Ethno-Political conflicts in the European Union's Neighbourhood: the Cases of South Ossetia and Abkhazia

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Introduction

The article will focus on ethno-political conflicts in South Caucasus, namely on the nature and dynamic of secessionist movements and resulting breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The second chief interest herein is centred on the European Union's declared objectives towards conflicts in Georgia.

Firstly, the article will briefly analyze the ethno-political strife in the South Caucasus region and the nationalist resurgence after the dissolution of the USSR and will explore the dynamic of ethno-political violence and the way in which threats and enemies were constructed. Secondly, we will survey the evolution of EU's contractual ties with Georgia, from the loose Partnership and Cooperation Agreement to the post-2004 inclusion of Georgia in the European Neighbourhood Policy.

The main theoretical claims supported throughout the entire account is that 1) social-constructivist assumptions provide a coherent understanding of secessionist movements and 2) a clear analysis on the modalities in which international organizations (*i.e.* the European Union) act as norm-setters and expect norm-internalization.

Social-constructivism and ethno-political conflict: theoretical claims

One main assumption pertaining to constructivist theorizing is that the social-construction of phenomena which comprise international politics plays a major role in understanding how threats, enemies and crises are construed, perceived and dealt with. Social-constructivist literature emphasizes the role of ideas (which are treated as complementary to material factors or to elements that belong to the so-called 'hard politics') and argues that meanings assigned to facts or associated with decisions represent key elements in decision-making processes. Social-constructivist scholars (such as Nicholas Onuf, Martha Finnemore, John Ruggie, Friedrich Kratochwil, Alexander Wendt and others) focus on ideational or social phenomena, on the issue of need (dis)satisfaction and the resulting emotions, and on the mechanisms and conditions under which norms play an influential role in world politics. For instance, Alexander Wendt emphasized on the social construction of fear and anxiety and explained how people experience the emotion of satisfaction when needs are met, and how they experience anxiety, fear or frustration when such needs are not met.[1]

When problematizing ethnic conflict, constructivists reject the idea that ethnic identity is a pre-given or natural phenomenon and contend that 'ethnic identities are enduring social constructions' and they are 'products of human actions and choices' rather than biologically given.[2] According to Cristoph Zürcher, 'ethnicity per se is never an explanation for conflict; rather, the way ethnicity is institutionalized and how this institutionalization becomes contested in periods of rapid social change explains conflict.'[3]

Valery Tishkov argued against oversimplified typologies and claimed that 'the basic methodological weakness of such theories of conflict analysis lies in their vision of groups as collective bodies with needs and universal motivation - not as situations, feelings, or acts of speech.'[4] If we adopt such an approach, we then focus on single-factor understandings of the nature and dynamic of

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[1] Alexander Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 132. Furthermore, Wendt listed five major 'material needs', physical security, ontological security, sociation, selfesteem, and transcendence, and he explains ontological security in terms of 'human beings need [to have] relatively stable expectations about the natural and especially social world around them.' (pp. 131-132).

[2] Raymond C. Taras; Rajat Ganguly (eds.), Understanding Ethnic Conflict. The International Dimension, New York: Pearson Longman, 2008, p. 12.

[3] Cristoph Zürcher, The Post-Soviet Wars. Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus, New York and London: New York University Press, 2007, p. 54.

[4] Valery Tishkov, 'Ethnic Conflict in the Former USSR: The Use and Misuse of Typologies and Data', in Journal of Peace Research, 36(5), 1999, p. 572.

conflict. But, when we reject this reductionist typology (which is in fact quantitative), we focus on ethnic boundaries or ethnic divisions which content, linguistic utterance and narrative are not immutable, but rather altered, interpreted and embedded in (political) speech acts. The convincing and coherent argument developed by Zürcher is that 'ethnic boundaries, while not a *cause* of conflict per se, become reinforced or even reinvented *during* conflict. The salience of ethnicity can therefore be the result of the 'ethnicization' of conflict. Cultural difference becomes important in the course of conflicts, for it is the material from which the barriers between groups are built.'[5]

In the case of post-Soviet wars, the argument supported here is that the collapse of the Soviet system increased the incentives and opportunities for nationalist elites. The Soviet map was based on the 'territorialization of ethnicity'.[6] This means that administrative units with defined titular nation were created and were embedded into the hierarchy of Soviet ethno-federalism. The Soviet hierarchy was based on three tiers: 1) the Union Republics (Soviet Socialist Republics/SSRs); 2) the Autonomous Republics (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics/ASSRs), and 3) the Autonomous Regions/Oblasts (Autonomous Oblasts/AOs).[7] As far as our case studies are concerned, Georgia received the status of SSR and the Georgians comprised around 77% out of the total population (followed by the other non-titular groups Armenians, Russians, Azerbaijani, Ossets). Abkhazia was given the status of ASSR and its ethnic demographic composition included a majority of Georgians (approximately 45%) while the Abkhaz represented only 18% of the total population living in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia. The Autonomous Oblast South Ossetia displayed a majority of Ossets (66%) and a minority of Georgians (29%).[8]

