CHAPTER FIFTEEN

STATE BUILDING IN GEORGIA SINCE 1991

Introduction

On 20 June 1990 the Georgian government decided to create a legal mechanism for restoring its independence as a state under the 1921 Constitution. This was a first step towards independence, which was to follow one year later.

On 17 March 1991 an all Union-referendum was organized around the question whether or not a reformed Soviet Union should be preserved. A majority in Georgia voted against the preservation of the Soviet Union, although in Abkhazia 52.4% voted in favor of the reformed Soviet Union.¹ Two weeks later, on 31 March 1991, a referendum was held in Georgia on the question of Georgian independence. The majority of the non-Georgian population living in Abkhazia did not participate in this referendum, 98% of the voters in Georgia were in favor of an independent Georgia.² Among them were 86% in Marseuli, where more than 80% of the population is of Azeri ethnicity, and in Akhalkalaki (with a population which is 90% Armenian) 52% voted in favor of independence.³ This means that there were minorities that were in favor of an independent Georgia, while the discontent in Abkhazia was already showing.

The first part of the rules concerning leaving the Soviet Union was thus followed. Elections were held in Georgia and with a vast majority of the vote the ultra nationalist politician Zviad Gamsakhurdia and his Round Table-Free Georgia was elected, who then formed a coalition government. Gamsakhurdia decided not to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

³ Cornell, Regional Security in the South Caucasus, 163.
The aim of Zviad Gamsakhurdia was to create a unitary state in which the Georgian ethnic group would be dominant. In fact this group was dominant, but since Georgia has several minorities on its territory, this was bound to create problems. The South Ossetians and Abkhazians, who are linguistically different from the Georgians and have their own cultures, were afraid that their autonomy would be infringed. They felt threatened by Georgian nationalist slogans and started to protest. These protests were violently subdued, which only fuelled discontent.

**Gamsakhurdia and South Ossetia**

The demands of the South Ossetians went back to the period before South Ossetia became part of the Georgian SSR. They wished to unite with North Ossetia. As early as 1988 the South Ossetian Regional Council asked for an upgrade to “Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic”. The Georgian authorities denied this. The South Ossetian Supreme Soviet adopted in September 1990 a law in which it raised its status to an SSR in the Soviet Union. On 11 December 1990 the South Ossetian Soviet voted to subordinate itself to Moscow. As a reaction the central Georgian government in December 1990 lifted the Autonomous Oblast status in South Ossetia. Fighting followed between Georgian and South Ossetian troops. Many ethnic South Ossetians living in Georgia fled to South Ossetia and North Ossetia, while there were also many Georgian inhabitants of South Ossetia who fled to other parts of Georgia. On 19 January, a referendum on joining the Russian Federation was held, in which 90% of the population voted in favor of joining. A cease-fire agreement was reached in March 1992. On 24 June 1992 the Dagomys Agreement officially signified the cease fire. In order to strengthen the peace process, on 9 July 1992 a peace keeping force, consisting of Ossetian, Russian and Georgian military was installed in the region. The major part of South Ossetia, which calls itself the South Ossetian Republic, is under Tskhinval control, while the Georgian-populated Akhalgori district and Georgian enclaves in the Liakhvi valley remain under Tbilisi’s jurisdiction.

In 2006 the South Ossetian authorities organized a referendum on the question of independence. Of the 95% of voters that turned up,

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4 Cornell, *Regional Security in the South Caucasus*, 162.
5 Cornell, *Regional Security in the South Caucasus*, 166.