁵

A ceasefire brokered by the United Nations on 14 May 1994 was enforced by a CIS peacekeeping force. Compliance with the agreement was monitored until 2008 by a 121-member *United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia* (UNOMIG). On 9 August 2008, UNOMIG partially suspended its activities in Abkhazia. It withdrew its observers stationed in the upper Kodori Valley because it anticipated a military operation by Abkhazia against Georgian-controlled Upper Abkhazia. In the view of the UN Security Council, UNOMIG's area of responsibility had been “unclear” since that date.

Negotiations to end the conflict have been held repeatedly under the auspices of the United Nations, so far in vain. Key points of contention included the

¹⁴ <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Abkhazia>

¹⁵ Blakkisrud, Helge; Kemoklidze, Nino. “Strategic Triangles, Actors and Agency: Georgia and Abkhazia in a Changing Regional Context.” *Caucasus Survey*, 15 Sept. 2023, https://brill.com/view/journals/casu/11/2-3/article-p111_1.xml?srsId=AfmBOopU9l2Unnigl_zM2V-p1wnCUIhSKbw4HERXNIIglv1PtIjWynSS.

repatriation of Georgian refugees and a political solution based on Georgia's territorial integrity. Both efforts failed due to the Abkhazian government, which insists on complete independence and rules out the return of refugees.

The reintegration plans of the then-Georgian government initially met with the approval of the UN, to whose General Assembly President Saakashvili had presented a three-stage plan for resolving the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia on 22 September 2004. The first stage called for confidence-building measures involving non-governmental organizations, students, journalists, doctors, athletes, and mothers. In the second stage, the conflict zones were to be demilitarized under international supervision. Finally, in the third stage, Georgia intended to grant Abkhazia and South Ossetia the greatest possible autonomy. The reality, however, was quite different. Similar to the approach taken in South Ossetia, on 27 September 2006 Saakashvili established an Abkhazian government-in-exile or opposition government under Malchas Aksichabaia in the village of Chchalta in the Upper Kodori Valley, after police and security forces had rounded up the regional Svan warlord and former Shevardnadze envoy Emsar Kwiziani and his 200 paramilitaries in late July 2006. When, one day after the Georgian attack on South Ossetia, Abkhazia made good on its threat and opened a second front against Georgia, the Georgian army was forced to withdraw from the Upper Kodori Valley on 13 August 2008. With that, Georgia lost its last vestige of control over Abkhazia.

Since 1993, the United Nations has repeatedly affirmed that, under international law, Abkhazia belongs to Georgia. Some international law experts consider Abkhazia to be a stabilized *de facto* regime that is beyond the sovereignty of Georgia.

Initially, Russia continued to delay recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, on 16 April 2008, the outgoing Russian president Vladimir Putin instructed his government to establish official ties with both *de facto*-republics, leading to Georgia's condemnation of what it described as an attempt at "de facto annexation" and criticism from the European Union, NATO, and several Western governments. Following Kosovo's declaration of independence, the Russian parliament released a joint statement reading: "Now that the situation in Kosovo has become an international precedent, Russia should take into account the Kosovo scenario... when considering ongoing territorial conflicts."¹⁶

Five states—in the order of Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, the Pacific island nation of Nauru, and Syria—recognized Abkhazia as an independent state between 2008 and 2018. The states of Vanuatu and Tuvalu revoked their recognition in 2013 and 2014. There are no diplomatic relations between Abkhazian and Georgian government authorities. However, the Georgian government elected in 2012 under Bidzina Ivanishvili signaled a willingness to engage in dialogue for the

¹⁶ "Recognition may come 'this year,' South Ossetian leader says; report. *UNOMIG*, 21 Feb. 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080531165158/http://www.unomig.org/media/headlines/?id=10173&y=2008&m=02&d=21>.

first time in mid-2013 and also admitted to some misconduct during the 2008 Caucasus War.

A 2010 nationwide representative survey by John O'Loughlin and colleagues (University of Colorado Boulder) revealed major differences in orientation across the four main ethnic groups in Abkhazia: while 79% of the ethnic Abkhaz polled preferred independence, a majority of the Armenians (51%) and a substantial share of the Russians (38%) preferred Abkhazia to become a part of the Russian Federation.¹⁷ Among the Georgians/Mingrelians, overt support for reintegration with Georgia was surprisingly low, less than 20%—but this might be explained by this group's discomfort with answering this question (nearly 30% opted for "hard to say" or "refuse to answer").¹⁸ The survey's authors comment: "We find empirical evidence for optimism within society, with Abkhaz being the most optimistic among the four principal ethnic groups. Almost a quarter of them declare that they are in an excellent mood, and another 60 percent feel they are in an average or normal mood. Similarly, Armenians (87 percent) and Russians (83 percent) report an excellent or normal mood, in contrast to only 57 percent for Georgians/Mingrelians (...). This 30-point gap between Georgians and others is crucial, and the difference undoubtedly influences, and is influenced by, the related political, social, and economic conditions in the republic."¹⁹ Nearly 50% of the Georgian minority support Abkhazia's continued existence as an independent state, while less than 20% consider a return to Georgia necessary. A return to Georgia is almost unanimously rejected by all other population groups.²⁰

Economically, Abkhazia is heavily dependent on Russia, by far its most important trading partner; nearly all food is imported from there. According to various sources, Russia funds between "nearly 40 percent" (Amnesty International) and three-quarters ("Wikipedia") of Abkhazia's budget. The second most important trading partner is Turkey, with its Abkhaz diaspora of half a million people. Georgia continues to this day to attempt to enforce a trade embargo against Abkhazia, which hinders the region's economic recovery.

To avoid an overly one-sided dependence on Russia, various Abkhaz governments in the past and present have pursued an approach of multivektoral foreign policy (*mnogovektornost'*). "Unlike in most other post-Soviet de facto states, the political class in Abkhazia is highly mobilized. Whereas the chaotic, impoverished immediate post-war period was accompanied by relative political stability under President Vladislav Ardzinba (1994–2005), the struggle over his successor sparked a political crisis. After loud protests and mobilization in the streets, Moscow's preferred successor was forced to step down and hand the

¹⁷ O'Loughlin, J., Kolossov, V.; Toal, G. "Inside Abkhazia: Survey of Attitudes in a De Facto State." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 27, 2011, 1: p. 31f. [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpgclefindmkaj/-https://abkhazworld.com/Pdf/Inside_Abkhazia_Survey.pdf](https://abkhazworld.com/Pdf/Inside_Abkhazia_Survey.pdf).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31f.

presidency to his opponent, Sergei Bagapsh (Abkhaz president 2005–2011). This debacle sent two important signals.