The term *micronationalism* was coined by Ted Gurr in order to describe the independence movements of numerically small groups like the 96,000 Muslim

5   Zürcher, op. cit., p. 55.
6   Zürcher, op. cit., p. 23.
7   Svante E. Cornell, Small Nations and Great Powers. A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus, London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005, pp. 136-138; Zürcher, op. cit., pp. 23-32; Georgiy I. Mirsky, On Ruins of Empire. Ethnicity and Nationalism in the Former Soviet Union, Westport, Connecticut; London: Greenwood Press, 1997, pp. 1-10. On Soviet ethno-federalism, see also Jack Snyder, 'Introduction. Reconstructing politics amidst the wreckage of empire' and Steven Solnick, 'Will Russia Survive? Center and periphery in the Russian Federation', in Barnett R. Rubin; Jack Snyder (eds.), Post-Soviet Political Order. Conflict and State Building, London and New York: Routledge, 2005.
8   See Zürcher, op. cit., pp. 28-31 and Pascal Marchand, 'Conflits dans l'espace post-soviétique: une géographie de la décomposition impériale', dans Franck Tétart (sous la direction de), Géographie des conflits, Paris: Editions Sedes/Cned, 2011, p. 323.

Abkhaz in the north-western corner of Georgia and the 164,000 Ossets in northern Georgia who wanted to be united with the 402,000 Ossets living in the homonym autonomous region in southern Russia.[9]

Soviet ethno-federalism was meant to guarantee the control of the centre and foster counteraction against aspirations of the various ethnic groups. But, it also proved to be a corrosive factor. Just like Zürcher showed, 'the equipping of the union republics with the prerequisites of statehood and the anchoring of their status as sovereign states in the Soviet constitution paved the way for the process of 'sovereignization' that began in 1988.'[10] Alongside with this attribute, other specificities of Soviet nationalism, especially the 'unusual alliance between Russian nationalism and other nationalisms of other peoples of the USSR'[11] or the phenomenon coined by Ian Bremmer as 'matryoshka-nationalism'[12] (the existence of nations inside a larger nation) led to the following cumulative effect: the resurgence of Russian nationalism triggered the revitalization of other national movements and hence provided impetus for conflict. Referring to the Caucasus and to the analogy of the Russian painted doll *matryoshka*, René Does showed that 'at the time the Soviet Union collapsed, the striving for greater sovereignty and even total independence was virulent in the autonomous formations lower in the federal hierarchy of the Soviet state as well.'[13] The ensuing situation was marked by a downward spiral of mistrust and rivalry. Christoph Zürcher explained this dynamic as follows:

> 'The autonomous republics and autonomous oblasts within the union republics viewed the latter's sovereignization and nationalization with concern, since they feared that the positive discrimination, which Soviet authorities had guaranteed the titular nations of the ASSRs, could be jeopardized.
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> Vice versa, the union republics viewed with mistrust the tendency of 'their' ASSRs to dispute subordination to them or even to make moves toward secession from the SSR. Thus, the weakening of the centre led to a competition between union republics (SSRs) and

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[9]   Ted Robert Gurr; Barbara Harff, Ethnic Conflict in World Politics, second edition, Boulder: Westview Press, 2004, p. 24.

[10] Zürcher, op. cit., p. 34.

[11] Taras; Ganguly (eds.), op. cit., p. 119.

[12] Ian Bremmer, 'Reasserting Soviet Nationalities Theory', in Ian Bremmer; Ray Taras (ed.), Nations, Politics in the Soviet Successor States, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 22.

