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THE POLITICS OF  
ETHNIC SEPARATISM  
IN RUSSIA AND  
GEORGIA



# Introduction

In the summer of 2008, open war broke out once again in Georgia, a small, multiethnic country along Russia's Caucasian border. It was not a new conflict. In 1990, as the Soviet Union collapsed, the region of South Ossetia, then part of Soviet Georgia, fought a war of independence with the Georgian government. Both sides in that conflict signed a cease-fire that left the political question of Ossetian sovereignty unresolved. The outbreak of sustained violence in August 2008 marked the conflict's most significant renewal since the earlier cease-fire.

South Ossetia, dominated demographically by its titular ethnic group (the Ossetians), borders the Russian Federation.<sup>1</sup> Relatively unencumbered by a weak Georgian state in the 1990s, the South Ossetian government had for years acted as an independent country, establishing substantial administration and the trappings of its own statehood. Accepting a difference between *de facto* and *de jure* circumstances, the Georgian government administered the large Georgian minority in the region, insisting that the conditions of functional Ossetian independence were temporary. Despite that claim, these ambiguous politics dragged on over almost two decades. By the time of the 2008 conflict, most Ossetians in South Ossetia identified themselves as citizens of an independent Ossetian state, but also held a kind of Russian citizenship. The Georgians in the region paid Georgian taxes and voted in Georgian elections. The international community had dubbed the conflict "frozen."

The August violence brought a thaw and revisited these problematic realities. The war swiftly escalated: Russian troops crossed over the mountain border, expelled Georgian troops from South Ossetia, and established a broad military presence. That presence carried over into several key Georgian cities, another secessionist region (Abkhazia), and segments of a major highway that bisects the country, effectively stopping Georgian traffic east to west. South Ossetian and Georgian villages alike suffered avoidable civilian casualties.<sup>2</sup> Georgian citizens living in villages in South Ossetia were expelled, their homes burned by militia groups after they left to ensure that they would not

return.<sup>3</sup> In Abkhazia, Georgian military and civilian populations evacuated as Abkhazian militias took the Kodori Gorge, the only section of Abkhazia held by the Georgians.<sup>4</sup> South Ossetian citizens, after more than a decade of confidence-building measures, complained bitterly about Georgian treachery and betrayal.<sup>5</sup> Georgians in turn protested Russia's occupation of key parts of the country and decried the expulsion of Georgians as ethnic cleansing.<sup>6</sup>

Amid the accusations of blame, scholars, media analysts, and policy makers sought to make sense of the events. Long histories were recounted, complexities dissected, and assertions scrutinized. A popular frame cast the base-level conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia as a long-standing one, the August 2008 events an inevitable expression of tensions bubbling for decades.<sup>7</sup> By those lights the August 2008 war was both long and certain in coming. Yet there are several reasons to be surprised by both the timing and location of war. In 2003, Georgian civil society overthrew the longtime president and former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze, replacing him with Mikheil Saakashvili, an American-trained lawyer and politician who pledged pluralist reform. Although this reformist spirit was undermined in part by heavy-handed executive power and often bellicose rhetoric, Saakashvili's stated policy included several important elements that differed from his predecessors'. His South Ossetia policy entailed offering reparations to those who lost property during the first war. Saakashvili was the first Georgian leader to establish ties with members of the early South Ossetian leadership of the 1990s and to offer the region real and extensive autonomy.

Among Georgia's ethnic cleavages, South Ossetia was an unlikely place for a renewal of violence. Compared to the war in Abkhazia, relations between Georgia's leaders and those of South Ossetia seemed less entrenched in the early years of the stalemate, more negotiable. Certainly the violence of the 1990s was less deadly in South Ossetia. Also, unlike Abkhazia, whose Georgian population remained displaced after the war, Georgians and Ossetians lived in neighboring villages across the territory. Although there were tensions, systematic violence was rare. In an interview after his removal from the presidency, Shevardnadze boasted of his good relationships with the Ossetian leadership throughout the 1990s, and suggested he could have brought South Ossetia back into Georgia "any time he wanted."<sup>8</sup> Yet he did not. Nor did he ever offer South Ossetia any autonomy within the Georgian state, although this issue had been the main spark pushing the independence movement toward violent conflict.

A similar story of lost opportunities might be told about Chechnya, an independence-seeking region within the Russian Federation. Like South Ossetia, Chechnya operated for several years as an independent country,

only to return to war after regime change in Russia. Before the outbreak of the second Chechen war in 1999, Chechen president and former insurgent Aslan Maskhadov multiple times called for negotiations with the Kremlin. He was rebuffed. To be sure, there are stark differences in the political realities of South Ossetia and Chechnya, Georgia and Russia. Georgia maintains a much more pluralist political system than Russia, for example (although few would call it a democracy). The ethnic identities and political interests of the Ossetians and Chechens also have unique characteristics. Yet both countries share experiences of ethnic separatism within the contexts of state building and the creation of political institutions. They also share the reality of bargaining and conflict resolution opportunities foregone, at the cost of civilian lives.

Both the Chechen and South Ossetian wars took place within a larger ethnic political context, among other regions of similar institutional structure, each of which engaged a new set of central governments, all seeking to improve their political standing after decades of top-down Soviet control. There are also some specific commonalities between the Russian and Georgian cases. After the Soviet collapse, those two states inherited the bulk of ethnic republics established as autonomous by the Soviet constitution. Little actual power was afforded to the ethnic republics by the Soviet government until the 1980s. But the easing of centralized power under Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet collapse along broadly ethnic lines, and the announcement of democratic reforms by the Russian and Georgian independent governments meant that the real political and economic status of ethnic republics was put into play. The established precedent of territorial independence for the most significant ethnic regions worried the governments of the new states, particularly as smaller ethnic territories followed the example with their own separatist and nationalist movements. Wars in Chechnya (Russia), Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia), Transnistria (Moldova), and Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan) challenged the governments of the newly independent states. Russia and Georgia, as the two Soviet successor states with the most autonomous regions, both feared further territorial disintegration. Even so, though Russia and Georgia experienced three wars of ethnic secession between them, they both also experienced peaceful autonomy movements (such as those in Achara in Georgia, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan in Russia). Although the bulk of the ethnic republics in Russia pursued low risk political strategies, some engaged in almost no autonomy-seeking politics altogether.

The violence in South Ossetia and Chechnya illustrates both the primacy and the complexity of ethnic mobilization, along with the troubling elements of nationalism and separatist war that have jeopardized the process

of stabilizing former Soviet space. The events in Russia and Georgia move us to ask critical questions about how political and economic reforms interact with ethnic separatism within state-building contexts. Why ethnic violence in some regions but negotiated settlements in others? Why did the Georgian and Russian central states negotiate with some regions but forego opportunities to find peaceful resolution with others? How did regional – central interactions change over time, particularly in bringing about violent or stable outcomes throughout the long periods of negotiation and territorial ambiguity? These questions address urgent issues in world politics: the causes of ethnic mobilization, the factors that lead regional decision makers to use violent or nonviolent strategies, and the incentives for central governments to compromise with regional demands or move quickly to violence against separatist claims. The answers to these questions offer unexpected, and perhaps unwelcome, implications for scholars and policy makers.

Focusing on high-level decision making by central and regional leaders, this book examines how policy makers assessed their political options and preferences within the constraints imposed by the breakdown of the post-Soviet system. The central argument is that regional and central government leaders responded to structural, institutional, and personal contexts that steered their choices regarding regional separatism (either participating in it or responding to it) in predictable ways. The infrastructure for this process, left behind by the fallen superpower, was the Soviet federal system, which established a territorial framework for ethnic identity. This institutional structure linked that framework to formal powers that privileged the titular groups of these regions. Almost all of the political movements that sought increased power for ethnic minorities in the Soviet successor states involve these territorial units.<sup>9</sup>

Several interacting factors shaped separatist strategies for ethnic regional actors and central governments; these had particularly significant effects on their incentives and capabilities for finding bargains with one another. Regional power and wealth, measured in terms of economic power and political control over the territorial infrastructure, enhanced or diminished the leaders' assessments of their power relative to the center. Regional leaders who could claim greater popular support were better able to direct and harness ethnic mobilization to enhance their autonomy demands from the central government. Ethnic mobilization created a unique circumstance for heightened regional demands of successor state governments, given their early stated interest in democratization and the federal structure inherited from the Soviets. In particular, wealthy regions found heightened separatist rhetoric safer from government retribution than impoverished ones. In the early years of Russian and Georgian independence, when the countries stumbled

through rebuilding state institutions and restructuring flagging economies, powerful and wealthy ethnic regions could assert considerable authority over the mechanisms of state building, in particular how power was to be divided between the center and the regional periphery. Such regions used this mobilizing force to enhance their prestige and bargaining power vis-à-vis the central governments, achieving extensive autonomy without risking violent strategies.

Central government interests and capabilities naturally framed the negotiation processes between regional and state leaderships as well. Yet these factors emerged in rather surprising ways, and were very much tied to central state power. First were instances where there was a clear state interest (rather than an aggregation of individual leadership preferences). Central states, particularly in conditions of weakness, were loath to create permanent institutions that would perpetuate that weakness, and therefore sought to limit any long-term concessions to separatist republics. This was particularly the case in center – periphery power-sharing institutions. Moreover, weakened central states had limitations regarding the sort of credible bargains they could offer to regional leaders who demanded political favors, particularly among stronger regions. This was less a problem for Russia, whose central government still commanded significant authority and had access to some wealth. But in Georgia, far less equipped and a much poorer state, this was a limitation that confounded negotiation processes. Likewise, smaller and weaker states like Georgia are more likely to experience intervention by external powers. Such weakness limited the state's bargaining options, but increased negotiation potential for the separatist governments.

Central states can also be steered—and were, in both Russia and Georgia—by the individualized interests of particular officials. Likewise, regional leaders worked to enhance their own personalized interests, although often legitimizing their political decision making as efforts to serve the titular group of their territory. Informal structures of clientelism, patronage, and corruption provided mechanisms for both central and regional government actors to pursue nonviolent strategies for organizing the power between ethnic regions and central governments. Patronage and corruption not only moderated the strategies of regions after the Soviet dissolution and the first years of independence, but also affected how the separatist territories (Chechnya, Abkhazia, South Ossetia), which at times functioned as independent states, interacted in negotiation processes with Russian and Georgian central governments after active violence ceased. Contraband crossing unguarded state borders enriched regional and central government figures alike. It diminished incentives to formulate permanent political solutions to the military conflict, yet established a fragile stability amid the fractured territories.

These three elements—state power, regional capacity, and personalized politics—interacted, creating an array of elite incentives to follow violent or nonviolent strategies at both the central and regional government levels. Those regions whose leaders could not rely on specific bargaining enhancements (thanks to diminished regional capacity and negligible patronage ties) were the most likely to escalate to violence in pursuit of autonomy or independence. Very weak central governments likewise could neither deter violent secession nor conduct effective negotiations that might mitigate or reduce violence. Moreover personalized payoffs, in terms of position, political favor, or illicit income, created limitations on how interested central government and regional actors were in securing negotiated outcomes. These individualized interests combined with hesitation among the central states, none of whom wanted to appear weak and establish what might be dangerous precedents for state dissolution. In short, although real possibilities for bargaining outcomes agreeable to both sides existed throughout the 1990s, regional and central government leaders in Russia and Georgia often failed to secure lasting peace agreements that would end their military conflicts and construct straightforward political conditions.

Within such a framework, the story of the South Ossetian war of 2008 reads as one of changing regional and central government strategies tied to the shifting conditions in state capacity and corruption. The uncertain political status of South Ossetia in the 1990s into the early years of the 2000s actually made money for high-level officials. Although Shevardnadze bragged that his close connections with the South Ossetian leadership could have engendered a peaceful resolution at any time, the truth was that some high-level officials in the Georgian interior ministry profited from Ossetia's ambiguous political status and porous borders. Stability and a fragile peace persisted while leaders on both sides benefited from this arrangement and the status quo was left unchanged. Problems arose, however, upon Shevardnadze's ouster during the Rose Revolution in November 2003, which occurred in large part as a rejection of the corruption that infested the central government. Shevardnadze's successor, Saakashvili, was elected to the presidency on an anticorruption and state building platform. South Ossetia was one of his first targets for ending corruption and a (admittedly unilateral) July 2004 effort to install customs booths there brought about early violence. As Saakashvili instituted state building reforms (and refurbished the flailing Georgian military), both the ability and the desire of the Georgian central government to revisit its territorial problems in Abkhazia and South Ossetia increased. By this time the bargains that Shevardnadze might have struck in the 1990s had dissipated. A more rigid authority had taken power in South Ossetia and a generation had been born that had no memory of being part of a Georgian state.

