

**მეგრელები, როგორც პოლიტიზირებული იდენტურობა  
ქართულ–აფხაზურ კონფლიქტში**

უეისი ანდრეა  
ცენტრალური ევროპის უნივერსიტეტი

ცენტრალური ევროპის უნივერსიტეტი, ბუდაპეშტი ნაშრომი განიხილავს მეგრულ იდენტურობასა და ეთნიკური თვალსაზრისით ამ საკითხის განსაკუთრებულ მგრძნობიარობას. რამდენიმე ფაქტორმა, რომელიც საფუძვლად უდევს ქართულ–აფხაზურ კონფლიქტს, ასევე დიდი როლი ითამაშა მეგრული იდენტურობის ეთნიკური კუთხით პოლიტიზირებაში. პირველი, შენარჩუნებულია საბჭოთა ნაციონალური პოლიტიკის მემკვიდრეობა, რომელშიც ენა გათანაბრებულია პოლიტიკური მისწრაფებებისა და მიზნების მიღწევის პოტენციურ საშუალებებთან, ავტონომიზაციისა და სეპარატიზმის ჩათვლით. მეორე, არსებობს სტუმართმოყვარეობის ტრადიცია, რომელიც იცავს სტუმრებს პრობლემების არასწორი ინტერპრეტაციისაგან. მესამე, ეს შეიძლება აიხსნას რუსეთის მუდმივი, აშკარა ჩარევით ამ საკითხებში. ამ ფაქტორების შედეგად იქმნება გაურკვეველი ვითარება მეგრული საკითხის მიმართ პოლიტიკური კუთხით, როგორც ადგილობრივთა, ასევე უცხოელთა მხრიდან. ამავდროულად, აღქმის ეს მოდელები წარმოადგენს შინაგან ან გარეგან მექანიზმს კულტურული სიახლოვის შექმნისა და წარმოჩენისათვის.

**Mingrelians as a Politicized Identity in the Context of the  
Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict**

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*Introduction*

On a nice summer day in June 2009 I met with Eka in the centre of Zugdidi. Eka, who was in her early fifties, was a native of the town and belonged to some circles that constituted a (self-perceived) more “educated” stratum of its population. This stratum would automatically by chance gather at cultural events in town, for instance in the gallery or the museum. On my mind was the sensation of a vaguely immanent threat

that (too) many questions about Mingrelian identity used to trigger as reactions by my conversation partners. The evocation of this threat was embodied by Russia's alleged desire to slowly incorporate more and more parts of Georgia into its realm. The starting point of which – similar to Abkhazia and as the logical next step – would be the recognition of Mingrelians as different from Georgians; this would be followed by subsequent autonomy, then a separatist movement, and finally integration with Russia. There is hardly any space left for doubt regarding the actual capacity of the overarchingly orchestrating Kremlin to enforce its will. This threat scenario could pop up in virtually any conversation and be left in the open air in its ambivalence. The ambivalence made it a virtual impossibility for me to distinguish whether my conversation partner had taken this threat seriously or had just referred to it as an automatic reflex without attaching any deeper meaning to it. In other words the border between probability and fiction became blurred. Nevertheless, for the most part facial expressions became more firm, with a surreal insistence on the matter, upon my disbelief and doubt. The omnipresent threat of Russia as a military power did not surprise me, but the virtual endless capacity ascribed to Russia to turn whole realities of today upside down tomorrow.

I used the opportunity of meeting Eka to discuss my thoughts with her, and ask what she thought. I began by saying the fatalism I had encountered seemed absurd to me, and was even to a certain extent comical. I also told her the paranoia over Russian meddling was irrational as there is no separatist movement or wish for autonomy in Mingrelia whatsoever, and everyone knows that. I confessed that I could not help, but laugh at the absurdity of it. She replied with a serious, but not at all angry manner, sighed and shrugged her shoulders: "I also laughed twenty years ago about Abkhazia."