[13] René Does, 'The Ethnic-Political Arrangement of the Peoples of the Caucasus', in Françoise Companjen; László Marácz; Lia Versteegh (eds.), Exploring the Caucasus in the 21st Century. Essays on Culture, History and Politics in a Dynamic Context, Amsterdam: Pallas Publication, 2010, p. 54.

autonomous republics and regions (ASSRs and AOs), which in Nagorny-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia ended in organized violence.'[14]

It was against this background that the Georgian state was challenged by the secessionist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The argument supported here is that there was no strict, cause-effect relation between national mobilization and organized violence. For a while, as Zürcher emphasized, national mobilization was present in 'mass rallies [...], exaggerated public use of national symbols, in public discourse, and in the rewriting of national histories.'[15] In fact, the inter-ethnic tension between Georgians-Ossets, Georgian-Abkhaz respectively, did not 'naturally', inherently, or 'automatically' turned into violent armed conflict. Any attempt to de-politicize ethnic conflicts and any reductionist emphasis on their 'ethnic nature' lead to an oversimplification that loses its content pertaining to the escalatory dynamic of such ethno-political rivalry. In an extended analysis on the Caucasus, Svante Cornell has argued that the conflicts in South Caucasus cannot simply be described as 'ethnic' or 'religious' in nature, because 'the conflicts are primarily political conflicts over territory and ownership' of such territories.[16] Symbolic politics, discourses that construct the 'us *versus* them' dynamic, and the politicizing of territorial, identity, and ethnic disputes pertain to the accurate description of conflicts in South Caucasus. Inter-ethnic rivalry and then violence were the result of (nationalist) political mobilization, not the inescapable triggering factor.

Social-psychological approaches on conflicts share certain assumptions with social-constructivism and delve into (mis)perception, fears and needs. For instance, one major claim formulated by Herbert Kelman is that 'conflict is a process driven by collective needs and fears.'[17] Ethnic conflict, then, is triggered by non-fulfilment or the perceived threats to the non-fulfilment of basic needs. One chief common denominator in constructivist and social-psychological theorizing is the role of ideational factors which, instead of competing with, actually completes the role played by material factors. When discussing basic needs, Kelman accurately indicates that 'needs include not only obvious material one, such as food, shelter, physical safety [...], but also, and very centrally, psychological ones, such as identity, security, recognition, autonomy, self-

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[14] Zürcher, op. cit., p. 35.
[15] Ibidem, p. 39.
[16] Cornell, op. cit., p. 2.
[17] Herbert Kelman, 'Social-Psychological Dimensions of International Conflict', on William Zartman; J. Lewis Rasmussen (eds.), Peacemaking in International Conflict. Methods& Conflicts, Washington, D.C., 1997, pp. 191-223.

esteem, and a sense of justice.'[18] Based on the previous constructivist and social-psychological assumptions, we could see that the secessionist wars in Georgia did not follow a line of inherent inter-ethnic belligerence and a form of self-perpetuating endemic rivalry between Georgians-Ossets and Georgians-Abkhaz.

According to Christoph Zürcher, 'it would be simplistic to claim that nations and nationalism caused the Caucasian turmoil at the end of the Soviet Union. Rather, it was the institutional legacy of the Soviet Union that shaped the ways in which the concepts of 'nation' and 'state' became contested.'[19] We contend that the perception of fears regarding not only material needs of Georgians, Ossets and Abkhaz, but also psychological and ideational ones such as identity, recognition and autonomy, coupled with the corrosive aggregated elements of the Soviet ethno-federal organization, unleashed ethnic mobilization. A gradual, yet rapid, process of threat inducement and triggering of need dissatisfaction occurred concomitantly with the Soviet Union's demise. Zürcher pinpointed to the fact that 'Georgians, Abkhaz, and Ossets mobilized in reaction to the national project of the other groups, which was perceived as a threat to their own national project. Each of these three groups came to see the ethno-national claims of the other group as mutually exclusive, and they mobilized in reaction to the other group's mobilization.'[20] A radicalization of the political agenda of Abkhaz and Ossets was also produced, turning them into what Ted Gurr coined as *ethnonationalists*.[21] When certain groups perceive the loss of power-sharing opportunity, autonomy as option tends to dissipate and other radicalized strategies are envisioned. Henceforth, autonomy is replaced by aspirations towards independence and secessionism is set into motion. Throughout this process, discursive practices and construction of *otherness* played a pivotal role in shaping group identity, menaces, and strategies.

Christoph Zürcher argued that wars in breakaway South Ossetia and Abkhazia were not 'the direct result of mutually exclusive national projects', but rather the inability of the new Georgian nationalist leadership to accommo-date claims and to consolidate state power. The author showed that: 'neither the Abkhaz nor the Ossets had national independence high up on their agenda in 1988 or even 1990. Both entities actually opted to remain a part of the Soviet Union, with the status of a sovereign republic. [...] the national project of the Ossets and Abkhaz was not much defined by what they wanted to become but, rather, by what they did not want to be: a minority group within

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18 Ibidem, p. 195.
19 Zürcher, op. cit., p. 40.
20 Ibidem, p. 144.
21 Gurr, Harff, op. cit., pp. 19-30.

a rapidly nationalizing Georgia' that did not intend to maintain the status quo enjoyed by the Ossets and Abkhaz within the Soviet Union.[22]

The main argument supported in this first part of the article is that narratives and counter-narratives, symbolic politics, reiterations or reinterpretations of historic events conveyed through discourse, and nationalist political mobilization were elements that torpedoed post-Soviet developments in Georgia. Furthermore, we argue that ethno-political conflicts should be explained without reducing its cause to the mere ethnic nature of inter-group rivalry, thus de-politicising disputes, and that a social-constructivist account provides a coherent understanding of secessionist movements.

