



**COMPARATIVE
POLITICS**Section B

Which of the three main ethnic conflict theories best explains the Ethnic violence in the post-soviet states of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova?

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Abstract

After a wave of ethnic conflicts spread across the world at the end of the Cold War, scholars, fearful that these ethnic conflicts were a serious threat to regional and global peace, began developing numerous theoretical explanations for the causes of such violence in hopes of preventing similar occurrences from happening in the future. Today, these explanations fall under three main theoretical approaches: primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism. The literature concerning ethnic violence, however, reveals that there is no clear consensus amongst scholars regarding which of these theories best explains the causes of ethnic conflicts. Therefore, this thesis, which uses a process tracing approach to test the three main theories of ethnic conflicts in the post-Soviet states of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova, argues that utilizing an approach which uses ideas from both the instrumentalism and the constructivism theories is the best way of explaining the causes of ethnic conflicts. This is the case because the primordialist theory has the least amount of explanatory power; and the instrumentalism and constructivism theories, separately, are incomplete.

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Keywords: Primordialism; instrumentalism; constructivism; ethnic violence; Azerbaijan; Georgia; Moldova

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1. Introduction

It was once believed that in the face of capitalism and scientific socialism, ethnic identities would wither away. However, the reconstruction of societies' dominant social norms, economies, and political structures did not make ethnic identities obsolete (Comaroff and Stern 36). On the contrary, not only did ethnic identities continue to dominate people's social and political lives, but a wave of conflicts between different ethnic groups spread across the world at the end of the Cold War (Lake and Rothchild 41). Thus, scholars, fearful that ethnic conflicts were a serious threat to regional and global peace due to their propensity of negatively impacting the world economy and opening the floodgates to asylum seekers, began developing theoretical explanations for the causes of such violence in hopes of preventing similar occurrences from happening in the future (Lake and Rothchild 43). Today, these explanations fall under three main theoretical approaches: primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism.

The first theory, primordialism, argues that ethnic conflicts are a natural phenomenon, which occur as a result of cultural differences. The second theory, constructivism, claims that ethnicities are not inherently conflictual; and that ethnic violence takes place when political systems and cultural scripts allow for such violence to take place. The third theory, instrumentalism, suggests that ethnic conflicts are caused by either ethnic entrepreneurs who mobilize the members of their ethnic group in order to achieve their own personal goals, or they arise as a result of different groups mobilizing their ethnic identities in order to realize their conflicting interests. Having said that, given that all of these theories have shortcomings and given that the literature on ethnic violence reveals that there is no clear consensus amongst scholars regarding which of these theories has the best explanatory power,

the purpose of the following literature review is to examine and to explain these theories in a more comprehensive manner in order to, later, use the concepts from these theories to decide which of these approaches best explains the causes of ethnic conflicts in the three post-Soviet states of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Primordialism

According to primordialism, ethnic identities are derived from nature (they were either biologically determined in the past or they were constructed by individuals in the distant past) and have been passed down to the current generations of people from their ancestors. Either way, every individual belongs to one ethnic group, which, once acquired, remains fixed over time ("Cumulative Findings in the Study of Ethnic Politics" 7). Moreover, members of an ethnic group have a group consciousness which develops from their language, culture, traditions and history; and this group consciousness is reinforced over time through myths and symbols, which are passed down from the older generations. For example, even though nomadic tribes from the Middle East, such as the Kurds, have untraceable kinship relations, their ethnic identity has survived for centuries as a result of their culture being continuously passed down from one generation to the next (Jesse and Williams 10).

The primordialist theory can be traced back to arguments made by historical intellectuals. For instance, in the past, German primordialist philosophers believed that ethnicities remained the same over time given that an ethnic group's unique

identities and circumstances in life were embedded in their spoken language. In other words, these primordialist thinkers believed that once people dispersed geographically and established different tribes and nations, these groups developed different languages which reflected their unique situations in life (Dawisha 17). Thus, as the ethnic group's language was passed down from generation to generation, the group's ethnic spirit was also passed down to the newer generations.

