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LIVING ON THE BRINK

ESTONIA AND GEORGIA

Christopher Marsh and Peter McCabe

RUSSIA'S annexation of Crimea illustrated to the world that Moscow does not consider its neighbors' borders sacrosanct. It also immediately raised the attention of other states that are home to a sizeable number of ethnic Russians or Russian passport holders—or those who might have cross-border kin inside the Russian Federation.

Two countries in particular remain on alert following the events in Crimea and east Ukraine—Estonia and Georgia. Estonia is home to a sizable Russian-speaking minority in the Tartu and Narva regions (as well as the capital city), while Georgia has already seen how Russian forces can easily cross the border to protect minorities, such as the Ossetians.

ETHNIC CONFLICT AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE USSR

The post-Communist transition in Europe and the former Soviet Union is considered one of the most important transformations in modern

history. Both political and economic systems were affected: there were changes in the social structure, territorial boundaries in some cases had to be established, and new institutions had to be constructed, quite often from scratch.

For the most part, the collapse of Communist rule in the former Soviet Union was also characterized by the relative absence of violence. This need not have been the case, and during the opening phases of the collapse it looked like conflict might erupt all over.

The first signs of bloodshed came in Baku in 1988, with the Sumgayit massacre, and then in Nakhchivan in May 1992, where the centuries' old Azeri-Armenian conflict reignited.

The Baltic region was not spared from the violence accompanying the collapse of Soviet rule. In Vilnius, Soviet forces and tanks moved into a crowd of pro-

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Presidents meet in 2018: Kersti Kaljulaid (Estonia) and Giorgi Margvelashvili (Georgia)

testers outside a TV tower on January 13th, 1991, killing 14 people. But, comparatively, the fight for Baltic independence was nearly bloodless compared to the independence movements of the Caucasus and the Balkans.

This leads to a very interesting question. Why in Soviet territories of mixed populations, in terms of ethnicity and religion, and of comparable size, were the outcomes of these independence movements so different?

This essay focuses on the two secessionist movements in Georgia, those of Abkhazia and South Ossetia,

and compares the factors that contributed to these conflicts with similar characteristics but a lack of conflict in the Baltic region, with a focus on Estonia. Our concern is with why, in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, ethnic conflicts existed in the post-Communist South Caucasus, while they did not exist in the Baltic region.

One explanation for this phenomenon is that Western influence in the Baltic region and the lack thereof in the South Caucasus region immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union was a decisive factor in whether ethnic conflict occurred.

While the contributions of the European Union and the United States were important, they cannot stand alone as an explanation—other factors must have been at work.

Two other factors that also played an important role are a history of Western influence and geography. Nothing happens in a vacuum, and thus economic, political, ethnic, and religious factors all combined with the impact of foreign interests to make conflict more or less likely, though earlier research by this essay's lead author indicates

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that, in the post-Communist world, groups with cross-cutting ethnic and religious identities engaged in some of the bloodiest and most impassioned conflicts that the post-Cold War world has seen.

ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN THE POST-COMMUNIST CONTEXT

The difficulty of defining the notion of ethnic conflict in the context of the political realities of the former Soviet Union lies not only in the multi-faceted nature of ethnicity, but also in the region's diverse ethnic systems. Ethnicity, according to a prevalent theory, is based on a myth of collective ancestry, which usually carries with

it traits that are believed to be innate. The concept refers to the idea of shared group affinity and a sense of belonging that is based on a myth of collective ancestry and a notion of distinctiveness. The constructed bonds of ethnicity may stem from any number of distinguish-

ing cultural characteristics, such as common language, religion, or regional differentiation.

Some of the causes of ethnic conflict are associated with modernization, economic competition, and cultural pluralism. Associating ethnic conflict with modernization focuses

on elites and their motives, the class system, and the frictions that develop in a modernizing society.

But modernization theory provides no convincing way to explain why so much ethnic conflict occurs in some of the least modernized areas of the world. This observation applies to the ethnic conflict in Georgia. Certainly, a theory of economic interest explaining ethnic conflict might seem plausible. Competition for resources, jobs, and the basic desire to survive could be valid reasons for ethnic violence. However, research indicates that straightforward relationships between economic rivalry and ethnic conflict are difficult to establish.