First, it demonstrated that the Abkhaz political elite was not ready to take their cues from Moscow: their perception of Abkhazia's best interests did not necessarily always coincide with Moscow's, and the 2005 succession crisis showed that, in such cases, Moscow's designs might be successfully challenged. Moreover, although it has remained fundamentally important for Abkhaz authorities to secure continued support from their Russian patron for everything from ensuring military security to providing healthcare services and educational opportunities that the de facto state itself cannot afford, Abkhaz politicians must still strike a balance: if perceived as being too subservient or selling out Abkhaz interests, politicians risk being severely punished by the local electorate.

Second, it proved to the political class and the public alike that political scores could be settled in the streets. The succession crisis thus set a precedent for street politics. Time and again, the opposition has filled the streets, demanding concessions and personnel reshuffles. In fact, the two presidents who succeeded Bagapsh—first Aleksander Ankvab (2011–2014) and then Raul Khajimba (2014–2020)—were both forced to step down amid large-scale street protests.”²¹

South Ossetia: A Divided Majority

Table 1: Ethnic Composition of the Autonomous Region of South Ossetia and the Post-Soviet De Facto Republic, 1926–2015²²

	Census 1926	Census 1939	Census 1959	Census 1970	Census 1979
Ossetians	60.351 (69,1 %)	72.266 (68,1 %)	63.698 (65,8 %)	66.073 (66,5 %)	65.077 (66,4 %)
Georgians	23.538 (26,9 %)	27.525 (25,9 %)	26.584 (27,5 %)	28.125 (28,3 %)	28.187 (28,8 %)
Russians	157 (0,2 %)	2.111 (2,0 %)	2.380 (2,5 %)	1.574 (1,6 %)	2.046 (2,1 %)
Armenians	1.374 (1,6 %)	1.537 (1,4 %)	1.555 (1,6 %)	1.254 (1,3 %)	953 (1,0 %)
Jews	1.739 (2,0 %)	1.979 (1,9 %)	1.723 (1,8 %)	1.485 (1,5 %)	654 (0,7 %)
Other	216 (0,2 %)	700 (0,7 %)	867 (0,9 %)	910 (0,9 %)	1.071 (1,1 %)
Total	7.375	106.118	96.807	99.421	97.988

	Census 1989	Census 2007	Census 2012	Census 2015
Ossetians	65.223 (66,2 %)	47.000 (67,1 %)	45.950 (89,1 %)	48.146 (89,9 %)
Georgians	28.544 (29,0 %)	17.500 (25,0 %)	4.590 (8,9 %)	3.966 (7,4 %)
Russians	2.128 (2,2 %)	2.100 (3,0 %)	515 (1,0 %)	610 (1,1 %)
Armenians	984 (1,0 %)	900 (1,3 %)	–	–
Jews	396 (0,4 %)	650 (0,9 %)	–	–
Other	1.243 (1,3 %)	1.850 (2,6 %)	515 (1,0 %)	810 (1,5 %)
Total	98.527	70.000	51.572	53.532

The Ossetians are considered indirect descendants of the northeastern Iranian equestrian and steppe peoples of the Scythians and Sarmatians, as well as direct

²¹ Blakkisrud, Helge; Kemoklidze, Nino, op. cit.

²² Russian State Archive of Economics website ethno-kavkaz.ru / “RGAE: Russian State Archive of Economics” Ethno-Kavkaz website.

heirs of the Alans, who were also Iranian and ruled over what would later become southern Russia from the 1st century AD until they were driven into the North Caucasus by the Huns in 374. Here they intermingled with indigenous mountain peoples, who adopted the Iranian language and culture of the Alans; the Ossetian name for the country, Iryston, and the ethnonym Iron point to this Iranian ancestry. The South Ossetians emerged from the southernmost of the four Alano-Ossetian tribes, the Tualläg, and found refuge from the Mongols in the Georgian principality of Samakhablo. This protracted ethnogenesis came to an end in the 18th century. Today, only 16% (2015: 48,146) of the total 700,000–800,000 Ossetians live in South Ossetia.

The Ossetians living south of the main Caucasus mountain range formed only small settlements that were feudally dependent on local Georgian lords. Poverty and a shortage of arable land thus led to a constant exodus to the fertile Georgian plains. Consequently, for example, at the end of Soviet rule, the Ossetian population in the Gori district bordering South Ossetia—numbering about 100,000—was larger than that remaining in South Ossetia, where, according to the 1989 census, Ossetians made up 66% (65,200) of an overall population of 99,000 (see Table 1); across all of Soviet Georgia, 165,000 Ossetians were counted in 1989. Since then, the Ossetian language has stood isolated within the Iranian language family and exhibits similarities with both the non-Iranian South Caucasian languages and the neighboring North Caucasian languages to the east, and even with Turkish.

The Christian missionary work in Ossetia, which originated directly from Byzantium in the 6th and 7th centuries, was completed with the establishment of an Alanic archdiocese in 921. Beginning in the 16th century, the Islamic mission originating from the Kabardians to the west achieved considerable success among the North-West Caucasians, including the North Ossetians. As a result, up to 61% of all Ossetians profess Islam. However, neither Christianity nor Islam was able to supplant the beliefs and traditions of far older, pre-Abrahamic faiths, especially since Christianity was limited for long periods of history to the Alano-Ossetian warrior and tribal nobility. From their indigenous Caucasian ancestors, the Ossetians adopted, among other things, the cult of sacred groves, which was once widespread in the Eastern Caucasus, and from their Alani ancestors, remnants of the ancient Iranian cult of the elements and ancestors. Although a literary language for the Ossetians did not develop until the end of the 18th century, the Ossetians possess a rich oral tradition of poetry. Their most important contribution to world literature is the cycle of legends surrounding the heroic Nart clan.²³

Unlike the Chechens and Circassians, the Ossetians did not participate in any of the anti-Russian uprisings that periodically shook the North Caucasus from the 18th century onward. From 1767 to 1774, Ossetia, which found itself in a

²³ Dumézil, George. *Le Livre des Héros: Légendes sur les Nartes*. Paris: UNESCO Collection of Representative Works, 1965.

precarious position between Iran, the Russian and Ottoman Empires, relinquished its independence and was incorporated into the Russian Empire. When Russia annexed Georgia at the beginning of the 19th century, it elevated the South Ossetian settlement areas to an “Ossetian District” (“Osetinskij okrug”) within the Tiflis Governorate. Although this administrative unit existed only until 1834, it became, in the minds of the South Ossetians, the nucleus of their claims to autonomy.