A common interpretation of ethnic wars relies on the argument that their roots lie in deep-seated ethnic or religious animosities, endemic to a cultural personality and therefore particularly difficult to resolve politically. But in the cases considered here, regional and central government leaders altered their strategies over time, in conjunction with varying economic and political circumstances. This indicates rather that ethnic separatism, though attached to cultural identities, stemmed from political and economic factors that enhanced elite incentives for ethnic mobilization. This interpretation dovetails with the instrumentalist approach to ethnicity and with recent scholarship that emphasizes the heterogeneity of ethnic groups. It highlights the diversity of interests and motivations for behavior within groups often assumed to be solidary and homogeneous.<sup>10</sup>

### **Corruption's stabilizing effect and the destabilizing impact of state building**

This research offers new policy insights into the processes of state building and their interaction with ethnic conflict. First, common policy prescriptions that promote democratization and economic stabilization may not lead to their desired—indeed, anticipated—effects of stability and prosperity. For example, many scholars and Western policy makers recommend decentralizing politics with federalism in ethnically diverse states. However, such segregation provides institutional support for ethnic mobilization toward secession, particularly for regions without strong personalized ties to the central government. Scholars and policy makers also recommend formal institutions rather than informal ones, although this analysis indicates that informal elite ties can help push regional leaders toward negotiation with one another rather than violent confrontation to mobilize or satisfy constituents at home.

Second, corrupt ties can mitigate ethnic violence, because central and regional leaders can work together to obtain personal spoils outside formal economic mechanisms. In states facing both external and internal pressures for anticorruption reforms, the effects of such policies may exacerbate fragile ethnic ties dependent on lucrative common ground. These lessons, important in the post-Soviet context, also have salience in the current political environments of ethnically diverse developing states. The Soviet legacy becomes instructive as Iraq begins to build new political institutions amid sectarian violence and corruption in the oil sector. Indeed, in his final memo as Secretary of Defense in the Bush administration, Donald Rumsfeld highlighted Saddam Hussein's practice of offering personal kickbacks to political and religious leaders as a mechanism the U.S. government could copy to stabilize



the civil war unleashed by its invasion and occupation of Iraq.<sup>11</sup> Such conclusions present a troubling paradox for those seeking permanent resolution to ethnic conflicts and a program of state building, especially through creation of formal political institutions and economic stability in transitional systems. Corruption and patronage are among the most pernicious problems that developing states face, yet they might help lessen violence.

Third, state building programs may increase rather than diminish ethnic mobilization and violence, at least in the short term. In Russia, the Second Chechen War reignited in 1999, corresponding with Vladimir Putin's rise to power and need to consolidate popular support. In Georgia, arguably more pluralistic under Saakashvili, the central government has faced renewed instability in all three of its regions, most obviously in the 2008 South Ossetian war, but also the earlier, threatened military standoff with the Acharan leadership in 2003. State building programs provide incentives for central and regional leaders alike for engaging in violence. This is particularly the case if state building reforms involve extensive political and economic changes that break the informal ties that helped create stability in the first place.

The pressure for democratization may also exacerbate demographic concerns for regional leaders who represent ethnic minorities. Within the realm of ethnic conflicts, ethnic cleansing has emerged as not only a way to punish or defeat an enemy, but also as a means to ensure demographic superiority for electoral purposes. One arena for continued debate between the Georgians and the Abkhazians is the return of Georgian internally displaced people to their prewar homes in Abkhazia, which would eradicate the demographic and electoral majority the Abkhazians secured during the war. We also saw similar trends in the former Yugoslavia, when central government leaders claimed to pursue democratic reforms even as they sought to control the demographic landscape to secure electoral majorities for their cultural group.

David Laitin and James Fearon have noted that wars within states (including wars of ethnic separatism) last longer and are more damaging than wars between states. From 1945 to 1999, the death toll of civil wars has dwarfed that of wars between states. Battle deaths for interstate wars numbered 3.3 million, while intrastate wars claimed 16.2 million lives in the battlefield.<sup>12</sup> The civilian experience in ethnic violence adds urgency to the struggle to resolve such wars. Ethnic cleansing policies, exemplified by the tragedies of Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, and Darfur, traumatize local populations, devastate communities, and confound international policy makers.

Lessons learned from the Russian and Georgian experiences with ethnic separatism offer important, unexpected results for states undergoing transition or reconstruction. By recognizing the dangers inherent in state building

programs, and the value of clientelism and corruption in bringing about cooperation, central government leaders and external policy makers can better craft responsible policies that reflect short-term political realities. Moreover, these lessons invite policy makers to develop innovative strategies to balance the goals of short-term stability and peace with establishing stable, transparent, and capable states in the long run.

## Chapter overview

Chapter 1 considers common conceptions of ethnicity and nationalism, in particular their relationship to ethnic politics in the former Soviet Union and its successor states. This section considers broad conceptions of ethnic conflict, distills common scholarly explanations for ethnic mobilization and separatism, and teases out the factors that most accurately reflect political events within the region. The chapter concludes with the outline for a theoretical framework, one that argues variation in degree of ethnic separatism in Russia and Georgia was due to the integration of several key elements: the legacy of Soviet federalism, individualized informal ties between central and regional government leaders, and central state and regional capacity. Weakened state capacity, the prevailing condition in both Georgia and Russia during the early 1990s, provided an incentive for regional ethnic mobilization, but also was an obstacle for resolving ethnic separatism as a regional bargaining strategy. Russia and Georgia were less able to offer political and economic deals to aggressive regions. Strong clientelism also deterred central government actors from finding formal settlements. Close clientelistic relationships did not produce formal state institutions, but instead perpetuated behind-the-scenes personal bargains that enriched private interests. Such relationships, however, often mitigated violent confrontation between center and periphery, and in certain cases made relations relatively stable even in the face of violence.

Chapter 2 traces the development of ethno-federalism in the Russian Federation from 1991 to 1999. It considers five regions that collectively pursued almost every permutation of separatism we see in the post-Soviet context. The focus in each case lies with interactions between state capacity, regional power, and informal politics that permitted risk-acceptant behavior by favored regional counterparts. Chechnya followed an active independence agenda though violent means. Tatarstan, having held a successful referendum on independence, made significant autonomy demands, but did so without violence (although there were real moments of risk and tension in a high-stakes game with central government leaders). The leaders of Bashkortostan followed Tatarstan's lead, but with decidedly less risky demands and actions.

Ingushetia and Dagestan engaged in low-stakes bargaining with the central government and pursued relatively quiescent policies toward it.

Chapter 3 carries this frame of analysis to Georgia prior to Saakashvili's accession of power, from 1990 to 2003. This chapter offers analysis of the divergent separatism of all three of Georgia's ethnic republics left by the Soviet dissolution: South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Achara. It traces the outbreak of violence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and analyzes the interests and strategies undertaken by leaders in both the central and regional governments. Contrasting the violence of the secessionist regions, Achara offers an alternative example of peaceful negotiation amid tense demands. Moreover, Achara's experiences demonstrate well the stability purchased through personal alliances by the top leadership, particularly with regard to maintaining political positions and economic benefits.

Chapter 4 deals with the changing framework of center – periphery ethnic politics in the context of Russia's resurgent state power between 2000 and 2006. During Vladimir Putin's tenure as president, the state established a new system of federalism that subverted autonomous interests of the ethnic republic “winners” of the previous era. Likewise, the state renewed the war with Chechnya, engaging in more rigorous military deployments that, although popular at home, faced some controversy and criticism from abroad. Chapter 4 revisits the five regions considered in Chapter 2 in light of the changing central government policies. It examines the regional governments' interests and strategies regarding their political and economic circumstances vis-à-vis the central government. Chapter 4 also traces the continuing personalization of politics in Russia, even amid the growing power of the central state, and investigates new trends in ethnic politics, particularly with regard to Ingushetia and Dagestan, both home to rebel groups and ethnic violence that is substantively different in organization from the ethnic politics and separatism that was common in the immediate post-Soviet years.

Chapter 5 examines Georgia's state building reforms conducted and their impact on the central government's relationship with Achara and the *de facto* independent governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from 2003 to 2008. Chapter 5 contextualizes the South Ossetian war within a larger discussion of the evolution of ethnic politics in Georgia after the Rose Revolution. Saakashvili's state building and anticorruption reforms contradicted concomitant goals of regional self-governance, designed to benefit ethnic minorities and offer an alternative to political limbo for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Like Chapter 4, Chapter 5 follows changes in state capacity. In Georgia, state building efforts occurred within the context of eradicating corruption and rebuilding its military, a focus that often undermined,

rather than enhanced, relationships between the central state and the regional leadership.

This book identifies similarities in ethnic tensions, the regional demographics of ethnic minority populations, and how the processes of state building affected or are affecting the likelihood of conflict. Georgia and Russia's experiences offer important lessons for weak states with ethnic decentralization (either through drawn federal boundaries or practical concentrations of ethnic minorities). In such circumstances, the incentives for regional ethnic mobilization are high. States likewise have their own motives in deciding when to offer concessions and when to punish separatism through violence. One common alternative to conflict found by regional and central leaders were informal structures rather than formal ones, and in these cases those alternatives have most often emerged through patronage and corruption. Such ties, however, were fragile and reliant on a particular array of personalities. They also depended to a large extent on continued authoritarianism in the state. Pluralistic and anticorruption movements such as the Rose Revolution in Georgia destabilized, rather than stabilized, the country's ethnic political situation.

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Ethnic Separatism in Russia and Georgia

As the Soviet Union crumbled, leaders of ethnic regions in the successor states began demanding immediate political, cultural, and economic autonomy from their new central governments. Increased levels of ethnic separatism occurred most consistently among the ethnic groups who had dominated autonomous regions during the Soviet period. Regional political leaders, as well as those of nationalist movements, characterized such demands as reasonable and just, results of the difficulties of being an ethnic minority in a multiethnic state. But the extent of the demands differed across regional contexts, and leaders used varied means to achieve their stated goals. Of the 35 ethnically designated territories inherited by Soviet successor states, 32 sought greater sovereignty from their central governments, and 7 of those asserted their desire for independence. From the 7 independence seekers, 4 fought secessionist wars against the central government.<sup>1</sup>

The former Soviet pattern of ethnic separatism, often conceptualized as one-time dichotomous choices between seeking independence and remaining within the state, between violence and nonviolence, unfolded as a process of changing regional policy goals. Likewise, regional decision making concerning the use of violence varied over time. Ethnic regional leaders often began their efforts toward autonomy with low-level demands, for example, the right to use regional symbols such as flags and seals. They increased their demands from symbolic politics to claim forms and mechanisms of economic and political power once held by the central government. This early process often proceeded in a cycle of escalating claims to autonomy. Yet some regions demanded much more than others. In the cases where the demands continued to independence and confrontations escalated to

active war, subsequent negotiation processes soon revolved around the terms through which a secessionist region might return to the state. For those regions that fought wars of secession, some sued for peace while others rejected negotiation efforts. In Russia and Georgia, violence between center and the secessionist regions of Chechnya, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia halted at times for years after cease-fires, and then descended into military hostility again as political circumstances changed.

The separatist politics of state building in Russia and Georgia provides a series of puzzles for scholars and policy makers who seek to understand the causes of ethnic violence and ethnic peacemaking. First, why did some regional leaders demand more autonomy than others, and what factors did they consider when establishing strategies to achieve their desired outcome? Why did violence occur in some circumstances, but not in others? Second, once regions began a separatist policy, why did their demands change over time? Why did some violent struggles find resolution, while others never achieved political resolution? What factors affected resumption of violence after months or even years of peaceful coexistence? Third, as the Russian and Georgian states created or recycled governance structures, what factors have affected the development of state institutions overseeing center – periphery relations? Why did state governments respond to ethnic separatism with concessions in some cases and violence in others?

These questions engage larger concerns about the causes of ethnic mobilization and conflict. The experiences of Russia and Georgia provide some answers as to why violent ethnic separatism emerged in particular cases, but was avoided in others. In both countries, leaders of ethnic regions calibrated their separatist strategies according to practical characteristics like regional power and wealth, assessments of central government power, and informal structures like patronage that bound them together with central government leaders. Likewise, central government authorities were motivated by concerns over state weakness and costly precedents, as well as personalized interests.