Another cause of ethnic conflict is cultural pluralism: the view that instability of culturally plural systems is the result of a clash of values. But if ethnic conflict is produced by the meeting of incompatible values, there is no explanation as to why so much ethnic conflict occurs among strata of the various ethnic groups that are culturally and socially most similar. This condition applies to Estonia and Georgia, both of which possess ethnic groups that are similar culturally and socially. However, given that we are interested in a particular form of ethnic conflict, namely, secessionist movements seeking independence, the situation may be somewhat different.

Secessionist movements that emerged in the Soviet Union were more than just isolated events, but were connected by nationalism. Such conflicts first developed in the Baltic region in the summer and fall of 1988, after which they spread in a massive way to Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Ukraine, and even eventually to Russia itself. This first wave of secessionist movements was a pull away from the center

(Moscow), the second wave that took hold in some regions (Caucasus) and not others (Baltic) was a pull among distinct ethnic groups within republics.

This second wave is the focus of this article. Why did Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia decide to pull away from being part of the newly independent state of Georgia, while Russians within Estonia did not? The rise of secessionist consciousness involves the interplay between structural facilitation, emboldening, and event-specific influences in the mobilization of identities. The importance of secessionist movements as a distinct

form of ethnic conflict is that it challenges the foundations of political order. As such, secessionist movements usually experience severe pressures from the state, and often open repression (such as Moscow's 1991 Vilnius crackdown).

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This element of the influence of outside forces is an important factor, especially given the historical influence of the West after World War I on both Georgia and Estonia. It will also play a role when discussing the influence of the West on both countries after the end of the Cold War. Western assistance in these two periods helps determine why secessionist movements and ethnic conflict occurred in Georgia and not Estonia after 1991.

One factor for secessionist ethnic conflict concerns the influence of the West during two distinct periods of time. However, it is important at this point to caveat the limitations of this factor. While Yale political scientist Nicholas Sambanis has found that what is missing from econometric civil war studies is external interventions, one could counter that it is simply external support that carries the day.

Cases from other parts of the world suggest that external support arrives only after it becomes clear that it could make a difference, that is, that the movement is viable enough to warrant the obvious material and potential political costs of aiding separatists in one of these countries.

A CASE FOR CASE SELECTION

Obviously, the collapse of Communist Party rule between 1989 and 1991 and the end of the Soviet Union was a critical moment in the political development of Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

For many, it was also a moment for certain ethnic groups to seek national independence.

During the collapse of the Soviet Union, the populations of the Soviet republics—driven by elites—all wanted sovereign states of their own. However, the rate of collapse of the former multinational Soviet state was truly unprecedented, and this in itself is one of the reasons for mounting ethnic tensions.

Surely no other country of this size has in recent memory been gripped at the same time by such deep economic, political, and ethnic crises (in terms of population size and territory, the former Yugoslavia does not even come close, even though the bloodshed there far outweighed the lethality of the Soviet collapse).

Social and ethnic tensions were brought to a head by the plummeting living standards of the population. All this paved the way initially, in most former Soviet republics, for the establishment of authoritarian-nationalist

regimes that inflamed nationalist passions even more.

However, not all regions of the former Soviet Union experienced ethnic conflict, despite experiencing the same momentous event. The two regions covered in this study, namely the Baltic and Caucasus, are geographically separated and yet have the same Soviet legacy in common.

The Bolsheviks seized power in 1917 and faced three issues that prevented them from consolidating power and uniting the country. First, the Bolsheviks were faced with indigenous counterrevolutionary forces whose armies sought to overturn the revolution. Second, the armies of various Western capitalist states, including the United States, intervened. Finally, the Bolsheviks found themselves facing the problem of non-Russian nationalities.

By the 1920s, the Soviet leaders had overcome the first two issues, but the third was never really resolved.

The Baltic and Caucasus regions have a common history of previous independence as states, while the North Caucasus and Central Asian states have historically been occupied and conquered by numerous empires.

Even those short periods of time during which these states experienced self-rule, the state's control of territory and people looked much different than today.