Social-constructivist assumptions and EU's role of 'norm-diffuser': Impact on Georgia-Abkhazia-South Ossetia

A great deal of constructivist theorizing is preoccupied with norms and rules. Constructivist scholars like Nicholas Onuf analyzed the way in which 'rules make social life intelligible for those participating in it' and showed how rules provide human beings with 'knowledgeability for survival, which simultaneously provides their lives with subjective meaning.'[23] Other constructivist perspectives, like the one of Friedrich Kratochwil, distinguished between *regulative* and *constitutive rules* and argued that norms direct or strengthen decisions, but they also confer meaning to actions. Therefore, rules should not be treated as naturally given; rather they are conceived and re(fortified) through practices, communication among agents, and their successful enforcement and compliance.[24] When approaching the European Union's role in world politics, social-constructivist arguments tackle the capacity and proclivity of EU to set and export norms.

Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink showed that the generally accepted definition of norms refers to the 'standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity' and were preoccupied with the modalities in which social scientists tackle behavioural rules:

> 'One difference between 'norm' and 'institution' (in the sociological sense) is aggregation: the norm definition isolates single standards of behaviour, whereas institutions emphasize the way in which

[22] Zürcher, op. cit., pp. 144-145.
[23] Nicholas Onuf, World of Our Making. Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989, p. 59.
[24] Friedrich Kratochwil, Rules, Norms and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

behavioural rules are structured together and interrelate (a 'collection of practices and rules').'[25]

One pivotal theme of research was centred on the way in which European institutions are able to establish norms, diffuse them and act upon reactions to such normativity. Analyzing European preferences and norms, Zaki Laïdi explained that 'norms are standards aiming at codifying the behaviour of actors sharing common principles' and they are meant to generate collective disciplines and dissuade undesired conduct in fields of public policies.[26] An extended work on 'the socializing potential of international institutions' was provided by Jeffrey T. Checkel who examined 'the conditions under which, and mechanisms through which, institutions in Europe socialize states and state agents, leading them to internalize new roles or group-community norms.'[27]

Our focus here revolves around EU's contractual relations with Georgia and our main argument will be built around a social-constructivist 'reading' (or interpretation) of the evolution of these relations. One main contention in social-constructivist literature is that agents/actors change their identities and their perceived interests through participation in common institutional structures. Thus, Nathalie Tocci emphasized that 'contractual relations can affect conflict and conflict resolution also through [...] diffuse mechanisms of learning and persuasion' and pointed to the fact that *via* processes of social learning 'domestic actors voluntarily internalize the norms and logic underpinning the EU system.'[28] The European Union's normativity in Central and Eastern Europe was based on drafting, uttering and designing optimal behaviour for candidate countries, on expectations of compliance, and on rewards pertaining to accession. But, when future accession is not an item within contractual relations, the following question is raised: how can the EU maintain its role of norm-setter and expect the incorporation of such normativity?

According to Zaki Laïdi, it was against the background of this problematic issue that the entire European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was designed; the scholar explains this rationale as follows: 'Europe is no longer able or no longer wants to offer membership as a perspective to its neighbours, while leading

[25] Martha Finnemore; Kathryn Sikkink, 'International Norm Dynamics and Political Change', in International Organization, 52, 4, Autumn, 998, p. 892.
[26] Zaki Laïdi (ed.), EU Foreign Policy in a Globalized World. Normative power and social preferences, London and New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 4.
[27] Jeffrey T. Checkel, 'International Institutions and Socialization in Europe: Introduction and Framework', in Jeffrey T. Checkel (ed.), International Institutions and Socialization in Europe, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 4.
[28] Nathalie Tocci, The EU and Conflict Resolution. Promoting peace in the backyard, London and New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 15.