Starting in 1918, pro-Soviet movements emerged in North Ossetia and the North Caucasus, which also spread to South Ossetia. With the collapse of the Tsarist Empire in 1917, South Ossetia came under the rule of the now independent Georgia.

The South Ossetians demanded national rights and recognition of their “Soviet Republic,” which they had proclaimed under Bolshevik influence on 6 May 1920, initially for the Ruk district, and then on 8 June 1920 for all of South Ossetia. As early as 17 May, Soviet Russian Foreign Minister Georgij Čičerin warned the Georgian government in a note against military intervention: “(...) Georgia’s interference in the affairs of Ossetia would constitute an unjustifiable interference in the affairs of another state.”²⁴ Nevertheless, beginning on 12 June 1920, Georgian government troops crushed the Ossetian uprising in a bloody punitive expedition, killing nearly 5,000 people and driving up to 20,000 Ossetians (out of a total Ossetian population of 130,000 at the time) from their previously burned villages into the Soviet Russian district of Tersk. A telegram from the South Ossetian Regional Committee of the RCP(b) to Lenin dated 18 June 1920 states:

“The communist units in South Ossetia have almost run out of ammunition. The brutal Menshevik gangs have burned down the villages. A total of 25 large villages have been burned, not counting the small ones. All peaceful inhabitants, young and old, are being mercilessly slaughtered. Such is the grim government order. Working-class Ossetia, which is shedding its blood in an unequal, arduous struggle, awaits decisive aid.”²⁵ Many of the displaced persons and refugees died from cold, hunger, and disease, which is why the forced resettlement lives on as genocide in the historical memory of the South Ossetians.

South Ossetia was declared an autonomous region covering 3,700 square kilometers on 22 April 1922 at the instigation of Stalin, whose father, Visarion Džugaev, is said to have been Ossetian²⁶. Genuine cultural autonomy was lacking,

²⁴ Central Foreign State Archives of the Georgian Soviet Republic, Fund 1864, op. 1, File 100, Sheet 63. Quoted from: Čelechsaty, Kazbek (ed.) *Osetija i osetiny* [Ossetia and the Ossetians]. Vladikavkaz; Saint Petersburg: Association of Creative and Scientific Intelligentsia of the IR, 1994. p. 148.

²⁵ Quoted from: Čelechsaty, op. cit., p. 149.

²⁶ Such speculations are particularly popular among the Ingush, who are involved in a territorial conflict with the North Ossetians. The rumor likely stems from a poem (1939) by the Georgian Georgi Leonidze about Stalin’s childhood, in which it was mentioned that Stalin’s ancestors came from the South Ossetian village of Geri. Since the poem passed censorship, it was regarded as a reliable source. As early as 1933, the prominent Russian-Jewish poet Osip Mandelstam also alluded to Stalin’s Ossetian origins in his epigram “*Мы живем под собою не чуя страны. . .*” (*We live*

however: until 1954, the South Ossetians were required to use the Georgian alphabet.

Only Russian was taught in the nominally Ossetian elementary schools of South Ossetia. Even during the Soviet era, South Ossetia was separated from North Ossetia by a time zone and differing cultural-political practices.

Georgia's anti-Soviet independence movement put the South Ossetians in a bind in 1989. They feared that in an independent Georgia no longer controlled by Moscow, they would be entirely at the mercy of Georgian authorities. The established Communist Party rulers of South Ossetia were additionally alarmed by the threat of losing power as a result of the shift in the political center of power from distant Moscow to nearby Tbilisi, without the Kremlin serving as the supreme arbiter and decision-making authority. Consequently, on 10 November 1989, the South Ossetian Regional Soviet submitted a request to the Georgian Parliament for the elevation and recognition of South Ossetia as an Autonomous Soviet Republic, which was, as expected, rejected.²⁷ Instead, 13 days later, a march organized by Georgian nationalist organizations—which were still in opposition at the time—set out for the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinval with 20,000 participants (40,000 according to Ossetian sources), chanting chauvinistic slogans (“Georgia for the Georgians”). Units of the central Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs, which positioned themselves between the conflicting parties, prevented major bloodshed at the time.

The decision by the Supreme Council of Georgia to declare Georgian the official language nationwide and the ban on regional parties in the summer of 1990 caused tensions between the Ossetians and the central government in Tbilisi to escalate. On 20 September 1990, South Ossetia declared itself a democratic republic within the still-existing USSR and boycotted the Georgian parliamentary elections. Georgian President Gamsakhurdia declared the elections held in South Ossetia in December 1990 to be illegitimate and completely revoked South Ossetia's autonomous status on 11 December 1990. When, a year later, the South Ossetian government attempted to implement its declaration of independence in

beneath ourselves, unaware of the country. . .)—though perhaps only for the sake of the rhyme (“osetina” rhyming with “malina”); his epigram ends with the lines:

Кому в пах, кому в лоб, кому в бровь, кому в глаз.

Что ни казнь у него—то малина

И широкая грудь осетина.

Some get it in the groin, some in the forehead, some in the eyebrow, and some in the eye.

Whatever punishment he metes out—it's a raspberry

And the broad chest of the Ossetian.

Mandelstam was less fortunate than Leonidze, who came after him, for his poem led to the poet's arrest, imprisonment, and death in December 1938. - According to other speculations, Stalin was of Jewish descent.

²⁷ For a chronology of the 1989–1994 conflict period based on political statements, press coverage, and other contemporary documents, see Čelechsaty, *op. cit.*, pp. 271–384.

practice, a civil war broke out. Once again, South Ossetian villages were burned to the ground, as were Georgian schools and homes in the capital, Tskhinval. In a region where close interethnic relations and numerous binational marriages had existed until the summer of 1990, approximately one thousand people died as a result of interethnic violence. About 100,000 South Ossetians from the former Autonomous Region as well as from the rest of Georgia fled to North Ossetia, while 23,000 Georgians fled South Ossetia. The similarities in the situations of 1920 and 1990—armed action by the two independent Georgian republics against South Ossetia's attempts at secession—were perceived there and within the Ossetian community in Russia as a repetitive genocide²⁸; South Ossetians who had fled to Russia appealed to Russian and international human rights organizations to call Georgia to order.

The Ossetian-Georgian war ended on 24 June 1992 with the agreement on the principles for resolving the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, signed in Sochi by Boris Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze. In addition to the ceasefire, it provided for a demilitarized security zone of about 15 km on both sides of the southern border of the former Autonomous Region, as well as a four-party joint monitoring commission to oversee the ceasefire, chaired by Russia and with the participation of Georgia, North Ossetia, and South Ossetia. Furthermore, a peacekeeping force consisting of three contingents—Russia, Georgia, and South Ossetia—each comprising 500 troops and headquartered in Tskhinval was formed. A memorandum signed in Moscow in 1996, with the participation of the OSCE mission in Georgia, reaffirmed the mutual renunciation of violence.