The aim of my article – in line with my presentation at the CBSR conference – is to analyse how Mingrelian identity/ethnicity in particular is dealt with; and what Mingrelian ethnicity tells us about ethnicity in the Georgian context in general<sup>1</sup>. These reflections are based on a period of eleven months I spent doing research for my doctoral dissertation in Zugdidi. My understanding of ethnicity is mainly based on Barth (1969), Gringrich (1998) and Brubaker (2004), but I will further elaborate on this concept at a later stage of this paper, as the terminology is of crucial importance to my argument. Throughout the paper I will put Mingrelian ethnicity into the wider framework of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict and see how the conflict is interpreted in the vernacular, and also in (Georgian) academia. I believe that the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict has in fact had a great impact on the way ethnicity – and what in Georgia is rather termed 'regional identity' – is dealt with. The main reason to choose the Abkhazian conflict is the way a "Georgian-Abkhazian" (comparative) frame of reference is implicitly established in Georgia when it comes to Mingrelian issues, an idea which I will pursue throughout this text. This frame of reference goes back to the history of nationality politics and the perceived role of Moscow as the only real, almost omnipotent, power centre. But the paper also brings in the role of hospitality and different representations differentiated for insiders and outsider, something which the concept of cultural intimacy will help us to understand. In very short and necessarily simplified words I will explain the issues that underlie the current debates and the politicisation of Mingrelian

ethnicity. Mingrelians in contemporary English language publications are often called a sub-ethnic group of Georgians (for instance Cornell 2001). Roughly 400,000 to 490,000 (Vamling 2000) live in Georgia, mainly in the historical region of Mingrelia/Samegrelo between Guria and Abkhazia<sup>2</sup>. While the category of sub-ethnic seems like a comfortable way out, the only thing the use of this category does is to avoid looking behind the underlying assumptions, which themselves form the objects worthwhile for research.

Three historical events and their particular interpretation are important in the Georgian context. The first is the use of written Mingrelian texts that were used by the tsarist administration to inform serfs about the abolition of serfdom. The second is Mingrelian cultural autonomy in the Zugdidi rayon<sup>3</sup> in the 1930s. The third is the Mingrelian affair in 1952, where upon the fabrication of a separatist plot a large part of Beria's network<sup>4</sup> was purged. I mention these events not because I believe that there is ignorance about them in the academic community or among the interested public in Georgia, but rather because of the way these historical facts are interpreted and if possible concealed in public – at least to foreigners.

My main aim is to analyse the circumstances of suspicion and discomfort present around “Mingrelian issues” in Georgia, particularly upon an expression of interest by a foreigner like myself. I have often found that when I tell Georgian researchers my dissertation topic many react in a similar way: before I am even asked about my beliefs or assumptions on Mingrelia or Mingrelians I am told pre-emptively that Mingrelians are Georgians. A position that, at least concerning within the boundaries of Georgia “proper”, I had never challenged even before having lived in Zugdidi.

This discomfort on the part of my hosts has presented a problem I have been struggling with, almost since I have become interested in the whole universe of assumptions that lie behind ethnicity in Georgia. For the most part the complexity of a so-called “Mingrelian issue” has remained an enigma to me, which I have so far been unable to receive a satisfying answer to. Yet most often the explanations that were offered puzzled me much more, and were more enigmatic to me than what I had myself thought of as explanation. In this paper I want to shed light on some of these ostensible contradictions through Herzfeld's (1997) concept of “cultural intimacy”. The concept should best be understood as a phenomenon that forms a crucial link between the nation-state and its population and allows for the subversion of official discourses and their adoption alike.