Primordialists also believe that ethnic conflicts are a natural phenomenon which arise as a result of cultural differences. In other words, given that an ethnicity is a relational concept, which means that having an in-group also means having an out-group, it is natural for two different ethnic groups to fight with one another in order to achieve their conflicting goals (Jesse and Williams 10). Moreover, primordialists also claim that ethnic conflicts are a result of "memories of past atrocities" which make violence "hard to avoid" (Sambanis 263).

2.2 Arguments Against the Primordialist Theory

There are also some scholars who believe that primordialist ideas are too simplistic to explain ethnic conflicts; and thus, should be disregarded. That being said, in order to support these claims, scholars bring to attention the many weaknesses of this theoretical explanation. First, they argue that this theory cannot explain the variations in the levels of conflict between two ethnic groups over time and place. For example, primordialism doesn't explain why there were no conflicts between the French and the English until the year 1066, and it doesn't explain why the French and the English became allies after intermittently fighting one another for centuries (Leadbetter 4). Second, they highlight the fact that there are some people who choose to assimilate into other ethnic groups. For example, sometimes, when people move to another country, they choose to disregard their old cultural practices and instead, choose to adopt the beliefs and

rituals of the new group that they belong to (Andersen 240). Third, they note that there are some ethnic groups which have disappeared or have changed over time (Jesse and Williams 11). For example, anti-primordialists note that the ethnic labels "Tutsi" and "Hutu," which are used to identify two "different" ethnic groups in Rwanda, were invented by the Belgians when they colonized the territory. In other words, these ethnic identifications did not exist in Rwanda prior to the Belgians moving into the region. Instead, these labels are a result of a myth that the Belgians invented about the people living in the territory in order to create a polarized society, which would make it easier to conquer and control them. According to this myth, the "Tutsis," who are a little bit taller, lighter skinned, and have longer faces, are a lost tribe from Egypt, which supposedly makes them higher up in the racial hierarchy than the "Hutus." This is not true, of course. One cannot actually identify people as "Hutus" or "Tutsis" simply by looking at them. That being said, despite the fact that there are no actual differences between "Hutus" and "Tutsis," the Rwandan people have come to believe the Belgians' story and have been using these ethnic divisions ever since that time period (Fearon and Laitin 858).

2.3 Constructivism

The constructivism theory, which can be traced back to historical arguments made by French and English philosophers, states that ethnic identities are constructed, reconstructed, and mobilized in accordance with social and political factors. For instance, the English language is a result of the linguistic influences of the various groups of people (the Celts, the Danes, the Romans) who invaded and settled down in the country (Dawisha 10). In other words, according to constructivism, the primordialist approach of understanding a group's attributes as natural characteristics which emerge from physiological traits and psychological predispositions, is incorrect. Moreover, constructivists argue that it is wrong to assume that an ethnic group's members have an internalized "singular social experience" that

everyone in the group is exposed to through their group consciousness (Cerulo 387). Instead, they suggests that ethnic groups are a social construction, which means that they are fabricated and refabricated based on reigning cultural norms. For example, in 1992, 31% of the population living in Britain considered themselves to be English; however, less than a decade later, this number increased to 41% of the population even though there were no exceptional rates of fertility or migration in the area (“Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics” 4). To put this another way, the increase in the number of English people in Britain was due to the fact that the number of people who identified themselves as English increased.

Constructivists also argue that individuals do not belong to only one ethnic category. Chandra, for example, maintains that when analyzing a single ethnic group, one notices that this supposed single ethnic group is actually a mixture of several other cultural identities. In other words, ethnic groups are made up of several different identities that are unified under one salient category (“Why Ethnic Parties Succeed” 4). Moreover, Cerulo supports this claim by bringing attention to the idea that there are individuals who have mixed ancestries; and thus, they can choose which ethnic identity they want to stress based on the circumstances that they find themselves in (Cerulo 389).