The Georgian government's stated intention, following the "Rose Revolution" of 2003, to bring "separatist" regions back under its control immediately led to a renewed destabilization of the situation in South Ossetia. As early as June 2004, interethnic violence broke out there once again. Saakashvili's attempt in 2006 to undermine the authority of the South Ossetian government under Eduard Kokoity by establishing a pro-Georgian rival government led by former South Ossetian Defense Minister and Prime Minister Dmitry Sanakoev was approved by the European Union but only contributed to further escalation. Even at that time, the Brussels-based *International Crisis Group* criticized the Saakashvili government's actions as one-sided and significantly exacerbating the conflict.

Even more disastrous was the attempt to forcibly bring South Ossetia back under Georgian control by military means. On the night of 7 to 8 August 2008, Saakashvili ordered the Georgian Minister of Internal Affairs to attack Tskhinval, with air support, ground troops and artillery deployed, including internationally condemned cluster bombs. In response, the South Ossetian parliament requested emergency assistance from Russia in the early morning of 8 August—a scenario reminiscent again of the situation in 1920. According to German international law

²⁸ See Čelechsaty, op. cit., p. 271; *Južnaja Ossetija: I krov', i pepel...* [South Ossetia: Both Blood and Ashes...]. (Vladikavkaz: Association of Creative and Scientific Intelligentsia of the IR, 1991).

expert Otto Luchterhandt, who has examined the respective shares of blame borne by Georgia and Russia, Georgia violated the mandatory prohibition on the use of force enshrined in the UN Charter (Art. 2(4) of the Charter of the United Nations). This is because, according to prevailing opinion, the prohibition on the use of force also protects “stabilized de facto regimes,” that is, state-like entities with partial capacity under international law, such as the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus”²⁹ or Nagorno-Karabakh. Through its attack, Georgia also violated essential norms of international humanitarian law and the laws of war (Art. 3 and 18 of the Fifth Geneva Convention of 1949, as well as Art. 48, 51, and 59 of its First Additional Protocol of 1977), such as the prohibition on attacking the civilian population, civilian objects, and “unprotected places.” At the same time, Georgia’s attack on the headquarters of the Russian peacekeeping force provided Russia with a legally acceptable justification for armed intervention under international law, as the killing of twelve Russian soldiers and the wounding of another 150 established Russia’s right to self-defense. A total of 30,000 people fled to North Ossetia, and another 15,000 to Georgia; over 1,400 civilians were killed, according to South Ossetian and Russian sources.

As a result of the war in Georgia, Russia, followed by Nicaragua³⁰, recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. “Georgia has now lost both territories—largely through its own fault—probably forever,” O. Luchterhandt concludes.³¹ On 9 May 2026, Moscow and Tskhinval signed an “Agreement on Deepening Alliance and Cooperation.”³²

Since 1990, South Ossetia has eluded the control of the central government in Tbilisi with the help of Russian troops. 95% of the residents of the Republic of South Ossetia have since also acquired Russian citizenship. As a result of the conflict over South Ossetia and the associated economic decline, the population has steadily decreased since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The current population figure is unknown. An estimate from 2010 suggested that there were only about 30,000 people left in South Ossetia, of whom about 2,500 were Georgians. The South Ossetian government, however, puts the population at about 72,000, while the Russian news agency RIA Novosti estimated the population at about 80,000.

²⁹ Luchterhandt, Otto. “Völkerrechtliche Aspekte des Georgien-Krieges.” In: Bungarten, Pia; Buhbe, Matthes (Hg.): *Krieg um Südossetien: Analysen und Perspektiven aus Hauptstädten der Welt*. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung, Oktober 2008, p. 8.

³⁰ Following the recognition on 5 September 2008, Georgia severed diplomatic relations with Nicaragua.

³¹ Luchterhandt, op. cit., p. 10.

³² Gvadzabia, Mikheil. “Tbilisi says Russia advances annexation steps in Georgia after new South Ossetia deal”. *Open Media*, 15 May 2026, https://oc-media.org/tbilisi-says-russia-advances-annexation-steps-in-georgia-after-new-south-ossetia-deal/?fbclid=IwY2xjawR1eeJleHRuA2FlbQIxMABicmlkETFIT3BHNmRLUFFjYVg2UGlwc3J0YwZhcHBfaWQQMjlyMDM5MTc4ODIwMDg5MgABHk0XZYRkZpRzQjurxrMdlOwmM3t-2HY0wi9mz8E8ksXAjckZBxes9LRMUQrV_aem_iaFgclOckFoyI3XoO9IRRA.

The majority of the population remains Christian Orthodox, though there are also some Muslim South Ossetians.

Artsakh: An Irredenta Ended in Genocide

The Armenian name for the region derives from the Urartian provincial name Urdekhe. In fact, Artsakh had belonged to the Kingdom of Urartu in the 8th century BCE. After the collapse of the Armenian monarchy in the 11th century, there was no longer any sovereign noble rule in the Armenian Highlands, with the exception of Artsakh and neighboring Syunik. Only in the remote northeastern border regions were elements of Armenian statehood able to survive into modern times. The indigenous Armenian population of these regions has a history spanning nearly three thousand years, in contrast to the Azerbaijanis, who only formed a short-lived republic under this ethnonym in 1918. In the mid-19th century, the question of the cultural and ethnic autonomy of the Azerbaijanis arose among the Russian-aculturated intellectual Enlightenment thinkers in the South Caucasus. Various responses were developed—Pan-Turkic, Pan-Islamic, and regionalist—though initially the political and cultural orientation toward the Ottoman Empire prevailed. This pro-Turkish orientation paved the way for Ottoman troops to enter Baku in 1918. Toward the end of World War I, regionalist forces prevailed over Pan-Turkism. They were supported primarily by Great Britain, and later by Soviet Russia. Due to economic and military competition with both Germany—which was allied with Ottoman Turkey—and the Soviet Russians, who allied with Kemalist Turkey shortly thereafter, the British were keen to push back both rivals in the South Caucasus and thus to create and strengthen a national Azerbaijani buffer state under their control between Iran, Turkey, and Russia, which was pushing southward. This did not prevent Northern Azerbaijan from becoming the first South Caucasian country to be Sovietized in April 1920.