### *Ethnicity, Local Identity and Suspicion*

The term ethnicity applied to the Mingrelian case seems to trigger strong reactions. Nevertheless, I confidently believe that these reactions are based more on a difference in terminology and its respective underlying understanding and assumptions. Ethnicity as a concept must not be confused with the term “ethnic group”. Through the use of “ethnicity – in contrast to the term “identity” that could also be used - I mainly want to point to two crucial factors. First, Mingrelian issues possess a highly political

dimension. Second, as opposed to other forms of identity like gender for instance, ethnicity is tied to (imagined) place – and in the Mingrelian case additionally to language and surname. In contrast to “ethnic group” ethnicity allows for the acknowledgement of multiple layers of attachment, which manifest themselves in situational concrete ways (Barth 1969, Gingrich 1998). For instance a Mingrelian<sup>5</sup> in Tbilisi might feel his identity as Mingrelian prevails during a cosy chat with fellow Mingrelians in the yard, whereas watching the news one hour later s/he feels perfectly and proudly Georgian. Therefore the use of ethnicity, contrary to ethnic group, highlights that human beings do not have one exclusive layer of belonging to one single place in their identity. Further, my example illustrates that different layers of identity do not necessarily constitute conflicting loyalties as such. Even though anthropologists have worked with underlying relational assumptions of ethnicity that did not necessarily presuppose the boundedness of groups, at least since the Manchester School, only Brubaker (2004) has coined the phrase “ethnicity without groups”, which matches very well with earlier assumptions of these anthropologists. This phrase can be read as very simple advice – not to presuppose the existence of ethnic groups, but rather to look at mechanisms of belonging to (imagined) places and political mechanisms, which are both at work in ethnicity. For sure the term “ethnicity” is not ideal either, but it should at least provide us with a better working language.

Regional diversity is seen by Georgians as a treasure, and is something that evokes pride. Upon further inquiry about specificities of Mingrelia, regional diversity is quickly brought into the picture, but it must not cross certain boundaries, for instance language. The specificity must remain on an equal level in relation to other provinces of Georgia to be acceptable – for instance the representations of difference in food, landscape or customs, as very often Mingrelia is contrasted to K’akheti in the East of the country. When it comes to language the issue becomes further complicated. Diversity between provinces is not sufficient to explain the reactions upon research interests touching political aspects of the Mingrelian case. Neither is it my aim to express that the existence of a different idiom would give Mingrelia a higher degree of difference. What I want to argue is not that its inhabitants are so much different, but that they possess a feature of potentially dangerous difference to the territorial integrity of the Georgian state; a difference that bears more than a regional component, namely their own language and exactly its status.

If we do a short excursion through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we will encounter a phenomenon that could be called “the myth of unwritten-ness”. It would start with promulgations on the abolition of serfdom, liturgy texts, a school book in Mingrelian, from as early as the 1860s, introduced by the Czarist imperial administration, but with local support. And above all one could refer to the huge amount of newspapers and books in Mingrelian produced during the days of the Mingrelian Cultural Autonomy in the 1930s (Feurstein 2007, Gvaramia and Tsitsishvili 2009). When parts of the linguist establishment call Mingrelian a dialect, instead of a language, and they insist on this point of view, this is only comprehensible to me in a political context. I am not a linguist and I will not go into any sociolinguistic argument about the distinctions between dialect and language, but I am a social anthropologist with common sense. The argument that

Mingrelian has been an unwritten idiom clearly does not fully comply with the historical facts. Even though throughout the course of history the conversion of idioms into languages have been power projects and idioms acquired the status of languages often did so via undesired texts in a quasi-colonial environment.

But let us follow my line of argument, about why the dialect-language discussion is interesting, rather than to enter the discussion itself, which would be likely end in a deadlock of positions and perceptions. During this very conference I was rightly criticized by another participant because I mentioned the dialect-language debate regarding Mingrelian. His argument was that something like this debate does not belong to a scientific realm. According to him someone who claimed that Mingrelian was a dialect – be it of Georgian or, the more refined version, of the Zan-language<sup>6</sup> – would not be taken seriously by linguists and social scientists in Georgia, the implication was that therefore such a person could not be considered a serious scientist. This conversation took place during the session where I presented an earlier version of this paper; however, the next day another conference participant repeatedly told me she believed that Mingrelian is indeed a dialect.