Whereas the Baltic and South Caucasus states have a modern history—albeit short—of independent rule over ter-

Gorbachev has been criticized for not granting the Baltic states their independence as a means of avoiding the collapse of the Soviet Union.

ritory and people that are similar to today, the North Caucasus and Central Asia regions do not have that modern legacy. In fact, Gorbachev has been criticized for not granting the Baltic states their

independence as a means of avoiding the collapse of the Soviet Union. The argument has been made that Baltic independence could have been granted because they had been independent prior to their forced annexation into the Soviet Union during World War II. Hence, their independence could not be considered a precedent that other union republics could draw upon. Of course, the short two-year history of Caucasus independence could have made that claim somewhat difficult.

The primary reason for selecting these regions for comparison is ethnic proportion. The collapse of the Soviet Union is very similar to what happens when a colonial power withdraws and returns power to the indigenous people. In much the same way,

groups divide the country's territory and armed forces among themselves, as well as its factories and plants, and other resources. Similar processes in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have often been accompanied by territorial and ethno-nationalist conflicts. Therefore, the historical legacy of Russian rule is the same as the Russian diaspora in each of the newly independent states. At the time of the USSR's collapse, Estonians made up 62 percent of Estonia's population and Russians accounted for 30 percent; while in Georgia that ratio was 70 percent Georgian and only 6 percent Russian.

Sharing similar twentieth century histories and confronted by similar problems, the Baltic states are free of the ethnic conflicts that plague the Caucasus region.

However, the biggest difference in ethnic makeup of Estonia and Georgia is the approach to minority rights, which was determined by the size of the group and not territory. If we look at how the Estonians approached the ethnic problem, there were no regional groups, just national minorities (though Tartu and Narva are home to a sizable Russian-speaking minority). The same cannot be said for Georgia, where regional groups like the South Ossetians and Abkhazians sought independence.

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the ethnic conflicts that plague the Caucasus region.

THE ESTONIAN CASE

The Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania gained their independence from Soviet control in 1991. The three Baltic countries were acquired by the Soviet Union under the secret protocols of the Nazi-Soviet pact of August 1939.

On June 16th, 1940, the USSR delivered an ultimatum to Estonia and the conditions of the ultimatum were accepted under force by the Estonian government on June 17th, 1940.

A new pro-Soviet government was promptly set up in Tallinn on June 21st, 1940. Russian sources now concede that 10,000 people were deported from Soviet Estonia in 1941 and 20,000 in 1949.

These deportations did not end after the initial Soviet occupation. Further deportations of "bourgeois nationalists" and their families were disguised as routine military exercises. The implementation of this Soviet operation, codenamed *priboy* ("the wash of the waves"), resulted in 32,540 Estonians being banished from their homeland to special settlements during the period from 1940 to 1953. This type

of repression helps explain the long memory of Estonians and Estonian tensions with the minority Russian population following independence.

Despite this long memory of ethnic tension, a November 1988 public opinion survey showed that only 10 percent of non-Estonians in Estonia favored secession from the USSR. Eventually by March 1991, up to a third of non-Estonians supported Estonia's exit from the USSR. Ethnic prejudice, as was practiced by the Russians before 1991 and by the post-Communist republics afterwards, always has the potential to lead to hatred and open conflict. In fact, the level of ethnic hostility toward Russians in the Baltic region is comparable to other regions, such as the South Caucasus.

When Estonia gained independence, Russia sought to undermine Estonian efforts to move toward the West. Moscow emphasized that Estonia was a land with huge economic problems that was unsuitable for investment. Much of what the Russians were saying was true. Estonia was poor and its main exports were scrap metal and timber, but its economy was growing. Russia supported an "autonomy movement" in northeast Estonia, which was populated mostly by ethnic Russians resettled

there during Soviet times. Estonia rejected such incursions and Moscow retaliated by instituting economic sanctions and cutting off gas supplies. A few Estonian products were allowed into Russia, but were heavily taxed and military intervention was often threatened.

So why has ethnic conflict not erupted in post-Soviet Estonia? There certainly is tension between the Russian-speaking population and the Estonians—tensions that flared up in 2006 when a Soviet war statue was relocated from the center of Tallinn. Additionally, many Russians that found themselves becoming a minority ethnic group overnight, after the collapse, packed their bags and returned to Russia.