Furthermore, according to this theory, ethnicities are not inherently conflictual. In fact, most ethnic groups accomplish their goals in a peaceful manner through established political channels (Lake and Rotchild 43). That being said, constructivists argue that it is possible to use the concept called the security dilemma to predict the probability of a conflict amongst different ethnic groups. First, ethnic conflicts are likely to happen when political regimes collapse because they often leave behind a number of non-cohesive cultural groups who are forced to compete with one another in order to gain a sense of security (Ellingsen 235). Second, ethnic conflicts can arise due to competitive elections that utilize ethnic-based political parties. This is the case because the minority

ethnic group could perceive the election results as a threat to their group’s identity (Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics 37-38). Third, ethnic conflicts can take place during times of modernization if an ethnic group’s expectations are not met and if an ethnic group believes that they are at a disadvantage relative to another ethnic group (Ellingsen 230).

2.4 Arguments Against the Constructivist Theory

There are scholars who believed that the constructivist theory has several flaws. First, the constructivist theory cannot explain how some ethnic groups are able to remain the same for very long periods of time, even during times of changing political and social contexts (Jesse and Williams 12). Second, the constructivists fail to recognize that mass literacy hardens people’s ethnic identities, which makes it very unlikely that the ethnic group can be reconstructed (Van Evera 20). Third, scholars argue that the constructivist approach does not reveal why some ethnic identities persist even though they harm the members of the group instead of benefiting them (Jesse and Williams 12).

2.5 Instrumentalism

According to instrumentalism, ethnicity is a tool used by people to achieve their goals because people who share ascriptive characteristics can be effectively organized and mobilized in order to influence public policies. In other words, individuals who believe that they can obtain access to valuable resources or state services by electing a fellow ethnic member to a political position, are likely to do so to achieve their goals (“Why Ethnic Parties Succeed” 6). This is the case because members of an ethnic group feel that they have common goals in life. Moreover, given that human beings are believed to be rational actors who pursue their objectives in a manner which maximizes their chances of achieving their goals, it is not

surprising that people are using their ethnic identity very much like an interest group (“Why Ethnic Parties Succeed” 11).

Instrumentalists also argue that given that members of an ethnic group (people who share a common history, language, and customs) feel a strong cohesion to other members of their in-group, ethnic activists and political entrepreneurs can mobilize their own ethnic groups to commit violence by convincing them that they are under a threat from another ethnic group (Comaroff and Stern 39). They can do this by magnifying the differences between their ethnic group and the people from the out-group; and they can do this by blaming the other ethnic group for their misfortunes. To explain this phenomenon, Horowitz argues that a lot of the tension between ethnic groups comes from people evaluating their abilities and their situations in life relative to the lives and the abilities of people who have other ethnic ties (Horowitz 143-144). In other words, if one group of people believe that the people from another ethnic group are better off than them, then they might perceive the other group to be a threat to their own group’s identity, which can sometimes be enough to get a group to resort to violence.

2.6 Arguments Against the Instrumentalist Theory

Scholars criticizing the instrumentalist approach of explaining ethnic conflicts state that the instrumentalist theory is incomplete given that it does not consider the feasibility of an ethnic conflict actually taking place. Even where extreme ideas and conditions exist, ethnic conflicts only break out when one of the ethnic groups has the opportunity to use violence against the other group. In other words, scholars argue that an ethnic conflict is unlikely to naturally evolve from a political protest. This is the case because rebel groups face collective action problems and because rebellions are very expensive. For example, the Tamil Tigers, an ethnic group which makes up about 12 percent of Sri Lanka’s population, spend between \$200 million and \$350 million per year in order to maintain their control over the Northeast part of Sri Lanka for which they

seek to obtain a political secession (Collier et al. 5). Moreover, since typical civil wars between ethnic groups last for many years, result in large numbers of deaths, and rarely result in rebel victories, rebellions are unlikely to be rational decisions (Collier et al. 6). Thus, members of an ethnic group should be opposed to starting an ethnic conflict once they consider the amount of time, money, and risk that is involved in the conflict. In other words, members of an ethnic group should not be likely to be manipulated by an ethnic elite who seeks to start a conflict to benefit himself or herself. After all, the rebellion is far more likely to have devastating results rather than to establish justice (Lake and Rothchild 46).