This chapter introduces a theoretical framework that demonstrates how these factors (regional power, central state capacity, and informal structures) enhanced or diminished the likelihood of ethnic separatism and violence. I offer a definition of ethnic separatism and violence, explore common causal arguments for ethnic conflict, assess these within the former Soviet context, and develop an approach highlighting those factors that have made the most impact on ethnic politics within the Soviet successor states. In doing so, I provide a framework for understanding ethnic violence that differs from the common conception that ethnic conflict stems from cultural diversity or minority group experiences of oppression. Instead, the framework and subsequent case studies in Russia and Georgia indicate that regional strategies of ethnic separatism, and the central government responses, stemmed in large

part from structural factors that enhanced political and economic benefits to political leaders. Ethnic separatist politics in Russia and Georgia was a politics of opportunity, for leaders in the ethnic regions as well as the central governments.

### **Ethnic separatism and violence**

Most scholars of ethnic conflict implicitly or explicitly link the causes of ethnic mobilization with those that cause ethnic separatism: what causes groups to identify themselves as culturally distinct and pursue political agendas must also cause wars between such groups. According to that argument the path to ethnic separatism, either in the form of political autonomy or violent secession, is a part of an ethnic mobilization process. But scholars approach the concept of ethnicity with divergent assumptions. Some understand ethnicity as an objective category, for example, identifying ethnic groups by their adherence to a certain religion or use of a certain language. Others reject this interpretation, noting that a group's religious or linguistic status is not a static component of their identity, and therefore strict adherence to such objective classification lacks accuracy.<sup>2</sup> One factor upon which both sets of scholars agree is that ethnic groups define themselves by what they are not. By identifying an "other," groups emphasize those aspects of their culture that distinguish them from other groups. What distinguishes ethnic groups from other group identification mechanisms (e.g., class) is an emphasis on cultural heritage. Ethnicity is an identity "consisting of the 'subjective, symbolic or emblematic use' by 'a group of people of any aspect of culture in order to differentiate themselves from other groups'."<sup>3</sup>

Political mobilization refers to committed organized efforts by a group seeking to achieve common interests.<sup>4</sup> Some scholars conceptualize political mobilization as an elite-driven phenomenon, with individual actors at high levels of an established hierarchy organizing mass interests.<sup>5</sup> Others emphasize the contributions of mass populations, arguing for political change brought on by a surge of populist demands.<sup>6</sup> Ethnic mobilization, which may stem from either an elite or mass endeavor, entails ethnic groups' development of social and political agendas in order to further the rights of the group or its members. Nationalism occurs when ethnic mobilization increases such that the ethnic group seeks to achieve independent statehood, often through separatist demands.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Categorizing post-Soviet separatism***

Nationalist ethnic separatism does not necessarily occur in all multiethnic societies. But what causes this separatism when it does occur, and how do



we predict the degree of separatism to expect from which groups? Post-Soviet regional separatist strategies followed a continuum from relatively quiescent policies and few demands to outright declarations of independence and separatist war. A distinguishing factor for characterizing the level of separatism is the extent to which the demands were threatening to the central government and therefore likely to spark punitive retribution. Cultural and symbolic autonomy rarely rated much concern or even interest from central governments, whereas political and economic demands tended to target critical bases of central government power. The most aggressive regional strategies paired threats or acts of violence with separatist demands. Since demands varied according to regional need or imagination, I classify them into three basic categories of high, medium, and low levels, distinguishing each group according to the level of threat they brought to the central state.

High-level strategies included demands for extreme changes in administrative position: for example aspiring to higher territorial status, or for the ability unilaterally to delegate certain authorities to the central government, or independence itself. High-level economic strategies included such policies as the unilateral regionalization of all property in the region, establishing trade alliances with foreign actors, efforts to construct a regional central bank, and refusal to pay taxes to the central government.

Within the context of the Soviet demise and post-Soviet state building, demands for sovereignty or changes in administrative status, unthinkable during the Soviet period, became medium-risk strategies for ethnic national territories. After all, by 1994, 32 of 39 of the national territories had issued a declaration of sovereignty with little concern of central government backlash. Medium-level political separatism included vague declarations of sovereignty, creation of joint administration of territory by both the region and federal center, and demands for border changes.<sup>8</sup> Medium-level economic separatism might also entail requests for new examination on property ownership of regional industries and natural resource complexes, or an accounting of how regional revenues would be shared between the center and the region. (During the Soviet period, the bulk of regional revenues went to central government coffers.)

Least threatening to the federal center, thus constituting the lowest-level separatism, were cultural demands. Some regions established strenuous language regulations for regional office holders. Tatarstan, for example, has fought with Moscow in its effort to follow Turkish precedent and Latinize the Tatar alphabet, which currently is written in Cyrillic. Likewise, the republics often vied for control over local schooling, asserting authority not only over language instruction, but also over subjects such as history and literature.

This classification of ethnic separatism adjusts for the contexts in which it occurred. Some regions made explicit requests of the central government to alter their policies in the interests of greater autonomy. Others acted unilaterally, instituting the desired policy and baiting a central government response. During the process of center – periphery give and take, many regions escalated their strategic method for achieving their stated goals. In response to a central government refusal of specific policy requests (or central government action against a policy undertaken without approval), regions could decide to comply or protest. The most radical protests came in the form of threatened or actual violence. For the purposes of this study, cases of violent separatism are classified as those where the regional political leadership consciously mobilized its population (or parts of its population) to use violent means in pursuit of a desired level of autonomy and engaged forces to do so. I use the term war if the number of battle deaths equals or exceeds 1000.<sup>9</sup>

### **Causes of ethnic separatism in Russia and Georgia**

Ethnic separatism in Russia and Georgia occurred amid division of the spoils from Soviet dissolution. Separatist politics helped enrich and strengthen governments as well as individuals. Ethnic regional elites calibrated the degree of separatism they would pursue and the mechanisms by which they would pursue it. They made conscious evaluations of their likelihood for success, given their regions' power and position, as well as the ability of the central government to deter their demands or offer incentives for resolution. Personal alliances between political leaders enhanced both regional position and central government tolerance. Each of these factors increased or decreased the mobilizing capacity of that region. The starting point of separatist demands was the Soviet federal system, inherited by most post-Soviet states, which endowed certain ethnic groups with territorial status by constructing national territories for them. This institutional structure enhanced ethnic separatism by providing such regions with a moral argument for separatism, as well as an institutional structure through which they could organize their efforts.

The first component of the ongoing center – periphery engagement was state capacity. Reeling from the Soviet collapse in 1991, both Russia and Georgia in the early 1990s engaged in creating new state structures within environments that included emboldened political entrepreneurs. At that time, neither state was strong enough to deter ethnic regional leaders from making demands. But while they were both weak states, Russia and Georgia did differ in terms of capacity. Russia, diminished from the towering superpower it had been, nonetheless maintained a powerful military with nuclear weapons, rich and diverse natural resources, an extensive (if

inefficient and somewhat obsolete) industrial and manufacturing complex, and some real (albeit weak) political institutions that carried over from Gorbachev's reforms in the 1980s. Georgia in 1991 had virtually no armed force that answered to civilian control, little rule of law (to the extent that corrupt paramilitary leaders ran their own fiefdoms in the capital city), no clear constitutional authority, and by the end of the year suffered a presidential coup. So while both states were undoubtedly weak, their positions for bargaining with ethnic regions diverged sharply. Russia had something to offer; Georgia did not. Moreover, as both states' state building programs took off in 1999 and 2003, respectively, conditions between the center and region (or *de facto* state, in the case of Chechnya, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia) likewise evolved.

Second, regions' ability and interest to increase their status varied. Very wealthy regions had more resources with which to bargain and more credible threats vis-à-vis the central government. Populous republics that unified around popular executives could offer succor in the ballot box and help central government leaders with their public allegiance. Weaker and less politically significant regions were more vulnerable to unilateral state action and retribution, affecting the level of risk of given separatist strategies. Likewise, some regions were more vulnerable to state action than others. This was certainly the case for Georgia's ethnic regions, which, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, lost a protector in Moscow. During Soviet times, those republics officially reported to the Georgian republic, but could appeal to Moscow as a higher authority. The collapse of the USSR closed that link, limiting the political options of Georgia's ethnic republics.

Third, informal structures interacted between the mobilizing elements of weak state capacity and regional power; this could enhance the likelihood of both regional and central governments engaging in violence. Close patronage ties strengthened regional leaders' negotiating leverage. Those with strong ties could demand more because the politics of separatism was less risky for them. Moreover, leaders of wealthy regions could offer powerful incentives to central government leaders in need of strong political or financial allies. Poorer regions with close ties to central government leaders could make more strident demands with less risk than poor regions without political clout.

In Russia and Georgia, patronage was a key component of the ethnic separatist phenomenon that has been fundamental to the state building experience. Although patronage ties or lack thereof did not determine the outbreak of violence, they affected regions' capacity to engage in separatism and the central government's incentives to respond favorably. In an environment where clientelism and patronage had dominated the power structure for decades, the regions where violent separatism occurred are those where

patronage structures either were nonexistent (South Ossetia, Abkhazia) or had broken down (Chechnya).

This approach builds upon the instrumentalist tradition of ethnic studies, emphasizing how ethnic mobilization enhances the capability of groups to achieve political or economic goals. Cultural identities are powerful energizers of mass populations, and political leaders in the former Soviet Union used this to their advantage as the successor states reconstructed their political and economic systems. The key theoretical contribution offered here is the examination of how individualized theories of ethnic mobilization such as regional strength or institutional structure combine in predictable ways to construct repeated incentive structures. These structures increase the probability of certain types of political outcome, in this case the decision by political leaders to use violent or nonviolent means in pursuit of their interests. Patronage structures can create a buffer and often incentives for keeping the peace.

### **Alternative explanations of ethnic mobilization and conflict**

Three schools of thought dominate the study of ethnicity and ethnic conflict: primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism. Primordialism highlights the seemingly fixed and emotional components of ethnic identity, finding the roots of conflict within the politics of diversity and the personalities and histories of different cultural groups. In this rendering, one's ethnic identity is something one inherits, something carried in the blood. Primordialism captures the emotions so often wrapped into ethnic identities. Clifford Geertz argued that the community constructed by cultural ties was often overwhelming: the "congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times, overpowering coerciveness in and of themselves."<sup>10</sup>

But the seeming ascriptive nature of ethnic identity is what arms primordialism's critics: constructivists reject the inviolability of genetics, pointing out that identities assimilate and disappear with history. Constructivists contend that ethnic identity, far from being biological, stems from social factors, particularly with patterns of economic development. Benedict Anderson, for example, places the emergence of ethnic distinctions with the processes of modernization: as people from villages moved into cities for more varied employment opportunities, they interacted with people from other geographical areas, many of whom spoke different languages. Those who could speak the language of the marketplace became the "in" group, while those who could not were outsiders. These groups developed into ethnic identities centered around language. Yet the differences were not biological, but were rather socially constructed. These communities of likeness were imagined, since

it is unlikely that all members of any particular group know one another personally, despite the reality of the perceived connection.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike constructivists, instrumentalists are generally more concerned with the use of ethnicity or nationalism in political discourse, rather than the origin of particular ethnic groups. But their understanding of ethnic mobilization draws directly from the sort of arguments offered by constructivists. Instrumentalists point out that political leaders in particular know the power of ethnic identity and use it to their advantage. These theories can focus on oppression experiences that engender a “rebellion” response from repressed minority groups. They also examine structural incentives that enhance the ability of minority groups to penetrate the political arena, often to the advantage of ethnic political entrepreneurs. The emphasis of the first line of thinking versus the second is an attempt to distinguish “righteous” mobilization from the sort that stems from more cynical interests in self-enrichment. Below, I explore how other scholars have approached similar questions of ethnic mobilization, particularly with regard to ethnic conflict in the former Soviet Union. I find that although there is wisdom and merit in all the approaches, instrumental factors explain more events in the Soviet context.<sup>12</sup>

### *Primordial explanations of ethnic mobilization and conflict*

Ethnic war often shocks observers with its emotion, its hatred, its intransigence, and its brutality. Its rhetoric resounds with prejudice and biological recrimination. Examples abound. In Nazi Germany, Jews were not human, but rather “vermin” and “lice.”<sup>13</sup> In 1994 Rwanda, Hutus labeled the Tutsi population “cockroaches,” and called for Hutu civilians to use the Nyabarongo River to send them back to Ethiopia.<sup>14</sup> Samantha Power, in *“A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide*, includes a photo of the Kagera River clogged with the bodies of macheted Tutsis.<sup>15</sup> The emotion behind such exhortations seemingly defies rationality, particularly upon the realization that those waterways, if they reached Ethiopia at all, would be a rather indirect route. There are many scholarly critiques of the primordialist conception of ethnicity, but for many in the midst of ethnic violence—victims and aggressors alike—their own identities and those of their adversaries *are* biological, ascriptive, and immutable, no matter what the scholars say.