For ethnic Russians living in the Baltics, large-scale migration, not violence, was the norm. Ethnic Russian minorities were excluded from the political process in many newly independent states and, in the cases of Latvia and Estonia, were excluded even from membership in the new civic communities. Mass violent mobilization did not become a major element of the mobilizational repertoire of Russians in the non-Russian republics until after the demise of the USSR, and even here it was almost entirely confined to Moldova.

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Overall, the Baltic states were defining their nations and national identity in terms of what they were not—Russian. While Estonians are embracing the concept of being Estonian, the attempt by Georgia to promote a sense of being Georgian did not take hold so easily. In fact, it was Georgian secessionist groups' fear of losing their ethnic identity that ignited conflict.

THE GEORGIAN CASE

Throughout its history, Georgia has been plagued by both internal strife and external interference. Though a nation with deep historical roots dating back to the 300s AD, the discussion of a modern Georgian state starts from the year 1990, when the proponents of independence came to power in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. The collapse of the USSR, which followed soon after, made the dream of these Georgian nationalists come true. Before that, starting from the year 1921, Georgia did not have the possibility of functioning as a state. State building was a very alien field of activity for the last three generations of Georgian leaders. The elite adapted to Soviet rules and were able to move into lucrative economic, political, and military positions.

The primary source of ethnic conflict in the South Caucasus with intra-regional origins and implications is the import of strife from north Caucasus. Some have argued that ethnic strife in the South Caucasus has its origins beyond the region and is evident in Russian attempts to

fragment Georgia along ethnic lines. In terms of ethnic conflict that has internal sources, the multitude of internal fissures in Georgia is the clearest and immediate potential source of severe conflict.

At the time of the Soviet Union's collapse, Georgia was the most multi-ethnic country of the South Caucasus. Ethnic hetero-

geneity, a necessary but not sufficient condition for ethnic conflict, is present in almost all the states of the region, but especially Georgia.

As has been identified by other scholars, the more deeply divided a state is on more than one front, the more likely it is to face secessionist movements—and the more likely it is to resist them, no matter what the cost. This certainly applies in the case of Georgia, with areas of resistance in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Moreover, the strength of a secessionist movement and the heterogeneity

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of its region are inversely related. In the case of Georgia, the separatist regions are not further divided along ethnic lines, which allow their movement to have a strength that would not exist if they were sub-ethnically heterogeneous.

In that part of the world, however, ethnic diversity exists side by side with wide economic disparities and state policies of "ethnic redress" that privilege the titular nationality over others—including those who once enjoyed more advantages.

In Georgia, secessionist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia pose complications, as does the situation in the Pankisi Gorge, which hosts a large number of Chechen refugees, including Chechen and other extremist leaders and insurgents.

Tensions with Abkhaz and Ossetian minorities, which developed parallel to the establishment of the Georgian independence movement, soon reached the stage of full-scale ethno-territorial wars, with 6,000 casualties and nearly a quarter million internally displaced persons. Much like Estonia, strained relations with Russia play a major role in foreign policies.

Abkhazia is located in northwest Georgia and enjoyed a measure of political independence under Soviet rule. Much of the ethnic conflict within Georgia during the Soviet era involved issues of language and culture, and not of independence. Georgia attempted to assimilate the minority groups within its borders, but was met with resistance.

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As the arbiter of these disputes, Moscow inevitably became embroiled in them and was often accused of using them to control the region. Georgia's minorities viewed Moscow as their only recourse for protection, whereas Georgians frequently saw Moscow's

hidden hand behind their minority problems. Soon after Georgia declared its independence, Abkhazia demanded autonomy from Georgia and asked for Russian help. In Abkhazia we find a minority that sees itself under siege.

Fear of a loss of identity in a Georgian-dominated state induced the Abkhaz to seek greater autonomy. Since both the state and the Abkhaz see the territory as indivisible, some have argued that violence was inevitable.

As for South Ossetia, the region parallels Abkhazia in many respects. South Ossetia enjoyed some

form of autonomy under Soviet rule, but it is a more ethnically homogeneous region. The Georgian nationalist government abolished South Ossetian autonomy in 1989, causing a three-year open conflict that has yet to be resolved and which was a trigger for the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Fewer than 20 percent of Abkhazia residents are ethnic Abkhaz, while over 60 percent of those in South Ossetia are Ossetian.