Under Mustafa Kemal, Turkey ensured that the Soviet-Azerbaijani region of Nakhchivan was placed under Soviet Azerbaijan's control through the Soviet Russian-Turkish Friendship Treaty signed in Moscow on 16 March 1921. This success encouraged the Azerbaijanis to strike a second blow. They found support in the Georgian Stalin, whom the Azerbaijanis in turn supported in Georgia's claims to the Georgian-Muslim region of Adjara, including the important Black Sea port of Batumi: an Azerbaijani-Georgian alliance against Armenia, tolerated by the Soviet Russian state. In an alliance of convenience with Stalin, the Soviet Azerbaijani Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, Nariman Narimanov, convened a plenary session on 5 July 1921 to revoke the previous day's resolution, which had assigned Karabakh to Soviet Armenia.³³ According to the revised resolution, Nagorno-Karabakh was to belong to Soviet Azerbaijan as an autonomous region. No referendum was held among the affected population, just

³³ Mikaeljan, Vardges; Churšudjan, Lendruš. *Nekotorye voprosy istorii Nagornogo Karabacha*. Erevan 1988, p. 53.

as none had been held in Abkhazia or South Ossetia. Of the historic Artsakh's former 12,000 square kilometers, only the central third was granted autonomous status; a direct connection to the Soviet Republic of Armenia was thus severed. Anyone wishing to travel from there to the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region had to take a long detour via the city of Kirovabad (Armenian: Gandzak). The connection between Soviet Armenia and Karabakh was largely severed during the 70 years of Soviet rule.

Between 1929 and 1932, all 100 village churches and the 18 hermitages in Artsakh were forced to close. For decades, the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church appealed in vain to the Soviet Azerbaijani government to be allowed to reopen at least one or two churches in Artsakh. It was not until the fall of 1988, following months of protests by the people of Artsakh and Soviet Armenia, that the reopening of the famous Gandzasar Monastery and a church in the historic capital of Shushi was promised.

Following the Turkish model, Soviet Azerbaijan engaged in both active and passive destruction of sacred and secular Armenian cultural monuments in Artsakh, and particularly in the already de-Armenianized Nakhchivan, in order to destroy evidence of current and former Armenian settlement. Of the 1,600 officially registered architectural and cultural monuments in Artsakh, only 64—and mostly Muslim ones—were maintained by Soviet Azerbaijan. The majority, such as the Amaras Monastery founded in the 4th century, were left to decay or even deliberate destruction, as was the case with the Church of Khutavank (5th century), which was misused as a cattle shed; inside, manure had been smeared onto the walls in a layer one meter thick. In 1986, saboteurs blew up this early Christian structure under the pretext of “geological fieldwork.”³⁴

Soviet Azerbaijan discriminated against the Armenian population of Artsakh in all areas of life and culture. The government in Baku deliberately kept the Armenian exclave in a state of economic and social underdevelopment, even though the production of meat, milk, and wine was well above the Azerbaijani average. The Artsakhians were not allowed to use the water from their rivers and mountain streams for their own fields and gardens. The militia, as well as key positions in the administration, were disproportionately held by Azerbaijanis, while incomes were far below those in comparable Azerbaijani towns.³⁵ Armenian history was not to be taught in schools. There was a lack of Armenian-language textbooks, and Artsakh was culturally bled dry. When an Armenian-language theater was finally permitted to open in capital of the Autonomous Region, Stepanakert, the Armenian theater in Baku—where over 200,000 Armenians lived

³⁴ Ajvazjan, Suren. *Open Letter to Mikhail Gorbachev*, 5 March 1987, p. 5 (Russian).

³⁵ Hofmann, Tessa. “Einleitung”. In: *Panzer gegen Perestrojka: Dokumentation zum Konflikt in und um §Arzach* (“Karabach”). Hg. Von der Armenischen Kolonie zu Berlin e.V. / Armenisch-Apostolische Kirchengemeinde Berlin und dem Verband Armenischer Vereinigungen im deutschsprachigen Raum. Bremen: Donat-Verlag, 1989, p. 18.

until 1990—was forced to close.³⁶ Large segments of the working population were forced to leave their homeland and relocate to the industrial cities of Azerbaijan for lack of work-places and low payments. The monument *We Are Our Mountains*, inaugurated in 1967, alludes to the aging population as a result of these state induced demographic policy and is popularly known as “Tatik u Papik” – Grandmother and Grandfather; it became the region’s unofficial symbol.

As an autonomous region, Karabakh had no right to secession but could only apply to the Baku government for withdrawal from Soviet Azerbaijan and ask the Soviet Republic of Armenia for admission. Since 1986, signatures had once again been collected in Artsakh in support of joining Soviet Armenia. In August 1987, Artsakh Armenians submitted a petition addressed to Party Leader Gorbachev and signed by 75,000 petitioners. From late 1987 through mid-February 1988, three Artsakh delegations traveled to Moscow to seek a response to their mass petition. When they returned empty-handed, demonstrations and strikes began in Artsakh. On 20 February 1988, the Artsakh Council of People’s Deputies approved the annexation to Armenia. A few days later, the industrial city of Sumgait saw the first in a series of pogroms against the Armenian population, with the perpetrators provided with lists of residents. The massacres in Sumgait, Kirovabad—now once again known as Ganja—and Baku between 1988 and January 1990 triggered mutual expulsions and mass exoduses: approximately 500,000 Armenian displaced persons and war refugees from Azerbaijan and Karabakh, as well as 724,000 Azerbaijani war and internally displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia.

In two military attacks in violation of international law, Azerbaijan attempted to force Artsakh back under its control. This failed in the First Karabakh War (1991–May 1994). In the Second Karabakh War (fall 2020), Azerbaijan—which for years had engaged in an arms race that was hopeless to win for Armenia—succeeded in recapturing one-third of the former Autonomous Region. The remaining De Facto-Republic of Artsakh was thereafter connected to the Republic of Armenia only via the Lachin Corridor. In December 2022, Azerbaijan imposed a nine-month hunger blockade on Karabakh. Russia, which had intervened on behalf of the Armenians during the Second Karabakh War and brokered a ceasefire, did not intervene this time to lift the blockade, much to the Armenians’ disappointment. In Artsakh, public transportation collapsed due to a lack of fuel, and imports and exports to Armenia were no longer possible. The number of premature births and stillbirths rose. On 19 September 2023, Azerbaijan launched another military attack on the starving population of Karabakh and drove them out completely. 120,000 people were uprooted. They are not welcome by the political leadership of the Republic of Armenia under Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan; he publicly denounced them as deserters, cowards, and ungrateful, and does not advocate for their right of return

³⁶ Galoyan, G.A.; Chudaverdyan, K.S. (Red.): *Nagornyy Karabach: Istoričeskaja spravka*. [Nagorno-Karabakh: Historical Reference]. Yerevan 1988, p. 58.

and homeland or compensation for their lost property. National and international human rights organizations, as well as experts in international law, including the first Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Dr. iur. Luis Moreno Ocampo, have assessed the starvation blockade and the deportation of the Armenian population as genocide. This was not the first time Armenians had experienced Azerbaijani mass violence. Interethnic conflicts erupted in the South Caucasus during every crisis of the Russian central government: in 1905, 1918–1920, and 1988–1990. Armenians were usually the victims, particularly in Karabakh in March 1920, when irregular Muslim units massacred 20,000 Armenians in Shushi.