Some post-Soviet scholarly literature indicates a theoretical as well as practical primordialism in the understanding of ethnic identity. These conceptions stem as far back as at least Joseph Stalin, in his capacity as the Nationalities Commissar in the Bolshevik party, as well as within current academic discourse. Stalin conceived of the ethnic group (*narod*) as “a historically

evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture.”<sup>16</sup> For Stalin, ethnic groups carried not only similar histories and languages, but also distinct personalities. Along those lines, Russian scholar Gennadii Kozyrev contends that ethnic conflicts “are most clearly manifest in contradictions, connected with differences in culture, language, religion and other socio-cultural particularities of ethnic groups.” He goes on to note the entrenched nature of such particularities: “. . . in contrast to other large social communities, ethnic communities are stable. A person during the course of his life may more than once change his profession, place of living, become richer or poorer etc.—but his ethnicity is his life-long characteristic.”<sup>17</sup>

These conceptions certainly carry over into language surrounding the cases of ethnic secession considered in this book, on all sides. In the days after the 2008 Georgian assault on Tskhinval(i), a South Ossetian woman lamented that Georgians “have poison in their blood.”<sup>18</sup> Speaking to a journalist covering the Chechen War, a Russian lieutenant colonel, Valeri, opined “The military has realized that Chechens cannot be re-educated. Fighting against Russians is in their blood. They have robbed, killed, and stolen our cattle for all their lives. They simply don’t know how to do anything else.” This sort of thinking helps rationalize the brutality that often accompanies ethnic war. Valeri continued:

We should have slaughtered all Chechens over 5 years old and sent all the children that could still be re-educated to reservations with barbed wire and guards at the corners . . . . But where would you find teachers willing to sacrifice their lives to re-educate these wolf cubs? There are no such people. Therefore, it’s much easier to kill them all. It takes less time for them to die than to grow.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the obvious allure and simplicity of the primordial explanation for ethnic war, it does not sufficiently answer the questions posed in this book. The approach does not help us isolate the groups that will attempt violent secession as a strategy, instead of less violent expressions of ethnic mobilization. In Russia, only Chechnya, one out of 21 ethnically designated regions, militarily sought independence from the central government. The mere existence of difference does not account for the variation in separatist outcome. Although primordialism often envisions historical rivalries, such as those between the Serbs and the Croats in Yugoslavia before its wars of secession, the emphasis on difference here obscures important temporal factors. Although the Serbs and Croats do share a history of mutual war, they also share instances of cooperation and peace within the same country, when individuals from both groups commonly intermarried. Diversity helps guide us

to common fault lines by indicating ethnic difference, but does not help us understand why war will happen after decades of coexistence. In the case of the former Soviet Union, the diversity thesis only points us to a likelihood that ethnic conflict might occur, given the incredible diversity of the territory, but it does not tell us why some groups used violence or why the vast majority did not. Indeed, considering the size of the Soviet Union and the number of ethnic groups that resided within the country, primordialist scholars might be surprised that there were so few conflicts as opposed to so many.

One variation on the primordial thesis examines how ethnic group population clusters affect separatism. Perhaps violent mobilization is more likely among communities that are concentrated demographically: the greater a group's population in a given geographical area, the greater the possibility of solidarity and propensity for dire action. Thus we might expect those minorities who enjoy a demographic advantage in their titular republics to follow more separatist strategies than those who make up smaller percentages within their regions. Within the post-Soviet context, however, this has not always been the case. In the regions that seceded violently, Chechnya, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, the titular ethnic groups made up 58, 66, 18, and 77 percent of their republic territories, respectively. Although it could be that Abkhazia is a notable exception within the cluster, it is difficult from pure population numbers to ascertain which regions will pursue high-level separatist strategies (with or without violence) based on their regions' demographic makeup. In Russia, Tatars make up 49 percent of Tatarstan's population and followed high-level separatist strategies; so did Bashkortostan, although the Bashkir make up only 22 percent of Bashkortostan's population. Likewise, several regions with proportionally high titular populations pursued fairly low-level separatist policies: the Chuvash (68 percent of Chuvashia), the North Ossetians (53 percent of North Ossetia), and the Tuvans (64 percent of Tuva).<sup>20</sup>

Monica Duffy Toft argues that an important demographic standard to consider is the density of a distinct ethnic population in one geographic area, rather than throughout the rest of the country.<sup>21</sup> A group whose members are not dispersed across the country but condensed into a smaller area might be better able to politicize their distinctive identity.<sup>22</sup> For example, the more Chechens who live *inside* Chechnya as opposed to *outside* it, the more likely we are to witness ethnic mobilization. Yet this measure in itself does not capture the very rich variation in ethnic republic political behavior. In Georgia, where South Ossetia and Abkhazia both fought separatist wars, the Abkhazian population was densely situated (in 1989, 97 percent of the Abkhazians in the former USSR lived in Abkhazia), but the South Ossetians were not (only 39 percent of Soviet Ossetians lived in South Ossetia).

Tatarstan and Bashkortostan both followed high-level separatist strategies, but while 64.2 percent of all Soviet Bashkir lived in Bashkortostan, only 32 percent of Tatars lived in Tatarstan.<sup>23</sup> As the case studies of this project will indicate, demographic concentration certainly affected how regional leaders marshaled their arguments vis-à-vis the central government, but it did not *determine* their actions.

Some scholars also identify cultural characteristics or historical experiences as creating gaps of understanding between ethnic groups. For example, some have argued that the ethnic identity differentiation is more powerful between groups that are culturally distinct—that share fewer cultural similarities or patterns. Samuel Huntington has argued that religious differences are crucial to predicting the locations of ethnic violence. Christian groups, he contends, might be more likely to engage in conflict with non-Christians.<sup>24</sup> Likewise Daniel Treisman finds in his examination of ethnic separatism in Russia that Muslim regions are slightly more likely to follow separatist strategies than non-Muslim ones (although his analysis and conclusions focus on other factors).<sup>25</sup>

Yet there are difficulties linking such cultural personalities with separatism in the former Soviet Union. One reason for this is that the Soviet context makes religious differentiation challenging. With two exceptions, the Soviet federal system distinguished its national territories according to historical and linguistic classifications of peoples, not according to religion, which they hoped to eradicate through communist ideology. Another element of this kind of cultural classification is that it does not account for differences within a religion. For example, the Muslims in Dagestan have historically been Sufist (although with a later influx of Salafism), whereas the Tatars and Bashkir generally adhere to Jadidism. Moreover, the criminalization of religion in the Soviet period has affected the identities of Muslim followers within regions differently. The Abkhazians, for example, who are often characterized as Islamic in Western scholarship (and have some Islamic history), protest that they are multireligious and do not base their identity on religious structures. Likewise, the Acharans, commonly referred to as Muslim Georgians, have trouble stating an unambiguous self-identification, since although many do have a background in Islam, they find this religious identity to be at odds with their primary Georgian identity, which, in their understanding, should be Christian.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, religious distinctions lead to conclusions about motivations that may not accurately portray the circumstances of separatism. For example, the crisis in Chechnya has often been interpreted in Western media as an expression of Islamic extremist interests, influenced by the threat of Wahabbism or Salafism in the area. While this is true of the later war in 1999, it does



not explain the early stages of Chechen separatism, which emerged before the growth of Islamic fundamentalism there. In fact, the Islamic radicalization of Chechnya occurred *after* the initial conflict began in 1994.

The religious explanation does not provide a comprehensive account of events surrounding separatism in Russia or Georgia. Even granting a clear link between Islamic radicalism and violent secession, the Russian region that harbors the most radical of Islamic movements, Dagestan, has firmly signaled its intentions to remain within Russia (although certainly some individual Dagestanis actively support the Chechen cause). Moreover, Islamic beliefs do not explain the Georgian context, where the two regions that engaged in violent separatism, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, were either ambivalent religiously (Abkhazia) or predominantly Christian (South Ossetia).

### ***Instrumental-oppression explanations of ethnic mobilization and conflict***

Instrumentalist scholars focus on periods of heightened or diminished ethnic mobilization, finding political and economic causes for increasing levels of tensions between ethnic groups. Thus ethnic mobilization is instrumental for groups seeking to obtain goals within the society.<sup>27</sup> Instrumental approaches fall into two key categories: theories of oppression and theories of mobilization. Like the primordial theories above, instrumental-oppression scholarship offers insight to our understanding of ethnicity in the former Soviet Union, but fails to direct us toward the regions most likely to experience violent separatism.

Minority ethnic groups, even in the most progressive states, experience discrimination because of their cultural identity. When explaining ethnic mobilization, instrumental-oppression theorists point to minority ethnic groups' experiences of oppression or repression by groups in power (often majority groups). These theories take into account broad conceptions of repression, looking not only toward cases of genocide and ethnic cleansing as clear signs of minority group suffering, but also in political and economic structures that systematically discriminate, either in general against all ethnic minorities or by targeting specific groups.

In *People versus States*, Ted Robert Gurr examines institutional oppression, arguing that multicultural democratic states are much less likely than authoritarian regimes to experience divisive ethnic mobilization or conflict. Part of the reason for this, he argues, is that democratic countries are unlikely to carry out coercive and repressive anti-minority policies that one might find in regimes not held accountable to an active citizenry. Gurr argues that ethnic conflict occurs because of a lack of protected outlets for political participation.

Groups that might desire greater autonomy, or more equal participation in the political system, can be stymied by oppressive regimes.<sup>28</sup> This broad institutional contextualization of ethnic separatism, however, does not account for the evolution of ethnic rights within the Soviet Union, admittedly a repressive and coercive regime. For many ethnic minorities within Russia in 1917, the Soviets offered greater benefits for their culture, language, and history than the minorities had ever experienced under the Tsars. The Bolsheviks actively sought alliances with ethnic minorities, co-opting them to fight for the Red Army in the Russian Civil War. As part of the application of communism to ethnic territories, the Bolsheviks established structures that promoted both native and Russian literacy, constructed printing houses that published native language newspapers and books, built native language schools, and created written alphabets for languages that had until that time only been spoken.<sup>29</sup>

The Soviets also brought less inviting practices, ones that involved systematic deportations and cleansing of several ethnic groups. During and after World War II, Soviet officials implemented vast changes to the “affirmative action” policies that were common in the 1920s. Even so, contrary to Gurr’s expectations in the 1990s, many separatist regions within the Soviet successor states (particularly in Russia, Georgia, and Moldova) actively decried the dissolution of the USSR, and called for its reinstatement. Dzhokar Dudayev, the first president of Chechnya, remarked once in an interview that he seriously considered suing the Russian government for the demise of the Soviet Union.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, Abkhazian and South Ossetian separatist movements sought to separate from Georgia but remain within the Soviet Union (and South Ossetia later has sought to join Russia).

The democratic oppression argument continues into the current period of democratic transition and state building. Reflecting Gurr’s sentiments, popular policy strategies for ethnic conflict avoidance and resolution promote democratic decentralization or federalism. A key assumption of such solutions is that unitary governments can ignore the interests of ethnic minorities and thus inhibit their abilities to maintain their cultural and political identity. By creating institutions that guarantee ethnic groups greater inclusion in the political system, tyranny by the majority group can be avoided (or diminished), and ethnic minorities will have fewer incentives to use violence to protect political rights. This perspective emphasizes the avoidance of violence by mitigating ethnic complaints before they appear. Democratization scholars such as Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan concur with Gurr that minority groups need a channel for their political aspirations.<sup>31</sup> If federal democratic institutions are in place, the separatism that does occur, such as Québec within Canada, can be resolved practically and objectively through institutional mechanisms.<sup>32</sup>

The authoritarian nature of Soviet federalism did not provide outlets for popular political involvement. When democratization reforms emerged in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev, however, the federal structure began to offer means for greater minority group participation. In the case of the Union Republics (the highest level of national territory in the Soviet ethnic hierarchy), this culminated in peaceful and successful secessionist efforts, with each becoming an independent country. After the Soviet Union collapsed and successor states began building new institutions, usually retaining the national territorial structure that had existed under Soviet rule, separatism grew out of the politics of establishing the rules behind those federal structures. Some argue that within the post-Soviet context, institutions associated with diminishing ethnic strife—democratization and federalism—actually promoted it.<sup>33</sup> This observation, as discussed later in assessing the mobilization theories, is critical for an accurate explanation of ethnic separatism in the former Soviet Union.