Another factor is the shared border with North Ossetia, which is located inside the Russian Federation. Even before Georgian independence, South Ossetian leaders expressed a desire to secede and join Russia (and North Ossetia).

Obviously, those Soviet regions that experienced autonomy are more likely to realize ethnic conflict if the state in the post-Soviet era is not willing to continue honoring that autonomy.

The last trouble spot in Georgia, the Pankisi Gorge, is no less problematic in Russian-Georgian relations. Russian insistence that Chechen rebels are hiding in the Pankisi Gorge and using the location as their base of operations from which they are able to strike at Russia has complicated Georgian-Russian relations.

These multiple ethnic conflicts in Georgia pose another problem, that of

precedent setting. When a state faces more than one potential secession, this makes ethnic conflict much more possible and might help explain a state's reaction (or inaction) to secessionist demands. Any state in such a situation will fear establishing a reputation of allowing a division of its territory.

By opening "Pandora's box," any or all minority ethnic groups could then seek their own autonomous regions.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE WEST

American assistance to Estonia began in October 1991, shortly after Estonia's reassertion of independence. Assistance was administered by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) under the 1989 Support for Eastern European Democracy (SEED) Act, and focused on three priority areas: re-establishing pluralistic democracy; promoting economic reform; and protecting the environment.

The stated SEED mission was to help Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania achieve integration with major Euro-Atlantic institutions and increase their cooperation with each other and with neighboring states. In 1996, Estonia became the first country to "graduate" from USAID's bilateral assistance program.

Not all of U.S. support to Estonia has been economic or development aid; it has also included military aid.

For example, in 1995 Estonia received non-repayable foreign military financing (FMF) funds valued at \$40 million; from 1993 through 2001, Estonia received excess defense articles from the United States with an original acquisition value of roughly \$34 million (current value of roughly \$13 million); and since April 1993, the Joint Contact Team Program has served Estonia as a U.S. military-to-military cooperation program.

According to the *Monthly Survey of Baltic & Post Soviet Politics*, Estonia's foreign policy strategy is based upon Western aid via NATO and the EU, and it has even been shown that Estonia's military support to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has been to secure NATO and EU membership. This is aimed at protecting Estonia from Russian aggression, especially in the post-Crimean/Donbass period.

On February 3rd, 1994, Estonia signed up to join NATO's Partnership for Peace program; it signed a free trade treaty with the EU on the same day. This was followed by a May 9th, 1994 agreement between the Baltic States and the European Union, granting them partnership status. Estonia also received loans from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Clearly, Western aid to the Baltic countries and Estonia specifically arrived much earlier after independence than it did in other post-Soviet regions.

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) also assisted Estonia. The CSCE is an independent U.S. Government agency responsible for monitoring and encouraging compliance with the agreements of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as established by the Helsinki Final Act.

In 1992, a CSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities (HCNM) was established to perform early warning and early action to tensions involving national minority issues. In 1993, the HCNM paid visits to the Baltic states to address the ethnic tensions resulting from legislation on citizenship and language that was aimed at Russian minorities.

When tension arose between Russia and Estonia about the rights of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia under a new law of aliens, it expressed support of the continued involvement of the HCNM in Estonia to promote "stability, dialogue, and understanding" between Estonians and Russian-

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speaking people. In the end, the HCNM convinced the Estonian government to revise the law on aliens and, thus, contributed to the de-escalation of the crisis.

Western influence also came in the form of diplomatic support. Once the three Baltic republics renewed their claims to be independent nation-states, the international community (led by the West) quickly recognized them.

The countries of the Caucasus region did not experience the same immediate diplomatic success. However, Western influence and its effect on ethnic conflict in post-Communist regions is not all encompassing.

GEORGIA AND THE CAUCASUS

Georgia has actively sought out Western support, particularly that of the United States and Turkey. Georgia views Russia as its predominant source of threat, and Georgia's secessionist groups have enjoyed a measure of Russian support. Diplomatic ties, economic assistance, economic interests, and military engagement through NATO's Partnership for Peace and bilateral cooperation varied in intensity from state to state.