The De Facto Republic of Artsakh existed for 33 years without any international recognition or support, not even from the five states that had recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The Republic of Armenia, with which Artsakh was in an economic and monetary union, likewise did not dare to grant formal recognition, let alone annex the region. The irredentist demand “Miatsum!”—“Unification!”—which in 1988 led a million people to demonstrate in the Armenian capital Yerevan and resulted in the joint resolution on the “reunification of the Armenian Soviet Republic and the Nagorno-Karabakh region” by the National Council of Artsakh and the Supreme Council of the Armenian Soviet Republic on 1 December 1989, was indeed incorporated into Armenia’s Declaration of Independence of 23 August 1990, which in turn forms the preamble to the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia³⁷, but was never realized.

Artsakh received economic support primarily from the Armenian diaspora, particularly in the United States.

Assessment under International Law

International law recognizes two principles that are difficult to reconcile: the right to national self-determination and the protection of territorial integrity. Both of these, as well as the right to secession, were enshrined in all three Soviet constitutions of 1924, 1936, and 1977; however, in the late and post-Soviet reality, they became highly contentious principles. Even international law scholars offer conflicting answers to the question of which legal principle takes precedence. Among the proponents of “remedial secession” (the right to self-defense), according to which the right to secession may take precedence over territorial integrity under certain conditions, the following international law scholars are found within German academia:

- Jochen A. Frowein (former director of the Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law) is cited in the debate on the right to self-defense, even though he himself takes the strict position that secessions are

³⁷ <http://www.parliament.am/legislation.php?sel=show&ID=2602&lang=eng;>
<https://www.president.am/en/constitution-2015/>

legitimate only in exceptional cases and in the event of serious human rights violations.³⁸

- Eyal Benvenisti (international law scholar and former UN Special Rapporteur) argues in his work that the right of peoples to self-determination may, under certain circumstances, justify secession, particularly in cases of systematic oppression. His work explores when and how secession can be justified.³⁹

- Antje-Verena von Ungern-Sternberg (professor of international law) argues in her publications that the right to self-determination can allow for secession in extreme cases, such as in the event of persistent and severe human rights violations.⁴⁰

- Stefan Oeter (international law scholar and professor at the University of Hamburg) discusses in his works the possibility of remedial secession as a last resort in cases of serious violations of the right to self-determination.⁴¹

- Ulrich Fastenrath (Professor of International Law at TU Dresden) is among those who recognize remedial secession as a theoretically possible exception to the principle of territorial integrity.⁴²

- Otto Luchterhandt⁴³ (Professor Emeritus at the University of Hamburg) has spoken out in particular in favor of the right to self-determination for Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) and South Ossetia.

However and as mentioned before, these positions are not uncontroversial and are the subject of heated debate in the literature on international law. The prevailing view continues to emphasize the primacy of territorial integrity or acknowledges the possible legitimacy of secession only in extreme cases—such as genocide or systematic oppression. In an article on the website of the German “Federal Agency for Civic Education” (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung), O. Luchterhandt reaches the following conclusion regarding Nagorno-Karabakh’s right to self-defense: “Although the Republic of Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh is not

³⁸ Frowein, Jochen A. *Das De Facto-Regime im Völkerrecht: Eine Untersuchung zur Rechtsstellung nichtanerkannter Staaten und ähnlicher Gebilde*. Köln/Berlin, 1968.

³⁹ Benvenisti, Eyal. “De facto Regimes in International Law”. In: Wladyslaw Czapinski/Agata Hleczkowska (eds.): *Unrecognised Subjects in International Law*. Warsaw: Scholar Publishing House, 2019, pp. 59–78.

⁴⁰ Walter, Christian; Ungern-Sternberg, Antje von; Kavus, Abushow (eds.). *Self-Determination and Secession in International Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁴¹ Oeter, Stefan. “The Role of Recognition and Non-Recognition with Regard to Secession”. In: Walter / Ungern-Sternberg / Abushow, op. cit., pp. 45–67; idem, “The Kosovo Case – An Unfortunate Precedent”. *Zeitschrift für öffentliches ausländisches Recht und Völkerrecht*, 2015, Vol. 75, pp. 51–74; https://www.zaoerv.de/75_2015/75_2015_1_a_51_74.pdf.

⁴² Fastenrath, Ulrich. *The Law of State Succession*. Heidelberg 1996.

⁴³ Chair of Public Law and Eastern European Law, Director of the Department of Eastern European Legal Research, Faculty of Law, University of Hamburg (1991–2008); numerous publications on constitution, law, and politics in Central, Southeastern, and Eastern Europe (USSR/Russia/CIS) as well as on international law; Since 1992, active as a constitutional and legal advisor in German government programs (GTZ/GIZ; IRZ Foundation), for political foundations, and in EU TACIS projects, primarily in Russia, Ukraine, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan; in 2009, international law expert for the EU mission investigating the background of the 2008 war in Georgia.

internationally recognized, it meets all the criteria of a de facto state and therefore possesses partial subjectivity under international law according to internationally recognized doctrine. The most important consequence of this is that the Republic of Artsakh is protected against external attacks by the general prohibition on the use of force under international law pursuant to Art. 2(4) of the UN Charter and, in the event of its violation—in principle no differently than the Republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia—can invoke the right to self-defense under international law (Art. 51 UN Charter). As Art. 51, sentence 1, expressly states, this right can and may be exercised not only 'individually,' i.e., by the Republic of Artsakh alone, but also 'collectively.' The military assistance provided to the Republic of Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh by the Republic of Armenia was therefore not a violation of international law.”⁴⁴

Luchterhandt's colleague Hans-Joachim Heintze (Ruhr University Bochum) disagrees on the same website: “Professor Luchterhandt also fundamentally shares the view regarding the continued validity of internal state borders, but at the same time argues that Azerbaijan forfeited its sovereign rights over Nagorno-Karabakh because it unilaterally and arbitrarily seceded from the Soviet Union in 1991, thereby forfeiting its claim to territorial integrity. It was therefore not a subject of international law during this transitional phase. This cannot be accepted, because all Soviet republics were de jure sovereign states at all times under the USSR Constitution. This is evident from the mere fact that Ukraine and Belarus, which had the same status as the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan, have been member states of the UN since 1945.