I interpret this experience less as a discrepancy, but more as several layers of representation, whereby the category of person spoken to plays a decisive role. These layers of representation can be best grasped through the term cultural intimacy. By cultural intimacy I draw on a set of ideas around the large issues of state and nationalism, in order to help grapple with seemingly opposed everyday life phenomena, such as when people conform with official ideology and subvert it at the same time. Cultural intimacy is defined by Herzfeld as “the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality” (Herzfeld 1997). The concept of cultural intimacy leads me to believe that the researcher who tried so hard to convince me that Mingrelian was a dialect, did not herself necessarily believe Mingrelian to be a dialect on all levels. But I will come back to this phenomenon in the hospitality section. For now, I would conclude that this boundary between what is acceptable in terms of regional diversity in a Georgian academic (and non-academic) context and what is not, seems to stop somewhere around the language issue. But in order to make this argument clearer and underline the importance of language, we have to briefly go back to the history of Soviet nationality politics.

### *The Logics of Soviet National Politics Continued*

The nationality politics throughout long periods of Soviet history with its “state-sponsored evolutionism” (Hirsch 2005), but also in its ambiguousness, have been pointed out by several authors (Hirsch 2005, Martin 2001 and Slezkine 1994). The making and un-making of different entities within the Soviet “federalist” system over time, and the policies that accompanied the making and un-making, such as the involvement of ethnographers/anthropologists in the forming of ethnic categories or the policy of “korenizatsija”<sup>7</sup> have also been outlined by these authors. If we want to understand why the issue of language is such a delicate one, apart from the fact that script

has played a very important role in Georgian history and current Georgian historiography, we must look at what language has signified for the underlying definitions of who and what could potentially become an autonomous entity in the socialist Soviet political framework. In the case of some languages that had been unwritten prior to late tsarist/imperial or the early Soviet period, we can see very clear examples of how the boundary between dialect and language, written and unwritten, has in fact been quite fluid, arbitrary and quickly convertible. For practical and for political reasons a line had to be drawn between the entities to be formed and the ones that were not. But apart from the undoubtedly political rationale reasons, language was one, if not the decisive “objective” criteria, which underpinned early Soviet national policies. The importance of language in the Soviet nationality politics derived from the very heart of the definition what a nation (a nationality or an ethnic group) was in the Soviet context. According to Stalin (1913) a nation possessed a common language and “there is no nation which at one and the same time speaks several languages”.

If we analyse these bases and apply them again to the Mingrelian case it becomes more obvious why the language vs. dialect discussion is so tricky: because of the political implications to classify Mingrelian as language. The implicit logic says that if a group of people speaks their own language and not a dialect, this is potentially dangerous. This group, or more likely somebody on its behalf, might claim that it is a separate group of people; and in turn might ask for the “subsequent” and “corresponding” political status. According to this logic, based on an implicit comparison with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, an unavoidable sequence is established between autonomy and separatism. These assumptions do not lead to an outspoken and explicit fear and suspicion, but remain in a subtext of assumptions. Mainly Soviet heritage, namely the implications of a Soviet understanding of ethnicity and its ethno-territorial consequences, underlies also the current understanding of federalism and politically implies fear and suspicion connected to anything supposed to more than regional identity. A similar situation was outlined by another conference participant the day before my presentation, when he discussed potential applications of federalist models to Georgia and the aftertaste of Soviet heritage, which the concept of autonomy has received in the Georgian context. At this point we can see the suspicion for a potential analogy between Mingrelia and Abkhazia – how ever remote and improbable the chances for its occurrence might be. This suspicion arises from the underlying belief in the logics of Soviet nationality politics and results in the fear for yet another separatist Georgian region, which I have outlined in the introduction.