2.7 A Combination of Constructivist and Primordialist Ideas

There are multiple scholars who believe that in order to fully understand the causes of ethnic conflicts, one needs to utilize ideas from both the constructivist and the primordialist theories. For example, Van Evera agrees with the constructivist idea that ethnic identities are socially constructed; however, he argues that this does not mean that scholars need to disregard the claim that ethnic identities are fixed. This is the case because even though ethnic identities are constructed at some point in time, once these identities have been formed it is incredibly hard to reconstruct them (Van Evera 20). For instance, the communist elites failed to construct a new national identity for the many ethnic groups that were joined together under the Soviet Union (Dawisha 4).

Scholars also argue that although the identities of non-literate people can be changed with relative ease, the identities of those people who have the ability to read are likely to be fixed. To explain this phenomenon, Van Evera argues that given that most of today’s ethnic groups have written records of their group’s history, the members of these groups should have a uniform understanding of where they come from and what their identity means. Moreover, given

that this information is written, the accounts of the group's history can be passed along to coming generations without going through a lot of changes. To support this claim, Van Evera brings to attention the fact that illiterate Eurasian identities such as the Hittites, Sumerians, Babylonians, Phoenicians, Amorites, and Edomites no longer exist; however, there are no examples of mass-literate Eurasian identities that have disappeared (Van Evera 20). That being said, it is important to note that this is the case because having a uniform understanding of what it means to be a part of a specific ethnic group helps to strengthen the loyalty that the members of the ethnic group feel towards one another, which, in turn, makes sure that the link between these people cannot be easily broken. After all, a member of a group that has a uniform ethnic identity is likely to feel more connected to the rest of the members of his or her group, even to those who are strangers, because they all have a common understanding of who they are (Jesse and Williams 12).

2.8 A Combination of Instrumentalist and Constructivist Ideas

There are some scholars who believe that in order to fully understand the causes of ethnic conflicts, one needs to utilize concepts from both the constructivist and the instrumentalist approaches. In order to support this claim, Posner provides an analysis of the relationship between the Chewas and the Tumbukas who live in Zambia and Malawi. The study of these two groups of people is a valuable one because although, according to the primordialist theory, the Chewas and the Tumbukas should have similar relationships with one another in both Zambia and Malawi, this is not the case in reality. For example, in Malawi the interactions between the members of these two groups are often antagonistic because the two groups tend to see each other as political opponents. On the other hand, in Zambia, the two ethnic groups consider themselves to be political allies because they view one another as one and the same (Posner 5). To explain this phenomenon,

Posner argues that the relationship between the Chewas and the Tumbukas differs in these two countries as a result of their differing population sizes. In Zambia, the populations of Chewas and Tumbukas are both small compared to the political arena; and thus, given that these groups, separately, are not considered to be useful bases for political mobilization, they do not see each other as political enemies. However, in Malawi, since the Tumbukas and the Chewas are both large groups, which are considered to be valuable bases for political coalition building, these groups see each other as one another's competition (Posner 22). In other words, given that the ethnic groups (on both sides of the border) seek jobs, hospitals, roads, licenses and many other resources which can be available to them if they have a say in the government, these people are focused on building effective political coalitions in order to win the majority of the seats in the state legislature (Posner 21). Therefore, in order to increase their chances of winning political offices, the Chewas and the Tumbukas in Malawi reshaped their ethnic groups' identities and created divisions between their two groups in order to use their ethnic groups as effective tools for political mobilization.