The Soviet Constitution granted the Union Republics a fundamental right to secede, invoking the right of peoples to self-determination. Nagorno-Karabakh, as an autonomous region, had no claim to state independence, however.”⁴⁵ Heintze rejects a right of self-defense for Artsakh, citing Armenian crimes against Azerbaijanis, without going into causal, chronological, quantitative, and qualitative details: “In particular, it should be noted that there have also been massive attacks by Armenians on Azerbaijani population groups. Above all, these crimes have never been addressed by either side; no attempt was made to create the conditions for peaceful coexistence between the majority (sic!; TH) of Azerbaijanis and the Armenian minority. Instead, a military solution was repeatedly sought, which claimed many lives on both sides and ultimately led to the formation of the ‘state’

⁴⁴ Luchterhandt, Otto. „Meinung: Das Völkerrecht und der Berg-Karabach-Konflikt Nationale Selbstbestimmung und Sezession der armenischen Minderheit oder Wahrung der territorialen Integrität Aserbaidshans?“ *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung*, 7.12.2021, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/kriege-konflikte/dossier-kriege-konflikte/344244/meinung-das-voelkerrecht-und-der-berg-karabach-konflikt/>

⁴⁵ Heintze, Hans-Joachim. „Kriege und Konflikte; Meinung: Berg-Karabach und die Grenzen des Selbstbestimmungsrechts.“ *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung*, 7.12.2021, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/kriege-konflikte/dossier-kriege-konflikte/344172/meinung-berg-karabach-und-die-grenzen-des-selbstbestimmungsrechts/>.

of Nagorno-Karabakh and the military occupation of Azerbaijan's neighboring provinces."⁴⁶

In addition to the lack of enforcement bodies and the United Nations' enforcement deficits, there are further serious obstacles to the enforcement of international law and thus to the punishment, prevention, and deterrence of genocide and war crimes. These include current U.S. sanctions against three judges of the International Criminal Court in The Hague, as well as rulings by a Russian court in 2025 against eight former and current judges of the ICC, which jeopardize the judicial independence of this key institution of international law.⁴⁷

A major obstacle lies in the differing perspectives on and handling of domestic and international issues. Let us take more or less recent cases of separatism as an example: The differing international assessments of separatist movements—such as in the cases of Kosovo, Scotland, Catalonia, or Nagorno-Karabakh—can be explained less by inconsistent legal principles than by an interplay of international law, power politics, historical narratives, and strategic interests. The discrepancy in perception is thus structural in nature and not accidental. Specifically: As already mentioned in connection with the Soviet constitutions, international law contains two principles of equal standing but that are contradictory:

- the right of peoples to self-determination
- the inviolability of state borders

There is no clear hierarchy between these two principles, even though some international law scholars give priority to the right to self-determination. International actors therefore choose which principle to emphasize depending on the situation. In the case of Scotland, self-determination within a constitutional framework would be legitimate as long as London agrees. Catalonia's self-determination, on the other hand, amounts to a breach of the Spanish Constitution, as it emphasizes the principle of territorial integrity. The recognition of Kosovo's right to self-determination is portrayed as a "special case" (*sui generis*) to avoid setting a supposed precedent (although the three *de facto* republics in the South Caucasus welcomed the recognition of Kosovo's right to self-determination for precisely this reason, unlike Russia). But it was precisely this precedent that occurred with the recognition of Kosovo and led to the further destabilization of universal legal principles, as Stephan Oeter noted: "If the United States and the EU can behave as if they were exempt from international legal rules, then Russia can do the same—so seems to be the inherent logic. Here lies the deeply disquieting aspect of the sequence of the cases of Kosovo, Abkhazia, Crimea, and 'Novorossiia.' From a Russian perspective, the West has begun to destroy the shared normative understanding regarding issues of secession and (non-)recognition, and now Russia has begun to disregard the established set of

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Jürgens, Johanna; Suchy, Clara: "Erst sperren sie ihre Kreditkarte, dann Amazon, Airbnb und den Rest." [Interview with Slovenian judge Beti Hohler of ICC]. *Die Zeit*, 23 April 2026, No. 18, pp. 17-18.

international legal rules as well. One should have kept these consequences in mind when manipulating the legal framework on secession and recognition in the case of Kosovo.”⁴⁸

In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan was emphasized almost unanimously, without taking into account the arbitrariness that had led to the forced annexation in 1921 of the Region, which was then 94.4 percent inhabited by Armenians.⁴⁹ Moreover, at the time of the Soviet-Azerbaijani declaration of independence from the USSR, the Nagorno-Karabakh region was no longer under Azerbaijani control, so that no violation of existing sovereignty can be said to have occurred here. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan’s rather incoherent interpretation prevailed internationally.

A central, albeit uncoded, criterion is the idea of “remedial secession,” that is, secession as a last resort in the face of massive, systematic oppression. In the case of Kosovo, ethnic violence, expulsions, and a NATO intervention led to the moral and humanitarian legitimization of secession. In the cases of Scotland and Catalonia, there is no comparable repression, which is why the “self-defense” criterion does not apply. In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan, both sides claim victim status. Although Azerbaijan started the violence in late February 1988, followed by two wars, the international community largely supports Azerbaijan’s claim to the region.

Statehood does not arise automatically in the international system, but through recognition. The willingness of existing states to recognize new state formations or to accept secessions and irredentism depends on their own interests. Kosovo was recognized by the U.S. and large parts of the EU, but blocked by China and Russia. A statehood for Nagorno-Karabakh independent of Azerbaijan and under Karabakh-Armenian leadership has not been recognized by any UN member, not even by the Republic of Armenia itself. Similarly, there is no willingness to recognize Scotland or Catalonia, as this would normalize secession in Europe. Recognition thus follows power dynamics, not normative consistency.

International reactions often reflect strategic calculations: The recognition of Kosovo was intended to weaken Serbia and roll back Russian influence in the Balkans. The non-recognition of Catalanian independence serves to protect a core EU state and was also driven by fear of domino effects, for example in Belgium, Italy, and France. The rejection of an independent Nagorno-Karabakh or one united with the Republic of Armenia stemmed from the energy interests of the EU, the Turkey-Azerbaijan axis, and the pushback against Russian spheres of influence. It follows that principles of international law are rarely enforced against one’s own interests.