Gurr also emphasizes historical oppression when analyzing incentives for minority groups to follow secessionist strategies.<sup>34</sup> Groups that have been systematically oppressed by a regime, he argues, are more likely to attempt leaving that regime. John Dunlop, in his assessment of the historical roots of the Chechen conflict in Russia, contends that continued and malicious oppression of the Chechen people since the tsarist period sowed the seeds of the twentieth-century Chechen wars.<sup>35</sup> Gurr and Dunlop both agree that the experience of oppression increases the likelihood of secession by historically oppressed groups.

Historical oppression, however, has not proven to be a necessary or sufficient condition for violent secession. Regional leaders certainly used the Soviet Union's repressive history to mobilize their citizenry, as well as to exact concessions from the newly forming national governments, which sought to distance themselves from the illegitimate Soviet regime. It is difficult to assess the impact of oppression in the Soviet case itself, because the Stalinist period brought strife to many ethnic groups, including the Russians. However, the most extreme case of oppression against ethnic groups was the cleansing of the "punished peoples" in forced mass deportations during and after World War II. Although several groups were singled out for punishment, only one of those groups subsequently sought independence from Russia. In 1944, the Soviets deported the entire nation of Chechnya to Central Asia. At the same time, the Soviets similarly deported the Ingush, the Balkars, and the Kalmyks.<sup>36</sup> Of these punished groups, only the Chechens engaged in high-level and violent separatism. The reverse is also the case in some circumstances: not every region that engaged in violent secessionist behavior endured such overwhelming repression as the Chechens, for example South

Ossetia and Abkhazia. As will become clear in the case studies introduced in later chapters, all regions referred to their historical experiences as they sought autonomy or independence from the center. However, the extent of that oppression itself did not determine regional demands, since even the punished regions varied in their separatism.

Economic oppression theories, the final instrumental-oppression approach considered here, explain ethnic mobilization by highlighting economic inequalities, particularly those that emerge between ethnic groups during modernization and industrialization processes.<sup>37</sup> As industrialization and modernization occurred, groups moved into cities and found common identities through communication in the same language, class differentiation, or economic mobilization. For example, Benedict Anderson argues that groups who do not speak the majority language are economically marginalized because they cannot move into the workforce as easily as those groups who do speak the language.<sup>38</sup> Ethnic groups then find mechanisms to contend with their economic disadvantage. According to Donald Horowitz, ethnic conflict occurs when ethnic differences correspond with class divisions in society.<sup>39</sup> Ernest Gellner contends that economically disadvantaged minorities turn to ethnic mobilization as a way to achieve economic prosperity.<sup>40</sup>

But these explanations are useful only when the modernization and industrialization processes differentiated ethnic groups along economic or class lines. Stalin's forced industrialization program targeted all groups with the goal of eradicating class differentiation within Russia. The Soviet system of industrialization combined with the Bolshevik efforts to promote the interests of ethnic minorities and created conditions limiting the applicability of the modernization argument. The early Bolsheviks organized ethnic territories to promote the interests of national minorities, seeking to bring them up to the level of the industrialized ethnic groups, such as the Russians. Modernizing policies such as urbanization and increased education for minority groups were mandated from above, limiting the impact of economic inequality in many cases. In fact, Henry Hale has found that, among former communist states, the most separatist regions were often the richest, rather than the other way around.<sup>41</sup>

### **An instrumental-mobilization framework for ethnic separatism**

As political actors in the Russian Federation and Georgia began to rebuild their states after the Soviet collapse, ethnic separatism challenged their efforts. The primacy of ethnic politics was due in part to the mechanism of Soviet collapse, into 15 independent countries along ethnic lines, with Union Republics becoming sovereign states. The nascence of the political

institutions and the weakness of the central governments gave leaders of ethnic republics new opportunities for heightening regional position as well as their own personal prestige. Likewise for the central states, the political arrangements generated in the early years could establish permanent state structures and cement the balance of power between the region and the state. This process would determine which political entrepreneurs would emerge, remain, and fall into obscurity. There was much at stake. As instrumentalist scholars have argued, ethnic appeals, particularly in democratic societies that needed constituencies, are particularly valuable in transitioning state contexts.

The legacy of the Soviet ethno-federalist system created a starting point for ethnic mobilization. Few autonomy demands for ethnic minorities in the former Soviet Union came from groups that did not have at least some formal autonomous status under the communist regime.<sup>42</sup> Within this framework, three factors interacted in ways that framed subsequent ethnic politics. At the state level, the capacity of the central governments to govern their territory and provide basic infrastructure simultaneously affected the risks associated with regional separatism, provided incentives for regional bargaining, and limited the benefits of negotiations. A region's political and economic power offered regional leaders significant leverage over central government actions, at times providing a buffer even for high-level separatism. Finally, informal political structures, often in the form of patronage ties, a common element of the Soviet system of governance, became even more significant as formal institutions withered. Regions whose leaders had or could build new clientelistic ties with central government authorities could make greater demands of the central government without taking excessive risks that might lead to a violent response. Regions with the protection of wealth or patronage could engage in "safe" separatism, whereas those without clientelist linkages or wealth could not.

Ethnic violence in Russia and Georgia, therefore, was more likely when the central state government was very weak and unable to offer credible bargains, when regions lacked significant wealth to force the central state to the bargaining table, and when informal structures, such as patronage, that tied individual regional and central government officials together were nonexistent or compromised. Regions without these enhancements, in states crippled by weakness, exhibited the most promising conditions for violent secession, given the dearth of bargaining opportunities.

This explanation of ethnic conflict challenges the primordial and instrumentalist-oppression approaches by emphasizing ethnic groups' mobilizational power within the political arena. Certainly diversity created complex political interactions within the Soviet successor states. Likewise, the Soviet legacy of oppression against minority groups, either in terms of

cultural ethnic cleansing policies, favorable economic policies toward certain groups, or the sheer weight of the authoritarian Soviet state, affected the cultural memory of ethnic minorities as the USSR collapsed. But, as demonstrated above, it was not the case that the most oppressed groups were the most separatist. Nor were the most culturally distinct groups most prone to violence. In Russia and Georgia, the critical elements affecting ethnic separatism, and especially the use of violence by both regional and central governments, were factors that enhanced a region's ability to mobilize, diminished the state's capability to deter action, and lessened incentives for both sides to respond politically rather than militarily.

### ***Soviet ethno-federalism: Institutional mobilization***

The Soviet ethno-federal territorial structure established a starting point for most postcommunist ethnic separatism. The Soviet Union used a complex structure of territorial administration to govern its large and ethnically diverse territory. One component of this geographical division established regions (*oblasts*) not based on ethnic identity. The other, critical to this study, were the ethnically based regions, hierarchically organized and designed to provide some sort of autonomy (at least on paper) to the ethnic groups for whom the territories were designated. At the top of the hierarchy were the Union Republics, 15 in number, which made up the entire Soviet territory. Within each Union Republic, the territorial structure differentiated nonethnic regions and ethnic autonomies. The autonomies likewise were divided hierarchically (see Figure 1.1). At the top were the Union Republics, then Autonomous Republics, and then Autonomous Oblasts and Okrugs. This ethno-federal structure, especially the pattern of its genesis and later development in Soviet politics, provided a process and precedent for ethnic bargaining during state building. Because the ultimate bargains were institutionalized in federal form, the structure also created the means for regional ethnic separatism.

As the Bolsheviks began the process of creating the Soviet empire, they grappled with how to consolidate a state in the midst of minority ethnonationalist mobilization. After the fall of the tsarist regime, many ethnic territories of the Russian Empire had begun their own movements for independence and sovereignty. In practice, Vladimir Lenin's approach to national minorities was to court them in an attempt to create an atmosphere of trust between the Soviets and the non-Russian nations. A key ingredient of Lenin's nationalities policy was the right of self-determination offered to non-Russians joining the Soviet realm. Although the general emphasis of Bolshevik communism was to internationalize—not nationalize—the

<p><b>Level 1: The Union Republics</b> (Russia, Georgia, Latvia, Ukraine, etc.) (The entire territory of the USSR was exhaustively divided into 15 Union Republics)</p>
<p><b>Level 2: Autonomous Republics – ARs</b> (Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Abkhazia) (ARs were located within Union Republic territory, but did not make up the entirety of the territory)</p>
<p><b>Level 3: Autonomous Oblasts – AOs</b> (South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh) (AOs were located within Union Republic territory, but did not make up the entirety of the territory)</p>
<p><b>Level 4: Autonomous Okrugs</b> (Evenski, Chukchi) (A. Okrugs were located within Union Republic territory, but did not make up the entirety of the territory)</p>

**Figure 1.1** Federal Structure of Ethnic Regions of the Soviet Union

proletariat, Lenin stressed that nationalism was part of society’s evolution into socialism, arguing “mankind can proceed towards the inevitable fusion of nations only through a transitional period of the complete freedom of all oppressed nations.”<sup>43</sup> Stalin’s later policy of *korenizatsiia* (indigenization) likewise promoted, rather than diminished, ethnic differentiation and national mobilization among ethnic minorities. Stalin envisioned both of these policies to be mechanisms by which the Soviets might co-opt the national minorities, thus consolidating Soviet power over the entirety of the former Russian Empire.<sup>44</sup>

Stalin’s efforts to create regional territories and enhance the influence of non-Russian nationalities were exhaustive. The early federal hierarchy included not only regional territories, but also included villages, even *soviets* (socialist council groups). The autonomy level designated depended on the Soviet leadership’s assessment of an ethnic group’s “level of indigenous national consciousness.”<sup>45</sup> According to Richard Pipes it also reflected the political processes involved in political consolidation, that is, co-optation between the center and regions joining the Bolsheviks during the civil war. For example, the territorial incorporation for the Bashkir population set precedent for the national territorial system that followed. Ethnic Bashkir leaders transferred their alliance with the White Army (anticommunist) to

the Red Army in exchange for extensive autonomy and a separate Bashkir republic, where before the Bolsheviks had only imagined a single republic for both the Tatar and Bashkir minorities. Pipes observes that this bargain significantly altered the Bolshevik plans:

... this concession was a far-reaching concession by the Soviet government. It meant the abandonment of the project of a united Tatar – Bashkir republic and the establishment of an autonomous state with far greater political and economic self-rule than Moscow was at that time generally inclined to grant to its republics. To the Bashkirs it appeared eminently satisfactory.<sup>46</sup>

The bargaining agreements established in the course of state consolidation likewise established patronage structures, with central government leaders favoring their national minority protégés with positions of power.<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, the *korenizatsiia* program institutionalized the recruitment and advancement of members of the titular ethnic minority into high-level positions in the regions' governance structure. Not only did communist party membership among non-Russians rise, but Moscow ensured that titular minorities would get the top leadership positions within the regional republics (although the second in command would often be Russian).<sup>48</sup> This political aspect of *korenizatsiia*, according to Robert J. Kaiser, was “a method of co-opting potential nationalist leaders” that was “probably crucial to the survival of the USSR.”<sup>49</sup>