The Caucasus states of Georgia and Azerbaijan hoped that American Engagement, as well as close ties with NATO neighbor Turkey, might translate into Atlanticist support against Russian

political, economic, and military pressure. Turkey's involvement with Georgia and Azerbaijan started in the mid-1990s. Turkey sponsored both countries' participation in NATO-led peacekeeping in the former Yugoslavia (as part of NATO's KFOR stabilization force in Kosovo). Georgian peacekeepers served as part of the Turkish contingent and Turkey provided significant military assistance, including training and refurbishment of bases.

Turkey is the largest single trading partner of Georgia and Azerbaijan. Although Turkey lacks any ethnic, linguistic, or religious ties with the majority of the Georgian people, these states' shared interests (and Georgia's desire to identify and build strategic partnerships with NATO member states) had been more than sufficient to provide the basis for an excellent relationship.

During the past several years, however, as Turkey has been turning toward Moscow, this relationship has fallen into question.

The Georgian strategy during the 1990s was to play on the rivalry between the West and Russia in the Caucasus, attempting to lean more toward the West while seeking to break from Russia's control. Russian support to specific ethnic groups within Georgia was an issue immediately after Georgian independence in 1991.



Photo: Guliver Image/Getty Images

Safer in NATO? Estonian soldiers in the Alliance's 2015 exercise

Initially, Georgia's strategy did not work. Immediately after Georgian independence, Tbilisi attempted to take a strong nationalist position by refusing to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). However, faced with two armed rebellions, one in Abkhazia and the other in South Ossetia, Georgia appealed to the West, and particularly to the UN Security Council, for intervention, but to no avail.

By October 1993, Georgia had reversed its position and agreed to join the CIS and appealed to Moscow for help. With Russia's assistance, both

rebel forces were rolled back. However, the price was a weakened Shevardnadze and a disciplined Georgia, now made aware of its dependence on Russian power for survival.

Nevertheless, while Western diplomatic and military support was not offered; assistance was not totally cut off. Washington budgeted \$986 million for assistance to Georgia from 1992 to 2001, placing it fourth out of 12 Eurasian countries in terms of U.S. assistance. In addition, over that same period the U.S. government sent more than \$334 million in humanitarian aid to Georgia.

As for Europe, with a few exceptions (namely the Baltic states), the European Union kept the states that emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union at arm's length, particularly those along the southern tier. The EU has provided economic assistance and humanitarian aid after natural disasters, but limited its foreign policy involvement. Individual European states, such as the United Kingdom and Germany, provide security assistance to Georgia. While Western assistance to the Baltic region was present in multiple forms (diplomatic, economic, and military), assistance to the Caucasus region was one-dimensional (economic). Despite this disparity, Western assistance alone cannot explain the variation in ethnic conflict in the post-Communist era.

FACTORS OF HISTORY OF WESTERN INFLUENCE AND GEOGRAPHY

The legacy of the Baltic countries includes some form of Western influence in their pre-Soviet days. For Estonia, it was part of the Russian Empire from the eighteenth century to 1918, although Sweden was a major influence due to its proximity across the Baltic Sea. Estonia declared independence in 1918, which it was able to maintain against Bolshevik forces with aid from Western countries. The Soviets withdrew in 1920 and recognized

Estonian independence. The assistance of the West came to an end at the beginning of World War II. All three Baltic countries were forced into the Soviet Union in 1940, because of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. The popular armed resistance to Sovietization left the Soviet leadership with a lower level of legitimacy here than in most other parts of the USSR. Hence, the likelihood of ethnic conflict in the post-1991 era is evident, but the absence of ethnic conflict in this region is facilitated by the historical influence of the West.

The same type of history of Western influence does not exist for the Caucasus region. Before Soviet rule, the modern version of the state did not exist for Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Instead, the Ottoman and Persian empires ruled them all. Until the Soviet period, the region was more or less a single whole, without established boundaries. Unlike the resistance presented by the Baltic countries, the Caucasus countries were quickly assimilated into the Soviet Union. As noted earlier, without the same type of Western assistance after World War I, the states in the Caucasus region had a short-lived stint of independence that lasted barely three years, 1918-1921. This is contrasted with the Baltic experience of a full 22 years of independence, from 1918-1940.