⁴⁸ Oeter (2015), op. cit., p. 74.

⁴⁹ In the 1920s, the NKAO had a population of 131,500 people, 94.4 percent (124,136) of whom were ethnic Armenians and only 5.6 percent (7,364) of whom were ethnic Azerbaijanis. – Herzig, Edmund; Kurkchian, Marina. *The Armenians: Past and Present in the Making of National Identity*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005, pp. 66, 121.

Many states also fear that recognizing separatist movements will backfire on them:

- Spain (Basque Country, Catalonia)
- China (Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang)
- Russia (Chechnya)
- France (Corsica)

Consequently, cases like Kosovo are rhetorically declared “unique,” even though the logic of the argument could easily be applied elsewhere. The normative inconsistency in the assessment and recognition—or non-recognition—of independence or secessionist movements is thus a hallmark of the international system. This is characterized by

- the absence of a world state and the increasing erosion of universal principles and structures;
- the absence of binding legal enforcement;
- the dominance of political power over legal equality.

In this context, the American political scientist Stephen D. Krasner speaks of “organized hypocrisy”: states profess adherence to norms but apply them selectively.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The international perception of separatist aspirations is determined by:

1. Selective application of principles of international law;
2. Narratives of violence and human rights;
3. Power-political interests;
4. Alliance solidarity and fear of setting a precedent;
5. Recognition as a political act.

Consequently, it is not legality under international law that determines legitimacy, but rather the political compatibility, or connectivity of a secessionist movement. In the context of secession or separation (efforts to break away or achieve independence, e.g., of a region from a state), compatibility refers to whether and how the demands or positions of a secessionist movement can align with existing political, legal, or social structures. It is therefore a matter of the compatibility or suitability of a secessionist movement’s goals with the following five aspects:

- Legal and constitutional framework: In this context, compatibility refers to whether the demands of the secessionist movement are compatible with the applicable laws or the state’s constitution. In Spain the question of the compatibility of Catalonia’s independence efforts with the Spanish Constitution is under discussion. The Spanish Constitution does not recognize the right to secession, which is why the demands of the Catalan government are considered

⁵⁰ Krasner, Stephen D. *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 25.

incompatible. In Canada, the question of Quebec's compatibility with the Canadian constitutional framework was discussed within the context of the Clarity Act. The law established the conditions under which secession would be constitutionally possible.

In a legal context, the criterion of constitutional compatibility is whether the demands of the secessionist movement can be legally implemented or whether they violate existing laws.

- Political and democratic legitimacy: Are the secessionist efforts compatible with democratic principles (e.g., majority decisions, minority rights) or political processes (e.g., negotiations, referendums)? Catalonia's independence referendum (2017) was deemed unconstitutional by Spain and thus lacked democratic legitimacy. In the United Kingdom, by contrast, the Scottish independence referendum (2014) was considered democratically legitimate, as both the Scottish government and the British Parliament facilitated the vote. The key to acceptance here lay in the recognition of the democratic process. In Belgium, however, the question of Flemish secession is the subject of heated debate. Any potential secession would have to be compatible with Belgian constitutional principles and the rights of the French-speaking minority in Flanders. The fundamental question in a democratic context is: Are the demands of the secessionist movement supported by democratic mechanisms, or do they jeopardize them?

- Social and cultural acceptance: Connectivity may also depend on whether the goals of the secessionist movement meet with approval or at least understanding among the population or other actors (e.g., neighboring regions, the international community). In Catalonia, there was a strong social movement for independence, while other regions of Spain rejected it. The potential for success was limited here, as the majority of the Spanish population opposed secession. In South Sudan, the potential for success of the independence efforts was strengthened by international recognition (e.g., by the UN). The international community accepted the referendum as legitimate. The question here is: Do the demands of the secessionist movement find social or international support, or are they met with rejection?

- International and geopolitical conditions: This concerns the question of whether secession is compatible with the interests of other states or international organizations (e.g., EU, UN). The recognition of Kosovo by numerous Western states shows that the Kosovar secessionist efforts were compatible with international norms (e.g., the right to self-determination). In contrast, Russia's annexation of Crimea was not recognized internationally because it violated international law. The Russian position's compatibility with international norms was therefore low. The fundamental question in the geopolitical context is thus: Is secession recognized as legitimate by the international community, or is it considered a violation of international law?

- Economic and practical feasibility: Compatibility can also refer to whether a secession is economically viable or practically feasible. The Scottish government argued that an independent Scotland would be economically viable, e.g., through

its own oil and gas reserves. Critics, however, pointed to uncertainties, such as the currency issue or Scotland's accession to the EU. The Catalan economy, in turn, is heavily intertwined with Spain. Secession would have significant economic consequences, such as withdrawal from the EU or the loss of the Spanish domestic market. The fundamental question here is: Is secession economically viable, or would it lead to serious disadvantages?

When applied to the three South Caucasian post-Soviet *de facto* republics discussed in this article, however, a sixth criterion of connectivity emerges: geographical location. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are, in the literal sense, connectable due to their border location between Georgia and Russia. Post-Soviet Russia, after several years of hesitation, has made use of this and has provided both regions with permanent military, political, and economic protection since at least 2008. Not sharing a border with Russia, the *De Facto* Republic of Artsakh found itself in a significantly less favorable situation. At the same time, Nagorno-Karabakh lacked international—and above all regional—acceptance in all five other aspects of connectivity.

Table 2: Refugees, Displaced Persons and Deportees by Ethnicity

Azerbaijanis (from Soviet Armenia, Autonomous Region of Nagorno Karabakh 1988-1992)	724,000
Armenians (from Soviet Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh 1988-2023)	640,000
Georgians (from Abkhazia and South Ossetia)	194,000 (from Abkhazia) 23,000 (from South Ossetia) Total: 217,000
Total of Displaced and Deported Persons; Refugees	1.364.000

The ambiguities in international law and its inconsistent application, and especially the status and significance of national self-determination, the right to self-defense, and the right to a homeland, led to the flight, displacement, and deportation of over 1.3 million South Caucasians, with members of ethnic minorities in the affected Soviet republics and autonomous entities being particularly vulnerable. It is currently unclear whether those people will ever be granted the right to return to their homeland, and if so, under what circumstances and with which guarantees. There is therefore a high risk that the unresolved status issues of international law will lead to renewed conflicts and mass violence, particularly in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. Equally concerning, however, is the idea of accepting the status quo and the consequences of expulsion and deportation “for the sake of peace.”

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.