2.9 A Combination of Primordialist, Instrumentalist, and Constructivist Ideas

Some of the literature on the causes of ethnic conflicts suggests combining primordialist, instrumentalist, and constructivist ideas together in order to create a more comprehensive approach for understanding cultural identities. This is the case because the study of ethnic conflicts involves the analyzation of the processes by which ethnic elites select aspects of their group's culture and history, reconstruct them by attaching new value or meaning to them, and then use these symbols and myths in order to mobilize the group to achieve their goals or to defend their interests (Dawisha 6). In fact, Conversi suggests that throughout history, historians have been studying their ethnic group's culture and history and then refabricating their past or magnifying certain pre-existing myths and events in a way to provide their

ethnic political leaders historic justification for competing with other groups (Conversi 74). This process involves putting a lot of attention on the ethnic group's heroisms, supposedly incomparable achievements, and the obstacles that they have confronted and prevailed against (Dawisha 17). That being said, this method of instilling a strong ethnic identity in the hearts and minds of the members of the ethnic group also involves conveniently forgetting the unbecoming events such as civil wars, massacres, and human rights violations that the ethnic group has been a part of (Dawisha 6). For example, Turkish history books do not include any information about the Armenian genocide even though 1.5 million Armenians were killed at the time (Conversi 74).

3. Methodology

In view of the fact that there is no clear consensus amongst scholars regarding which of the three main theories of ethnic conflicts (primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism) best explains the causes of such violence, the purpose of this thesis is to test these theories in order to determine the theoretical approach that has the best explanatory power.

That being said, given that a wave of ethnic conflicts spread across the world at the end of the Cold War and given that the Cold war was marked by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this thesis uses a process tracing approach to analyze the chain of events which resulted in ethnic conflicts in three post-Soviet states: Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova. These three former Soviet Socialist Republics serve as the case studies for this thesis because they share many similar characteristics. For example, all three of these states are geographically close to one another and all three of them have had ethnic conflicts, which have resulted in de-facto states. Having said that, the purpose of choosing such similar cases is to see whether the ethnic conflicts in these states came about due to similar processes or whether they reached the same destination through a different chain of events.

To test the primordialist theory, this thesis looks at the history of the disputed territory in order to see the length of time that the warring ethnic groups have been residing in that location; it examines the length of time the ethnic groups have been in conflict with one another; and it analyzes the justifications given by ethnic leaders in order to explain the reasons for engaging in the conflict.

To test the constructivist theory, this thesis looks at international agreements that political leaders signed or agreed to near the time of the conflict; it examines the policies that the states adopted around the time that the conflicts arose; and it considers whether key historical events, which took place prior to the start of the conflict, resulted in changes in societal norms that could have led to the conflict.

To test the instrumentalist theory, the thesis analyzes ethnic leaders' behaviors in order to see whether these ethnic entrepreneurs made the members of their in-groups feel threatened by the out-groups in order to achieve their personal interests; it looks at the states' political parties in order to see whether the parties were based on ethnicities or if they were based on other commonalities and interest; and it evaluates election results in order to consider whether both of the ethnic groups involved in the conflict had the means to affect the politics in their state.

4. Case Study 1: Azerbaijan

4.1 Testing Primordialism

The ethnic conflict in Azerbaijan is a conflict over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, a de-facto state under the control of ethnic Armenians, which is internationally recognized as a territory of Azerbaijan. That being said, the ownership of this mountainous territory is currently under debate between Azerbaijanis and Armenians because both of these groups claim that Nagorno-Karabakh is the birthplace of their group's culture, language, and religion (Kuburas 46).

The Armenian historians insist that while the Caucasus were traded by international powers, Nagorno-Karabakh has always remained a commune of Armenian culture. To support this claim, they bring to attention several facts. First, according to the writings of Strabo, a Greek geographer, historian, and philosopher who was born in 64 BC and died in 24 AD, the Armenians' control over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh can be traced back to 189 BC ("History, Geography, and Ethnology" 2). Second, in 2005, archaeologists found the remains of the ancient Armenian city of Tigranakert, which dates back to the 1st century BC, in the Askeran region of Nagorno-Karabakh (Petrosyan 1). Third, the first Armenian school, which taught students how to read and write using the Armenian alphabet, was opened in the Martuni District of Nagorno-Karabakh during the 5th century AD (Kuburas 46). Fourth, the remains of St. Grigoris (an Armenian bishop) is buried inside a mausoleum located underneath the Amaras Monastery, which is the oldest monument in Nagorno-Karabakh ("Diocese of Artsakh" 2).