One obstacle to Soviet industrial development was what the leadership considered the “backward” cultures of non-Russian minorities. The early stages of social and political change in the Soviet Union therefore contained systematic efforts to urbanize and educate the ethnic minority populations. Those groups organized into territorial autonomies benefited from the bureaucracies therein. Stalin's nationalities policy of *korenizatsiia* created systems of dual language literacy, establishing native language schools that included a Russian language component. This allowed non-Russians to maintain (or in many cases, enhance) their own native language literacy without losing the economic and political benefit of learning Russian. *Korenizatsiia* encouraged a belief among national groups that their territorial homeland was fixed, and at the same time improved socioeconomic development by raising levels of education, wealth, and political sophistication. The Soviets extended *korenizatsiia* into policies that helped perpetuate national identity, for example, creating written languages where none existed before.<sup>50</sup> Native language publications within the territories increased dramatically. Not only did the Soviets expand their support for non-Russian publications, but they also prioritized education within the system, arguing that this would



bring the peasantry and those from “backward” territories equal to those who had experienced more advanced economic development. Consequently, much attention was paid to creating literacy for the ethnic territories, both in their native language and Russian. Literacy rates for all nationalities rose dramatically after the installation of the Soviet education system.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the concentration on increasing minority groups’ socioeconomic conditions, the Soviet Union remained a repressive regime. Ethnic territories, once created, were not necessarily stable or protected from changes initiated by Moscow. For example, in 1934 Stalin unified the formerly separate Chechen and Ingush autonomous republics into one territory, a downgrade for each of the ethnic groups, since an autonomy designation signified a group’s political importance. In the 1936 Soviet constitution he downgraded the Abkhazian Union Republic into an Autonomous Republic under the jurisdiction of Georgia. As a result of these somewhat arbitrary changes, the regional leaders came to understand that the whims of the party leaders in Moscow could drastically affect their political and economic position. This reality enhanced incentives to develop and maintain personalized relationships with the central government.<sup>52</sup>

Politics of patronage and corruption received a boost under Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Soviet Union from 1964 to 1982. In order to maintain political stability as well as to avoid the loss of prestige that had ousted his predecessor, Nikita Khrushchev, Brezhnev consolidated power by creating an elite cadre made up of his own protégés. According to John Willerton, this style of recruitment “began almost immediately upon Brezhnev’s selection as party leader, and it continued throughout his tenure.”<sup>53</sup> A result of this emphasis, note Evan Mawdsley and Stephen White, was increased nepotism and a new cult of personality surrounding Brezhnev and his family, particularly outside of Moscow: “Abuse of office, within as well as outside the Brezhnev family, became increasingly frequent; and in the outlying and non-Russian areas entire networks of ‘family circles’ developed around long-serving first secretaries.”<sup>54</sup>

For national leaders, Brezhnev’s support meant greater possibilities of professional advancement. A party member could only advance into higher positions in the party and government by achieving the patronage of higher-level members of the party hierarchy. First Secretaries of Republican Communist Party cadres could be promoted into key positions in the Central Committee, for example, and then up into the ranks of the Secretariat or Politburo. In his assessment of patronage politics in the Brezhnev era, Willerton observes that while few of the Autonomous Republics’ elite cadres moved into high-level central government positions, Brezhnev clients in the national territories maintained their own “entourage of protégés,” heavily influential “within their own regional settings.” Even so, he argues,

during the Brezhnev years, only patronage could provide advancement for non-Russian (or non-Slavic) leaders: “only the non-Russians directly working with Brezhnev—those who were his protégés—had any real opportunity to advance into top national positions.”<sup>55</sup> Subsequent General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, who oversaw the collapse of the Soviet regime, altered some elements of the elite relationships created by the Bolsheviks and systematized by Brezhnev, opening up greater opportunities of advancement for non-Russian political leaders. Nonetheless, it is notable that Gorbachev’s own foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, moved up the ranks to the Politburo from his position as First Secretary of the Georgian Republic’s Communist Party.

The long evolution of politics among non-Russian minorities, particularly for those in designated territorial autonomies, was one of expedient alliances and bargains during periods of state change. Soviet federalism helped structure the country’s collapse and the subsequent politics of state building in the successor states. In her analysis of state dissolution in Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union, Valerie Bunce argued that the states’ institutional structure helped define the interests of elite actors within a weakened state system. Federal structures based on nationality, she wrote, “put into place the necessary conditions for the rise of nations and nationalist movements in the peripheral units.”<sup>56</sup> Likewise, Philip Roeder argued that in nondemocratic societies, federal structures are not mechanisms of inclusion, but political tools manipulated by elites to enhance their own power.<sup>57</sup> This system granted ethnic groups specific territorial boundaries and endowed them with formal cultural, political, and economic autonomy. As such, the titular ethnic groups had prospects for greater ethnic mobilization, vis-à-vis both the hegemonic ethnic group and the minority groups that dwelt within their boundaries.

Among the post-Soviet successor states, there has been only one instance of ethnic separatism by a group not previously endowed with administrative status: the Transnistria region in Moldova. Moreover, the post-Soviet autonomies seemed almost fated to engage in some sort of separatism. Of the 35 ethnic federal republics in the successor states, only four did not make demands of their central government. All the others made some kind of demands, although with considerable variation on the level of demand and risk associated. Ethnic groups without institutional autonomy were less likely to muster separatist movements and less likely to achieve central government concessions.<sup>58</sup>

### *Central state capacity*

In Georgia and Russia, state capacity affected how central political elites established policy preferences with regard to ethnic regional governments.

State capacity also helped determine regional separatist strategies, provided incentives for state creation of formal institutions for center – periphery relations, affected the states’ abilities to offer a coherent response, and conditioned their ability to offer credible bargains to regional leaders. State capacity refers to a state’s ability to “*penetrate* society, *regulate* social relationships, *extract* resources, and *appropriate* or use resources in determined ways.”<sup>59</sup>

Scholars examining postcommunist ethnic politics link the near-universal drive by regional actors for increased power within federalized states to the politics of state failure and rebuilding. Stephen Solnick’s analysis of the Soviet collapse and Russian reconstruction, for example, links the weakness of the Russian state to ethnic regional elites’ making separatist demands to pressure the central government.<sup>60</sup> As international relations theories have posited, war is one available tool for political negotiation.<sup>61</sup> Ethnic separatist conflicts, therefore, might be understood as a mechanism of political bargaining in a weak and fragmented state. Jack Snyder argues that precisely during state change ethnic leaders are uniquely positioned for success, particularly when transitioning states pursue democratization. New elite recruitment policies open up the political environment for new actors and ethnic leaders can use new media outlets for mobilization purposes.<sup>62</sup> In his study of the Eastern European Gypsy population, Zoltan Barany stresses the primary importance of political opportunity for postcommunist ethnic mobilization, arguing that ethnic actors mobilized to take advantage of “a weakening state that is forced to make compromises” or to respond to the more radical stimulus of “systemic crisis and transition.”<sup>63</sup> Ethnic leaders understood and used this power, to enhance both their own standing and also that of their group.<sup>64</sup> In the former communist states, leaders of the ethnic regions combined extant national mobilization with more stringent demands, to take advantage of the more permissive political environment. In Russia and Georgia, the negotiation processes unfolded into bilateral negotiations between regional and central governments over determining the level of autonomy for individual regions within the state.

Weak states also have different sorts of motives for bringing an end to civil violence. William Reno argues that very weak central state governments have incentives to take bargaining positions that intentionally stall conflict resolution and state-building processes. He traces cases in Africa, for example in Liberia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where central state actors actively fought against the resolution of civil wars and exacerbated the disunity of their territory for personal gain.<sup>65</sup> Charles King finds similar trends in postcommunist civil wars.<sup>66</sup> This diverse but relevant scholarship might lead us to a conclusion that weak or failed state contexts will lead to greater levels of instability, not less.

But a different logic also compels with regard to state capacity and the likelihood of civil violence. Failed or weak states, especially those in post-conflict contexts, may be eager to reestablish working state institutions and recapture flagging morale, and therefore engage in state building reforms. State building includes “efforts to reconstruct, or in some cases to establish for the first time, an effective indigenous government in a state or territory where no such capacity exists or where the capacity has been seriously eroded.”<sup>67</sup> As these broken Eurasian states rebuild, however, the incentives for restoring disputed territories to their previous position within the state increase as well. Thus the question about state capacity might be not so much a matter of weak or strong states, but rather the implications of state capacity *change*. As a state loses or gains power, this alters how central government elites, as well as leaders of the ethnic republics, view their potential for changing how the political arena works.

Since 1991, both Russia and Georgia have followed policies to address the problems of state weakness that persisted as they emerged from the Soviet system. Diminished central state capacity has had considerable effect not only on the initial decision making about ethnic separatism, but also on changing conditions within separatist regions, especially the entrenched conflicts in Chechnya, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Admittedly, state capacity is a generalized factor that has contributed to a variation of outcomes within individual countries. But state capacity is a state-level factor, one that all regions within a given country will respond to. Two additional factors—regional capacity and informal institutions—affected how regional leaders understood their levels of risk regarding their separatist decision making within a given state capacity context. Likewise central states often calibrated their responses bilaterally. Thus it is possible to have a central state government pursuing different strategies toward different regions within the same state capacity condition.

### ***Regional capacity***

The wealthiest and most powerful regions were best situated to follow aggressive separatist strategies. Regional capacity refers to economic power and political control over the region's territorial infrastructure. Policies that might be construed as high risk became less so because of enhanced regional bargaining power. Regional leaders took stock of their economic and political potential and assessed their ability to obtain greater power from the center. This is not altogether a new idea, and has been a popular approach in explaining how federal relationships have unfolded within Russia. Many of these examinations focus on how wealth affected all regional behavior within Russia and do not emphasize the privileged role of *ethnic* regions within the system,

but are nonetheless relevant for this project. Daniel Treisman has explained the asymmetrical federal arrangements in Russia through an analysis of the power of wealthy regions over a dependent center. Wealthy regions obtained generous fiscal incentives in return for political loyalty. Moscow responded to regional demands by limiting its demands for tax revenue and offering budget credits.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Kathryn Stoner-Weiss has found that those regions that had better economic leverage in the first place were able to exact the most generous deals from the central Russian government.<sup>69</sup> Wealth affected bargaining positions, she argued, because regional leaders understood that the weakened center depended on the regions' political and economic support. In studies particularly examining ethnic republics, Daniel Treisman and Henry Hale, writing separately, likewise have found that regional wealth improved the likelihood of any ethnic region to seek or gain greater levels of autonomy in the postcommunist context.<sup>70</sup> Although these scholars were not pursuing questions of the causes of ethnic violence specifically, it is notable that, in the Russian cases they examined, the wealthiest regions, while they followed high-level separatist strategies, tended not to pursue violent ones.

Wealth is not the only source of regional power. Each region contained its own regional politics, the environment of which affected its bargaining power with the central government. Several regional characteristics applied. First, the ethnic divisions in the territory could affect the unity of the region's political message (although this factor varied in its salience). So regions with smaller titular ethnic populations might have faced more difficulties in mobilizing a popular political message capable of moving central state governments into concessions. Likewise, regions with powerful and popular political leaders (such as President Mintimer Shaimiev in Tatarstan) could make demands with a greater assurance of credibility than those whose leaders had less political capital in the national political arena.

So what about regional power helps us understand the choices made between violent separatism and nonviolent approaches? If power boosts separatism, it is difficult to explain the continuation of the Chechen War (or outbreak of the Second Chechen War in 1999) amid a devastated regional economy. South Ossetia, hardly an economic powerhouse, was the first region in Georgia to declare its independence and fight a war. One might contend that these regions are outliers, but the fact that these regions account for two of the four cases of violent separatism in post-Soviet space begs further investigation. These cases indicate some contradictions regarding the effect of regional capacity on separatism. Two possible (and mutually exclusive) strategies exist for those regions without the bargaining position of economic prosperity. On the one hand, a poor region might sense that it has little to lose from risk-acceptant strategies, unlike a wealthy region, which

could lose its economic edge. It might decide that accepting a system that would institutionalize dependence would be a better option than risking a violent central state backlash. On the other hand, a weak region might find that its only option within a changing institutional environment is a very high level of separatism. Without wealth as a bargaining chip, a weak region might make high-level demands, perhaps even threaten violence, in hopes of a quick and generous settlement from a state that has no interest in protracted conflict.

### *Informal institutions*

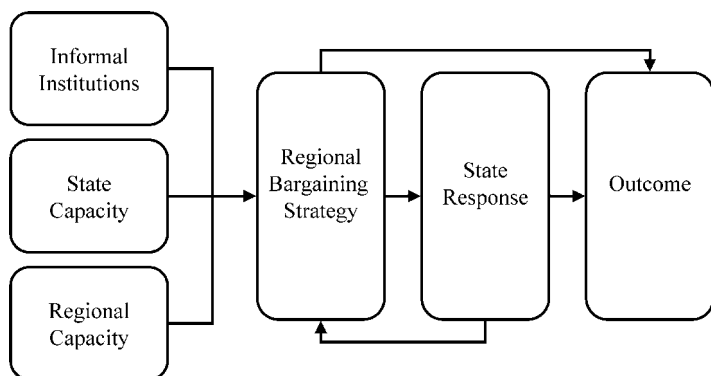
Informal structures such as patronage and corruption helped establish prestige within the political hierarchy and permitted more extensive demands by regional leaders, and affected central government responses to separatism. Political alliances, opportunities for personal advancement and enrichment, and patronage structures helped buffer regional capacity concerns for ethnic elites seeking regional autonomy and personal advancement. In some ways, that the elites chose informal mechanisms rather than formal ones to pursue their interests displays path dependency. Patronage and clientelism were long-standing means of organization within the Soviet government.<sup>71</sup> From Stalin to Yeltsin, Soviet leaders built clientelistic networks with ethnic regional elites, promising promotion, privileges, and power in exchange for loyalty and ensuring regional stability and support. In other ways, however, the informal institutions that permeated ethnic politics after the USSR collapsed reflected the preferences of the governing authorities in central states, unwilling to create permanent formal institutions in their weakened states, and the ability of regional actors to exploit those inclinations.