### *Hospitality*

There is yet another issue that is linked with the way ethnicity is dealt with - namely hospitality, which I will only analyse so far as to foster an understanding of the ethnicity and Mingrelian issue. Any anthropologist or probably any foreigner in general, who has enjoyed (and sometimes endured) huge benefits on the hands of Georgian individuals, will certainly be thankful like I am. Georgians like to point out that this seemingly unconditional hospitality is a shared cultural trait of Georgians. In

turn, almost all foreigners, who were so well received in this country, hasten to confirm Georgian self-perceptions with – undoubtedly rightful but unreflected – praises for this hospitality. However, as pointed out by Selwyn (2000), hospitality comes with mutual moral obligations. The re-affirmation by the guest of the host's own image forms part of these moral obligations expected from a guest to comply with. However, some other expectations tend to come with the Georgian hospitality package. It seems to me that there has been an implicit understanding in most of Georgian society – extending also to academia – that for all the complexity the “ethno-political” situation in Georgia possesses – the assumption prevails that the complexities of Georgian social reality go beyond comprehensibility to outsiders who have not been socialised into familiarity with the Georgian context from early childhood on. In order to alleviate the burden of understanding for the foreign guest, sometimes rather curious explanations are provided, explanations that for instance can hardly be accepted by a Mingrelian native speaker outside the political establishment (like the statement that Mingrelian is a dialect). I want to give one more example, also from this conference:

The moment a discussion popped up with the perception of minorities at the centre of attention, the debate of which was in Georgian – but which at least from my perspective would have been interesting to the whole audience-, one of the two discussants involved would conclude upon – a statement that this (discussion) is something we do not have to translate, it would only irritate our guests. I have to stress that I doubt his intentions were mean in any way, but I suppose for him this debate was something that belonged to the culturally intimate realm, reserved for internal discussion, but not to be shared with the foreign conference guests. However, there is a certain danger in this approach: if nobody is to show foreign social scientists complexities, but rather simplified representations they will be more inclined to believe that this person's analytical capacities lurk behind, which is certainly not the case. This probably happens because of the fear of misrepresentation of complex issues.

Narratives provided to guests often lack complexity, but can gradually become more complex as a relationship develops. I would not be surprised in a few years from now to hear more personal stories about how in a more concrete manner Mingrelian issues affected events in the civil war or the Georgian Abkhazian conflict. Further, rather than to take the concept of cultural intimacy to understand aspects of hospitality, this story should illustrate that such obstacles do not only hinder foreign researchers, but much more fundamentally also restrict local social scientists in their research agendas as well. Unfortunately, certain taboos have probably prevented work being carried out on Mingrelian issues. For example, pure language enthusiasts have not been able to pursue their publication and language advocacy projects. Social scientists have been restrained in investigating alternative ethnic histories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while they could have focussed more on either the recent past or on regional political history, including the Mingrelian language question. Yet another factor why above mentioned potential research agendas are difficult to pursue is the suspicion regarding outside meddling by Russia.

*Locals Tied to Outside Meddling*

From a certain perspective, hospitality explains what might happen to foreign researchers in Georgia. But there is another factor that helps to disentangle the suspicion I have previously outlined, which is applied despite (or because of?) the hospitality bid. This last factor in my personal puzzle is (perceived) outside meddling as a potentially all-encompassing explanatory framework. This is not to deny the fact that on various occasions (most likely) a divide and rule policy in the tsarist empire and later the Soviet Union played a decisive role, but can almost the whole course of history be blamed on outside meddling?

During a conversation in Zugdidi with a student in the social sciences, who was just about to enter into a master course in Tbilisi, we talked about the question of Russian mingling. During the conversation he asked me whether I knew Georgian history. I did not know what to answer, because it is difficult and almost inconceivable claim to have an idea of Georgian history, but at the same time not to agree with Georgian main-stream historiography. Most likely, I should have said that I do not necessarily know history, but that the idea I have about Georgian historiography is not so bad. So I answered that it depended. Then he explained that during their history they had a lot of invasions, and traitors were involved in nearly all of them. So it was not only Russia, but they, Georgians, also had had a lot of traitors, who have played a vital role.