The Azerbaijani historians, on the other hand, also insist that they can identify their ancestors' clans and tribes in this region. For example, the Azerbaijanis argue that they can trace their predecessors, the Caucasian Albanians, to the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh as far back as the 4th century BC ("History, Geography, and Ethnology" 3). Moreover, they emphasize that although this territory was repeatedly traded by international powers, it was under the control of Azerbaijani ancestors during the 1st century AD, the 9th and 10th centuries, and the beginning of the 11th century (Potier 1).

Despite the current debate regarding the ownership of this territory, however, the two ethnic groups in this territory have lived in relative peace with one another for centuries. In fact, the serious conflicts between the ethnic Armenians and the ethnic Azerbaijani's ancestors, the Caucasian Tatars, only began in the 20th century. The first round of violent clashes between the two groups, which occurred in Baku, Nakhichevan, Shusha, and Elizavetopol, took place during the

Russian Revolution of 1905 (Hakobyan 2). Nevertheless, after this incidence was over, the two ethnic groups resumed their peaceful coexistence until the year 1988 (Romashov 11). Thus, given that there were long periods of relative peace and stability between these two ethnic groups, the primordialist notion that ethnic conflicts arise naturally as a result of ancient hatreds does not accurately explain the conflict between the ethnic Armenians and the ethnic Azerbaijanis (Jesse 11).

Notwithstanding the fact that the primordialism theory is fundamentally flawed, primordialist ideas are often used by ethnic activists as a means of explaining and justifying the conflict between the ethnic Armenians and the ethnic Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh. For example, Allahshukur Pashazade, the Grand Mufti of the Caucasus, has incorrectly claimed that the conflict between the two ethnic groups in Nagorno-Karabakh is a result of the ethnic Armenians' deceitful nature. In fact, he has insisted that Azerbaijan has done all that is possible in order to resolve the conflict between the two ethnic groups in Nagorno-Karabakh; however, the Armenians' dishonest and disloyal nature has always hindered the peace process between the two groups (Elibegova 22).

4.2 Testing Constructivism

When Armenia became a part of the Soviet Union, the Bolsheviks promised the Armenians that the Nagorno-Karabakh territory would be considered a territory of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. In fact, on 4 July 1921, the Communist Party in the Caucasus decided, by majority vote, to transfer Karabakh to the Republic of Armenia. On the next day, however, Stalin ordered the Bureau to revoke its majority vote verdict and to declare that Nagorno-Karabakh would be an autonomous enclave of Azerbaijan. This was the case because Stalin wanted to use a "divide and rule" policy in order to maintain his control over both the Armenian and the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republics. In other words, by refusing to allow the transfer of Karabakh to Armenia, Stalin

could use this territory, which was largely populated by Armenians, as leverage over the people living in the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic in order to force them to cooperate with the Soviet leadership; and he could also use the Nagorno-Karabakh territory as a fifth column in case of disloyalty from the Azerbaijanis (“Sovietization of Caucuses” 3-4). That being said, while Stalin’s “divide and rule” policy helped him to maintain his control over both the Armenian and Azerbaijani Republics, this policy had severe consequences for the two ethnic groups living in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. As a matter of fact, the policy *created ethnic tensions between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis who were living in the territory of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic.*

As a result of Nagorno-Karabakh being considered a part of Azerbaijan’s territory, the ethnic Armenians, who had recently experienced a systematic extermination by the Ottoman Empire, became fearful of their Azerbaijani neighbors and began doing everything in their power to ensure their safety. In other words, worried that the Azerbaijanis, who had legal rights to the Armenian-dominated Nagorno-Karabakh, would decide to cleanse them from their homes, the Armenians in the region began mobilizing under a nationalist sentiment (Kuburas 47).