Informal institutions are “socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels.”<sup>72</sup> Critical to the existence of informal institutions, argue Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky, are shared expectations of predictable outcomes with some sort of enforcement if the rules are not met. Within the politics of ethnic separatism in Russia and Georgia, certain types of informal institutions emerged as particularly relevant: corruption and patronage. In this context, political corruption refers to the use of governmental or public office for private and/or personal gains.<sup>73</sup> Patronage is the reciprocal relationship between a patron and a subordinate. Scholarship on patronage identifies three characteristics that consistently indicate its presence: (1) the relationship must be unequal, between superior and inferior actors; (2) the arrangement relies on reciprocity, be it of goods, political favor, wealth, or votes; (3) the emergence of patronage depends on close personal interaction between the

actors.<sup>74</sup> Because this book is particularly concerned with regional separatist demands, which were made by the leadership of the regions, it necessarily examines elites. By elites, I refer to those people who occupy strategic positions in government and nongovernment institutions such that they consistently influence politics. In the case of ethnic separatism, this includes elites that drive regional as well as national ethnic politics.<sup>75</sup> In the case of the former Soviet Union, many of these actors occupied national leadership positions.

Informal institutions exist in both weak and strong state settings; however, the dearth of formal institutions in weakened states opens the door for increased reliance on unwritten rules of behavior. So while informal institutions and weak states are not perfectly correlated, we do see a greater reliance on informal structures in very weak states. Alex Weingrod argues that “patron – client ties can be seen to arise within a state structure in which authority is dispersed and state activity limited in scope, and in which considerable separation exists between the levels of village, city, and state.”<sup>76</sup> States in transition without extensive institutional or political reach over their territory are more vulnerable to state collapse and therefore are more likely to use patronage as a power consolidation strategy. By the end of the Soviet period, this system determined how regions could obtain key industrial complexes and agricultural technologies. This arrangement affected the early bids for autonomy and independence when the Soviet Union still existed, as well as the later politics of separatism in Russia and Georgia. Strong patronage ties with the center helped regional actors raise separatist demands with less risk than those without similar relationships. Regional leaders exploited these relationships, maximizing their own and their regions’ power vis-à-vis the central government. In periods of state building, this interaction, like that between wealthy regions and the central governments, affected regional separatism.

Similar to regional capacity, patronage ties had dual effects on possible regional strategic outcomes. Patronage links enhanced the bargaining positions of regional elites, allowing them to pursue more strategies of seemingly higher risk than they might otherwise because they could be confident of an open dialogue with central government officials. Close ties diminished uncertainty by opening up channels for direct communication rather than relying on separatist rhetoric for signaling intent. A region with close relationships with the center therefore might engage in greater levels of ethnic separatism with the knowledge that central government elites will understand that violence will not be an outcome. However, an opposite strategy might also be possible: closely linked elite groups might have no need for ethnic separatism at all, relying instead on close patronage relations to enhance their position within the new institutional structure. Much depends on how



**Figure 1.2** Factors Affecting Ethnic Separatism in Russia and Georgia

these three factors—state capacity, regional power and wealth, and informal institutions—combine to create outcomes. We need to identify how these factors interact, especially when both regional capacity and patronage structures, taken singly, might have divergent effects on regional separatism. Figure 1.2 shows the processes through which these interacting factors affect ethnic separatism and the level of any accompanying violence.

### *Interaction 1: Regional and central state capacity*

When war occurs, it does so because the parties to the violence choose that outcome over another. It may not be the case that the parties have many options outside of violence (e.g., when a territory has been invaded), but the outbreak of war indicates that both combatants have made a choice.<sup>77</sup> Thus, for separatist war to have occurred in the post-Soviet context, both regional and central government actors have made a decision to use violent means to achieve their political goals. Likewise, where regions made separatist demands but violence did not materialize, both the region and central government chose to pursue nonviolent means to divide power between the center and periphery. This section looks at both strategies. First, I explain how regional actors calibrated their strategies based on their assessments of their own regional power and wealth vis-à-vis that of the state. Second, I describe how a central state's capacity affected the nature of its response to ethnic separatist demands, as well as its ability to mount an effective response at all.

Regional strategies reflected the central state environment. Regional leaders assessed the central states' weaknesses, anticipated central government preferences, responded to new or changing circumstances, and gauged the ability of the state to offer enticements. Regions were more likely to use



separatist strategies in conditions of state weakness, when government structures were open to change and negotiation. The Soviet state weakness led to its eventual demise; the weakness of the successor states opened the door for new negotiations of the role of ethnic minorities and ethnic regions in new governance structures. Russia, in the early years of its independence, was a strong state relative to the other successor states, but still insufficiently strong to avoid bargained autonomy deals in order to consolidate state power over the regions.<sup>78</sup>

Regional capacity had a dual effect for regions within weakened states. A powerful and wealthy region had an enhanced bargaining position with the central government because it was not as dependent on the state for monetary support. It could use its wealth to force the weakened central state, which needed the financial backing of its richest regions, to make significant political concessions. Moreover, a region with high capacity commanded more ability to enforce its will within its borders and politically mobilize its population, and was thus better able to extend support or opposition to central government leaders. Given these factors, leaders of powerful regions could push the threshold of separatism with fewer risks of a central government's backlash. A central state is not likely to lash out against a region that enhances its wealth and generates revenue. Rather, the state will be more likely to offer valuable concessions in order to forestall outright secession and rebellion.

This logic presumes a central state weak enough to open opportunities for regional actors to press beyond the Soviet-era status quo but also a central state strong enough to offer enticements for regions to remain within the country. When taking the Russian and Georgian cases together, I discovered that a state capacity threshold existed that conditioned regional separatist strategies. For example, as the Russian state strengthened under the reforms of Vladimir Putin, regional separatism (both violent and nonviolent) diminished. The logic here is intuitive. Strong states are better able to maintain the monopoly of force, as well as extract from society as they wish. In strong states, the central government has little need to negotiate with regional governments, and thus regions are, *ceteris paribus*, less likely to engage in separatist strategies, given their higher level of risk. Regional separatism is more likely in weak central state environments because those periods are ripe for central government concessions. But a state can be too weak to offer substantive bargains that would interest regional actors, and this increases the likelihood of separatist violence. Very weak states lack the bargaining power to offer credible incentives to regions to remain within the state. Even if central state actors sought to bargain and offer concessions in exchange for the acceptance of central state sovereignty, these offers suffered because the central governments lacked credibility.

At all times, regional separatist leaders risk a punitive central state response. Why might a central government use violence against some separatist regimes but not others? Theda Skocpol and others have argued that states have their own interests, distinct from those of society.<sup>79</sup> Barbara Geddes has observed that often state interests can also be narrowed to an aggregation of the personal interests of the ruling elite.<sup>80</sup> Weaker states have, generally speaking, decreased coercive capacity. As a result, central government incentives for bargaining increase, since such agreements can solidify the unity of the state and thereby strengthen it. Within the processes of state consolidation, when the political environment is open to more political actors and greater contestation, central government leaders can strengthen their own power by co-opting regional actors to support their cause.

Even in such conditions of state weakness, ethnic separatist strategies by regional leaders tested central government mettle. Since few institutional structures remained to manage debate, central state leaders could choose to “punish” a separatist region it viewed as overstating its bargaining position. For example, within Russia during the 1990s, some political leaders considered Yeltsin’s bargaining with regional governments to be a sign of weakness. Although the central government may not be able to use punitive measures against all the regions, it could single out one for example. Even wealthy regions risked a central government backlash, although this was admittedly more costly to the center than punitive measures against poorer regions.

### *Interaction 2: Regional capacity and patronage*

As the case studies will show, a strong region with close patronage ties typically followed a highly separatist, but nonviolent, strategy. Regions in the USSR made demands for political and economic autonomy on the basis of ethnic identity under the tsars. Moreover, the experience of the Union Republics in successful and nonviolent bargaining for independence offered a precedent for separatist behavior. Within this context, ethnic separatism was not necessarily a risky strategy, particularly for those with close patronage ties and greater regional capacity.

Strong regions with fewer patronage ties typically engaged in lower levels of separatism, although they were not completely quiescent. Powerful and wealthy regions without such ties tended not to risk their economic position through behavior that might provoke a central state backlash. Rather, they followed precedents cast by other wealthy regions in better bargaining positions, quickly accepting that new default position within the institutional structure.

Low-capacity regions with strong patronage ties also tended to follow a course of low-level separatism, relying on patronage relations to look out for

their interests. Without a strong economic and political bargaining position, regions were less likely to get a better institutional deal without personalized politics, which they did not jeopardize by heightened ethnic demands. These three combinations predict a nonviolent strategy in each case, although they vary in the extent of the regional demands.

Weaker and poorer regions with low-level ties were those most likely to pursue highly separatist, violent strategies, perhaps with a goal for secession. These regions fell at the lowest economic level in the system, and without close ties had little ability to bargain themselves into a favorable outcome through peaceful means. Caveats apply. First this condition was extremely rare. Second, violent means or demands for independence did not necessarily mean that the only goal of the region was outright independence. Often, there were negotiation points regional leaders would have accepted in order to remain within the state. Without established patronage linkages or if the central state did not act to create such ties, this negotiation point was often unrealized. What affected bargaining success in the Russian and Georgian contexts, particularly the latter, was the ability and interest of the central state to negotiate effectively with regional leaders. For real negotiations to occur, the central state needed to be sufficiently weak that its leaders felt a need to consolidate power through bargaining (not merely through coercion) and also that the state was strong enough to offer credible concessions to the regions at all. Georgia, designated by many in its early years of independence as a failed state, was unable to make such promises. For Georgia, where formal bargains were meaningless, patronage ties became the critical mechanism for avoiding separatist violence or stabilizing conditions after it occurred.

### *Interaction 3: Central state capacity and informal institutions*

When formulating policies to address regional separatism, central governments confronted an array of choices. First, should the state use coercion or compromise to limit separatism such that the territory of the state not be divided? Stronger states, more likely to deter separatist policies from the outset, were best able to consider coercive strategies. Weak states were less able to deter separatist policies and carried more risks with coercive measures. Thus, weakened state capacity opened more doors for political compromises over regional demands. These dual options, bargaining or punishment, were conditioned by regional power and wealth. The central government might prefer to compromise with regions that have a greater ability to mobilize forces and fight back. Indeed, the political and financial benefits of alliances with strong regions often deterred central governments from using violence in favor of pursuing peaceful forms of bargaining. Like wealth, informal institutions helped create mechanisms through which individual regions could

avoid central government punitive measures in response to separatist strategies. The Russian and Georgian central governments were less likely to use military force against regions whose leaders shared clientelistic bonds with the central government, particularly if central government officials benefited personally.

A state, once it chose to eschew violence in response to ethnic separatism, needed to calibrate the terms of its bargaining. The transitioning context of the Russian and Georgian cases helped determine central strategies. Both countries were building new political and institutional structures with long-term futures in mind. State capacity affected how central governments approached the issue of building new political institutions amid bargaining over the appropriate status and power of separatist national territories. In such circumstances, central government leaders in Russia and Georgia found that patronage structures could solidify relationships when the central state was either unwilling or unable to construct strong, permanent, and formal structures for center – periphery power division. In the early 1990s, the Russian and Georgian governments were uninterested in constructing permanent formal federalized structures. Both governments were loath to fully institutionalize their feeble positions vis-à-vis the regions.

Both states also had difficulty controlling the disparate interests of government officials, who manipulated separatist tensions for personal gain. Scholars have found that civil wars provide unique opportunities for self-enrichment, such as trafficking in contraband materials.<sup>81</sup> In conditions of state weakness, central government actors had incentives to construct temporary and informal ties to keep separatist regions within the state. Patronage structures, so critical to the Soviet historical experience, became a mechanism for keeping the peace.