them to believe that this fundamental change will not make a big difference to them.'[29] This 'policy for non-membership' (in the words of Zaki Laïdi) was launched initially under the idea of Wider Europe in 2003 and represented the result of efforts to build up a coherent strategy. According to Florent Parmentier, the essence of ENP lies in 'a process of norms diffusion in the European 'near abroad', largely influenced by the EU's security concerns and realized under the constraints of the 'enlargement fatigue'.'[30] In 2004 the European Neighbour-hood Policy emerged, the South Caucasus was included in it and an EU special representative for South Caucasus was appointed. As already noted by analysts, throughout the 1990s the EU had not played a decisive role in the South Caucasus[31], but in 1999 the loose Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) entered into force. Both Georgia and the secessionist regions (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) were beneficiaries of EU assistance.[32] In 2006 EU and Georgia signed the Action Plan on cooperation. Ever since the Maastricht Treaty, the European Union had set the goal of 'preserving peace, preventing conflict and strengthening international security'[33] and this objective was embedded in the EU-Georgia Action Plan, as Priority area 6 (*Promote peaceful resolution of internal conflicts*), with the following specific actions:

- Contribute to the conflicts settlement in Abkhazia, Georgia and Tskinvali Region/South Ossetia, Georgia, based on respect of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognised borders; [...]

- The EU stresses the need for a constructive cooperation between interested international actors in the region, including the EU and OSCE Member States, on additional efforts contributing to peaceful settlement mechanisms in Tskinvali Region/S. Ossetia and Abhkazia;

- Include the issue of territorial integrity of Georgia and settlement of Georgia's internal conflicts in EU-Russia political dialogue meetings.[34]

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[29] Laïdi, op. cit., p. 14.
[30] Florent Parmentier, 'The reception of EU neighbourhood policy', in Zaki Laïdi (ed.), EU Foreign Policy in a Globalized World. Normative power and social preferences, London and New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 103.
[31] Nicu Popescu, The EU and Civil Society in the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict, MICROCON Policy Working Paper 15, Brighton: MICROCON, 2010, p. 17.
[32] Nathalie Tocci indicated the following data: €420m in assistance to Georgia in 1992-2004 (approximately €32m per year); approximately €14m to Abkhazia in 1997-2006 (including the rehabilitation of the Inguri dam); approximately €8m to South Ossetia in 1997-2006. See Tocci, op. cit., p. 149.
[33] Art III-193 of draft Constitutional Treaty.
[34] EU/Georgia Action Plan, available at [http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/pdf/action_plans/georgia_enp_ap_final_en.pdf].

However, the EU did not assume a substantial role in drafting a political solution to the separatist disputes in Georgia and avoided to engage in 'high-politics issues related to the conflict', focusing instead on financial assistance in order to support the peace process.[35] According to Nathalie Tocci, an overall picture indicates that EU's interest in South Caucasus has been 'weak and sporadic' and its 'impact on Georgia's secessionist conflicts has been marginal albeit negative.'[36] One major explanation for this stems from the cautionary strategy employed by the Union in dealing with breakaway entities and its constant preoccupation not to antagonize Russia. As a consequence, 'despite the EU's oft-repeated strategic interest in the Caucasus, its insufficient concern with the region goes far in explaining the absence of a concerted EU strategy to promote the resolution of its conflicts.'[37]

A social-constructivist interpretation of EU's relations with Georgia-Abkhazia-South Ossetia reveals a precarious form of social learning. Sociali-zation, as derived from sociology and symbolic interactionism, refers to a 'process of inducting actors into the norms and rules of a given community. Its outcome is sustained compliance based on the internalization of these new norms.'[38] As visible in our case-studies, the European community, the European values and the European norms were not appropriated insomuch as to modify conflict-related strategies attaining conflict resolution. Referring to the role of international organizations, Martha Finnemore and Michael Barnett argued that, 'having established rules and norms', they are 'eager to spread the benefits of their expertise' and they 'often insist that part of their mission is to spread, inculcate, and enforce global values and norms.'[39] Tocci's analysis shows that 'there has not been enough time and exposure to EU actors, arguments and norms for these to be genuinely assimilated by the conflict parties.'[40] Socialization is based on ideational factors, meaning that agents gradually internalize norms, patterns of behaviour and rules and become elements of certain structures (such as the EU) irrespective of material facts (*i.e.* financial gains, sanctions or 'carrots and sticks' relations). The two main factors that weakened norm-reception and norm-incorporation were the European Union's reluctance to step outside traditional pathways in dealing with conflict-related issues and the reduced amount of institutional interaction,

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[35] Cf. Popescu, op. cit., p. 17.
[36] Tocci, op. cit., pp. 170, 175.
[37] Ibidem, pp. 175-176, 170.
[38] Checkel, op. cit., pp. 5-6.
[39] Michael Barnett; Martha Finnemore, Rules for the World. International Organizations in Global Politics, Ithaka and London: Cornell University Press, 2004, p. 33.
[40] Tocci, op. cit., p. 169.

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