When an ethnic group and a state view the issue of territorial control as indivisible, it will lead to violence.

Geography is a factor that has two parts to it. The first part relates to the geographical location of Estonia and Georgia in relation to the West and Russia. Geography has made the South Caucasus states a historical nexus for trade, competition, and sometimes conflict. Traditionally, foreign powers have seen the region as an economic and strategic gateway to other parts of the world. In addition, the region's recent potential for energy production is a modern incentive for foreign intervention by the West and Russia.

As for Russia, it has definite stakes in the Caucasus region, which are historical, political, strategic, and economic; this presents a number of potential complications for all sides. Whether or not Russia has the capability to do so successfully is less important than the fact that, in trying, it can spark ethnic, religious, and territorial conflicts in the region, which would set prospects for reform and development back decades. Russia will seek to play a role in the Caucasus and to have a say over the extent to which other external powers can get involved. This is in Moscow's strategic interests.

The second part of geography used here refers to the territory in each region, specifically, the meaning that territory has for Estonians, Georgians, Russians, and secessionist groups. Political scientist Monica Toft has a

particular view of the role of geography in ethnic conflict. She argues that when an ethnic group and a state view the issue of territorial control as indivisible, it will lead to violence. In the case of Georgia, Toft concludes that the fundamental disagreements between Georgia and Abkhazia remain the same: Georgia insists on the preservation of its territorial integrity, and Abkhazia continues to demand independence from Georgia.

Another view of geography as a physical location and position of homeland is that offered by Donald Horowitz back in 1985. Horowitz argues that geography is as important as history in producing claims to indigenism. The Abkhazians and South Ossetians view their regions as being their homeland or, as Horowitz would claim, as "sons of the soil." Georgians, meanwhile, view all the people within their borders as Georgians (a civic identity). Both the state and ethnic group view control over the disputed territory as an indivisible issue and violence was thus inevitable.

BECOMING VS. BEING EUROPEAN

The end of the Cold War saw the emergence of local and ethnic conflicts in Europe and beyond, which stimulated a number of debates about the sources and nature of ethnic conflict. Estonia and Georgia have similar histories, as well as being similar in size (both territory and population) and ethnic group proportions. So comparing

their experiences and finding ethnic conflict in one state and not the other is rather puzzling, more so since ethnic tensions between Estonia and its Russian diaspora are well known.

Estonia began forcing Russians out of social, economic, and cultural life, as well as from politics, immediately after independence, and that became a routine practice. Russians living in the “near abroad” have had their rights violated, been discriminated against in terms of their nationality, and seen a loss of civil and political freedoms. According to the Russian Federal Migration Service, in the first nine months of 1997, 600,000 refugees and 1.2 million forced migrants came to Russia, the majority of which were young people. Youths are coming back to Russia because they are unable to get an education and due to limitations in employment.

This type of forced migration can lead to ethnic conflict, but did not do so in the case of Estonia. The two factors of history of Western influence and geography—along with Western assistance after independence—help explain the lack of ethnic conflict. As for Estonia, it does not see itself as *becoming* part of Europe, as it is historically, culturally,

and geographically already part of Europe and, as such, Estonia hoped to take its rightful place in the institutions of Europe, which it largely achieved through NATO and EU membership.

Georgia’s experience with ethnic conflict since 1991 is the result of its minorities (Abkhazia and Ossetia) being seen as regional groups as opposed to the Baltic’s Russian diaspora being seen as national minorities. These conflicts are not driven by primordial clashes or ancient hatreds; clearly, other factors are involved.

The lack of history of Western influence in the country is one factor. Unlike the resistance presented by the Baltic countries after World War I, the Caucasus was quickly assimilated into the Soviet Union. This lack of Western influence has much to do with the geographical location of the South Caucasus. In the South Caucasus region, the Soviets did not have to compete with the West, as they did in the Baltic states. Finally, Western aid to Georgia after independence was one dimensional, namely economic. While this helped Georgia’s economy, it did not help with its security issues. Therefore, violent conflict is likely to be a continuing problem in the South Caucasus region. ●