In conditions where state capacity is very low, formal institutions cannot function, and economic bargaining is improbable, the chance for violent separatism increases. But clientelistic frameworks do not rely on formal institutions. As such, they are safe havens for both the regional leaders, who benefit from strategic mobilization without violent measures or institutionalized bargains, and the central leadership, which can avoid formalizing a reciprocal agreement during a period of unacceptable weakness while maintaining state unity.

### *Anticipating ethnic violence*

The three factors outlined above—regional power and wealth, central state capacity, and informal structures such as patronage—combined in Russia and Georgia to construct conditions that help us anticipate the circumstances by

which ethnic conflict might occur. While this framework does not predict violent ethnic conflict necessarily, it points us to the critical areas where both regional and central actors might engage in violence, having fewer incentives to pursue nonviolent means to achieve their goals.

First, separatism was more likely to take place in weakened states. Second, ethnic regional leaders used their privileged status within the Soviet ethno-federal system to follow separatist strategies that enhanced their political, economic, and cultural autonomy. Third, stronger, richer, and more politically cohesive regions were more likely to achieve their goals within a weakened state. Regional leaders in Russia and Georgia knew this and strategized accordingly. If we assume that regional actors usually prefer nonviolent means as opposed to the uncertainties and costs of violent conflict, we can expect aggressive but generally nonviolent separatism from such regions.<sup>82</sup> Weaker and poorer regions could not rely on their wealth or power for bargaining leverage. They chose between a path of quiescence or, having nothing to lose, aggressive separatism.

Fourth, state strength affected negotiation processes. Georgia's very weak central government was unable to offer credible bargains to regional leaders to keep them within the state. In such circumstances, violence was more likely, due to fewer arenas for negotiated peace. Fifth, in such cases where violent separatism was most likely, one factor that mitigated violence was patronage. Patronage acted as a second mechanism for safe mobilization in addition to regional capacity. Individual actors found mutual incentives for cooperation, either prior to or after the outbreak of violence. These incentives help account for variation in violence after cease-fires signed in Chechnya, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia.

### **Case selection, measurement, and data collection**

This book focuses on Russia and Georgia for several reasons. First, both countries include variation in the levels of separatism sought by the inherited national territories. They are the only two countries in the former Soviet Union to have this shared experience. Second, they have experienced different levels of state capacity during the past decade. Georgia in the early 1990s was torn by civil wars, which left the government with limited ability to implement policy decisions. Even under Eduard Shevardnadze, corruption stymied the state's ability to collect taxes or establish public policy. Georgia's state condition from 1994 to 2003 has been deemed collapsed or failed by various scholars of the region. It is by far the weakest state condition considered here. Georgia's state recovery progressed in two eras, the first under Eduard Shevardnadze from 1995 to 2003, which saw macroeconomic stability and

an end of active violence, but pernicious corruption. With the 2003 Rose Revolution and subsequent state building reforms under Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia's state capacity has grown, as has its interest in restoring its Soviet-era borders. Russia under Boris Yeltsin (1991–2000) represented a stronger state, able to bargain effectively with its regions, but still weak enough to need to do so. Vladimir Putin's reforms to the Russian state, however, have rapidly increased Russia's state power, making it significantly stronger relative to the others. Thus, we can look at several different conditions of state capacity and observe their effects on ethnic separatism.

Georgia and Russia combined contain several dozen national territories. The case studies follow eight of these from 1991 (in one case, 1989), dividing the cases further along several time points based on central and regional leadership pairings. The time distinctions mark when top officials changed within governments. This separation promotes clear analytical distinctions in patronage scenarios over time, since changing personnel would likely affect patronage structures. I employ a case study methodology based on John Stuart Mill's indirect method of indifference. Although some might argue that random samples are best, in small-*n* analyses, random sampling can be more debilitating than useful, particularly if a random sample does not provide adequate variation in the dependent variable.<sup>83</sup>

The cases considered here provide the strongest method to examine the theoretical framework and to assess its applicability to the emergence of ethnic separatism in Russia and Georgia. I chose eight regions that varied in separatist strategy and regional capacity. Although *perceived* capacity is important for the case studies, available data helped narrow to the regions that have different levels of separatism but nevertheless similar levels of wealth, to control for variation in the other variables. The cases studied are the most challenging and significant for questions of separatist violence in the former Soviet Union, including most of those that have fought secessionist wars with the central governments.<sup>84</sup> For the three cases where violent secession occurred, the analysis reflects the negotiation process after the cessation of violence, as well as periods where violence recommenced. Hence, I investigate three cases of regions with violent separatism, Chechnya, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia; three cases of high-level, but nonviolent, separatism, Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, and Achara; and two cases where medium- or low-level separatism occurred, Ingushetia and Dagestan. These cases include the population of national territories within Georgia (South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Achara), as well as the regions in Russia that were expected to engage in high-level and violent separatist efforts but thus far have not (Ingushetia and Dagestan). Table 1.1 lays out the key variables and the separatist strategies of these cases.

**Table 1.1** Case Array: State, Region, and Separatist Outcome

<i>State</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
<b>Russia 1990–1999</b>	Tatarstan	High-level, peaceful separatism; state bargaining
<i>State condition:</i> Weak and building	Bashkortostan	High-level, peaceful separatism; state bargaining
	Chechnya	High-level, violent separatism; no state bargaining
	Dagestan	Quiescent; patronage placement
	Ingushetia	Quiescent
<b>Georgia 1990–2003</b>	Abkhazia	High-level, peaceful separatism with state bargaining; later violence/no bargaining
<i>State conditions:</i> Failed (1990–1994) Weak (1995–2003)	South Ossetia	Violent separatism; no state bargaining
	Achara	High-level, peaceful separatism; state bargaining
<b>Russia 2000–2006</b>	Tatarstan	Mild autonomy demands; personalized bargaining
<i>State condition:</i> Strengthening	Bashkortostan	Mild autonomy demands; personalized bargaining
	Chechnya	High-level, violent separatism; no state bargaining; ultimate patronage placement
	Dagestan	Quiescent
	Ingushetia	Quiescent
<b>Georgia 2004–2008</b>	Abkhazia	De facto independent, minor violence; state bargaining
<i>State condition:</i> Weak and building	South Ossetia	De facto independent, violence; state bargaining
	Achara	Quiescent

One problem with the Russian/Georgian comparison is the vast size difference between the two countries. Russia is the world’s largest country in terms of landmass, sprawling over Europe and Asia, encompassing ten time zones. Georgia, on the other hand, is the size of West Virginia in the United States (one of its smallest states). Even so, the variation of ethnic separatism in both countries is unique to just these two in the former Soviet Union, limiting other country case options. As such, the cases unfold in ways that reflect the very different power circumstances—and political complexities—of both states.

### Measurement

The framework outlined in this book offered three major elements that contributed to ethnic separatism in Russia and Georgia: state capacity, regional power and wealth, and informal institutions such as patronage or corruption. Each of these factors present their own challenges for objective and consistent measurement. Common quantitative measurements of state capacity, for

example, vary from taxation extraction as a percentage of GDP to infant mortality rates. These statistics measure quite different elements of what it means to have state capacity: the ability to extract taxes speaks to low levels of corruption and to some administrative infrastructure, for example, but also speaks to levels of privatization, which is of less concern here. Likewise, rates of infant mortality indicate health-care access, the availability of clean water, and also spending priorities. Even more problematic is that the weakest states—such as Georgia in the very early 1990s—are less likely than strong ones even to collect and disseminate such data in a reliable fashion.

Where possible, I have obtained quantitative measures of state capacity: percentage of tax revenue as a percentage of GDP, Human Development Index rank, GNI per capita, GDP growth, mortality rate, and life expectancy at birth.<sup>85</sup> In addition to these, to capture state building vis-à-vis conflict zones, I include a measure for military expenditure as a percentage of GDP. I also consider problems common to states with low capacity that might not be captured with straightforward statistics: problems of infrastructure, corruption, and policy enforcement. In general, we can trace two general state capacity eras in both Russia and Georgia in their first decades of independence. Russia faced conditions of weakness from 1991 to 1999; with the arrival of Putin, however, the Russian state vastly expanded its ability to permeate society. Georgia's state from 1991 to 2003 was far weaker than its Russian contemporary. In 2003, the Rose Revolution in Georgia led to extensive state-building reforms, leading to extensive military spending, economic growth, and anticorruption policies.

In terms of measurement, regional power and wealth are even less straightforward than central state capacity. For one, the sorts of quantitative measures available for states are not readily and consistently available for the regions considered in this book, particularly those that are not practically administered by their *de jure* central states. Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Chechnya, for example, offer little by way of credible data on regional GDP or infant mortality. Therefore, for each region, I include data when they are available on regional GDP, tax revenue collection, and human development. I also include any data available on natural resource potential in the regions (particularly where it is especially relevant, as in Chechnya, Tatarstan, and Bashkortostan). To capture political strength of the regional political leadership, I examine public opinion surveys where available, electoral outcomes, and analytical assessments by interview subjects.

The most common informal institutions governing ethnic politics in Russia and Georgia were patronage structures, corruption (especially the use of contraband opportunities), and the development of political alliances. Helmke and Levitsky lay out three measurement criteria for addressing



informal institutions in political science research. First, the scholar must identify the expectations of actors involved in the political process. Second, the scholar must clearly indicate the actors who are expected to act within the informal structures. Third, the enforcement mechanisms of the institutions must be clear. In the context of this study, the identification of informal mechanisms differentiates depending on the regional context.<sup>86</sup> For example, the expectations and enforcement mechanism of the patronage structures that governed bilateral bargains between Moscow and Tatarstan are quite different from those that structured Acharan and Georgian relations.

Informal institutions, patronage, personal alliances, and corruption defy objective and systematic measurement. Personal ties are rarely transparent and corruption is generally illegal. Yet these structures are critical to an accurate understanding of politics. Despite such complexities, there are certain patterns of regularity that I use to identify the existence and importance of informal structures. First are mechanisms of regional elite recruitment and appointment, which often occurred by central government fiat. That alone did not determine political patronage, however. I also look for evidence of patronage or personal alliance structures through regional electoral behavior, in elite speeches and declarations, as well as in economic transfers between central and regional governments. Personal economic benefit from contraband materials, both in Russia and Georgia, helped determine elite preferences in building state institutions. I examine evidence of corrupt activity, drawn from news reporting at that time, as well as subsequent anticorruption judicial processes. Taken together, along with the impressions from memoirs and in-depth and comprehensive personal interviews with major players, I provide a summary of how informal institutions helped frame ethnic politics.

### *Data collection*

The main theoretical argument developed here draws from the experiences of regional and central government policy makers, as well as nationalist actors in Georgia and Russia. The subsequent analysis applies data gathered from in-depth field research conducted in both countries, from over 100 interviews with high-level government officials and ethnic or cultural leaders. For Russia, the bulk of the interview data stems from regional officials in Bashkortostan and Tatarstan (research conducted in 2004 and 2005), and includes access to regional decision makers who actively participated in the negotiations with central government actors. This includes members of the legislature as well as the regional presidential apparatus, in particular those who worked closely with oil and gas industries. In Georgia, the data reflect

interviews with representatives of all three of its autonomous ethnic regions, including the secessionist territories, South Ossetia and Abkhazia (research conducted in 2002 and 2006). The interview subjects include representatives from different political regimes, reflecting leadership changes in both the central and regional governments. This breadth of access offers unique insight into Georgian central government decision making and includes extensive interviews with representatives of all Georgian presidential administrations since its independence, including personal interviews with current president Mikhail Saakashvili and former president Eduard Shevardnadze.

### Conclusion

Ethnic separatism is a risky venture. In Russia and Georgia, regional leaders tempered their demands by assessing their bargaining power vis-à-vis the central government. Central governments also acted strategically, proffering carrots for regions that promised beneficial ties and sticks to those who did not. Even more important than regional political economic power were patronage relationships, which had a magnified effect in weak states. Without favorable elite ties with the central government, even wealthy regions tempered their demands and followed less aggressive demand strategies. Although both wealthy and poor regions used violence, patronage ties tended to inhibit the outbreak of war. A surprising outcome of this study is that corruption and patronage might actually enhance state stability and promote cooperation, while the absence of such ties enhances the likelihood of conflict.