One could probably critically examine the all encompassing framework underlying many assessments of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict or Georgia's position in general – be it on a state level or reinforced by believes in the vernacular: that Russian imperialism is the main clue to its understanding. The small story exemplifies an approach, which according to my own experience is very prominent in the vernacular as well as among many intellectuals. Such a view would imply also the hesitation to reassess Georgian and Soviet Georgian policies in the past and only protract the representation of vulnerable Georgia; and to ignore the role Georgian Soviet personalities played. If in historiography they are called traitors, what does this historical interpretation imply? It means that there is only one alternative variant to “it is all Russia's fault”. Either Russia is the only source, or it must have had its henchmen, in the form of traitors (“moghalat'e”). Two implications derive from that: on the one hand, it offers a way how Georgians can have taken part in the story as actors, without questioning the “Russia's fault” paradigm, while on the other hand it basically excludes that throughout the past 150 years there have been sincere efforts by local enthusiasts that only focussed on language conservation, without being political henchmen of the neighbour up North. However, again I believe that more than to take these discourses literally, we benefit from taking a look at the context these discourses take place in and regard them as a mechanism of external, and probably also internal, representation. Some of these representations locals would not take very seriously in their literal sense either.



### Conclusion

I have outlined throughout the text the background of the most important underlying issues of sensitivities regarding Mingrelian ethnicity in Georgia. These issues stem from the assumption that thinking a different language automatically implies and is coupled with political aspirations. In other words; the underlying understanding stems in most parts from Soviet nationality politics, an understanding where in many cases a different language meant - or at least was "logically" connected to - some status of "autonomy". This kind of thinking, which apparently still prevails, drives many efforts to preserve cultural heritage into a dubious light and equates them in terms of potential sanctions with separatist efforts. This creates a constant atmosphere of suspicion around anyone interested in these questions, be it locals or foreigners. This paper argues that Mingrelian ethnicity is not politicized by Mingrelians themselves, but as a result of the prevailing culturally moderated perception of outer circumstances.

As a result of these political constellations and their perception Mingrelian ethnicity has become partly a taboo issue, which is only taken up by a few researchers and is particularly regarded with suspicion if a foreigner becomes interested in this topic. At the same time Mingrelians themselves do not question their Georgian identity or see it in conflict, at least not within the boundaries of Georgia proper. This paper argues that several factors have contributed to the politicization of Mingrelian identity. These factors are the same that lie also at the heart of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. As I have outlined in the paper, the current and ongoing issues around Mingrelian ethnicity are influenced by a mixture of factors, but basically the underlying Soviet heritage, in which language is potentially highly coupled with political aspirations and goals. And in contrast to some likely expectations, to apply the concept of ethnicity, which I have outlined, spares anyone researching Mingrelian identity issues from assuming that the very existence of Mingrelian ethnicity creates conflicts in terms of loyalty for citizens.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> First of all I would like to thank the organizers and participants of this conference for all the insights and help they have provided me with. I am deeply grateful for their readiness to assist me, also nolens volens in struggling to understand many Georgian dynamics. Particularly I want to mention Tamta Khalvashi, who throughout my stay has been very encouraging.

<sup>2</sup> Others live in the Gali region (Abkhazia) and in the capital Tbilisi. There are no official statistics, such as a census category, therefore estimations are necessarily very rough.

<sup>3</sup> Rayon was a Soviet administrative division.

<sup>4</sup> Beria was a leading Soviet politician in Stalin's entourage and head of the NKWD from 1938-1946.

<sup>5</sup> As I have already indicated by Mingrelian I envision more the subjective side – I emphasize self-identification, be it on the basis of language use, ancestry or even surname.

<sup>6</sup> A historical remedy to be able to say that Mingrelian and Laz are dialects, is to bring Zan language into the picture, a language that does no longer exist in the present and that is merely an issue in linguistic classifications, see for instance Vamling (2000), who is very diplomatic about it.

<sup>7</sup> Korenizatsija was a Soviet policy of the 1920ies to foster a local non-Russian Soviet elite and co-opt it into Soviet power structures. The content of this policy was carried on in later decades as well.