The Azerbaijanis (who were known as Caucasian Turks, Tatars, or Muslims prior to the Russian Revolution of 1905), on the other hand, developed a strong national “Azerbaijani” identity under the Soviet rule and began putting a lot of emphasis on ensuring the territorial integrity of the new Azerbaijan republic. Thus, since Nagorno-Karabakh was legally considered to be a part of Azerbaijan’s territory, the Azerbaijanis were adamant about making sure that the territory, which was dominated by ethnic Armenians, remained a part of Azerbaijan (Kuburas 49).

That being said, the rise of tensions between the ethnic Armenians and the ethnic Azerbaijanis, who used to be relatively peaceful with one another, is a result of the events and agreements which took place during this time. In other words, Stalin’s “divide and rule” policy, the Armenian Genocide, and the new

“Azerbaijani” identity under the Soviet rule changed the region’s social and political norms and created an environment where ethnic conflicts could take place. Thus, it is clear that the constructivist theory correctly explains some of the factors which caused the ethnic violence between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis.

4.3 Testing Instrumentalism

When Mikhail Gorbachev became the new leader of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1985 and introduced the policy of glasnost, he allowed the region’s simmering ethnic tensions to be openly expressed. This, in turn, eventually, resulted in the violent clashes between the ethnic Armenians and the ethnic Azerbaijanis living in the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic.

Gorbachev’s glasnost policy gave the oppressed ethnic Armenians living in the territory of Azerbaijan the ability to mobilize as a unit in hopes of achieving their common ethnic needs (Kuburas 50). In other words, this policy allowed the ethnic Armenians of the Nagorno-Karabakh region to express their dissatisfaction with the lack of health clinics, the lack of Armenian education programs available to the public, and the general lack of job opportunities for Armenians in Azerbaijan (Kaufman 20). Therefore, when the first murmurs of the glasnost reforms reached the territory of Azerbaijan, a group of ethnic Armenians living in this region quickly joined together in order to demand reforms. To start off, this group, which called itself the Krunk, decided to express their grievances against Azerbaijan by collecting 75,000 signatures from the ethnic Armenians living in the Nagorno-Karabakh territory in order to petition the Politburo for the transfer of this region to the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. Next, when a senior Communist Party official in Moscow announced that their petition for transfer had been rejected, the ethnic group once again mobilized to fight for what they perceived to be their rights; however, this time they utilized different methods (Kaufman 21). First, they posted protest placards around Azerbaijan, which

stated their many grievances. Then, they began organizing daily protest rallies in order to raise awareness of the fact that their needs weren't being met. Later, when an Azerbaijani party boss in Chardakhlu decided to punish protesters by beating up women, children, and elderly individuals living in his region, the Armenians who believed that this was an Azerbaijani effort to cleanse their ethnic group from the territory, began driving ethnic Azerbaijanis out of the Nagorno-Karabakh region (Kaufman 22). In other words, with the impending Soviet collapse and with the new policy of glasnost, ethnic Armenians were given the means, the motive, and the opportunity to not only make political demands but to also step up their fighting in hopes of achieving their goals.

The impending Soviet collapse and the new policy of glasnost also gave the Azerbaijanis the ability to mobilize as an ethnic group in order to achieve their wants and needs. For example, in November of 1988, ethnic Azerbaijanis began rallying in Baku in order to protest against a reported construction project in the Topkhana area of Nagorno-Karabakh. The project, the building of a highly polluting aluminum workshop, was reportedly being carried out by ethnic Armenians without the approval of Baku, which violated Azerbaijan's sovereignty (Kaufman 28). Thus, unhappy about the events in Nagorno-Karabakh, the ethnic Azerbaijanis came together and created the Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF) in order to regain sovereignty over the region. At first, the APF led large rallies in order to protest the construction project. Later, however, the group became increasingly radicalized. In one instance, the group organized a rail blockade of Armenia, which severely hampered Armenia's ability to recover from a major earthquake. Moreover, in another instance, massive attacks were carried out against Armenians living in Baku in order to provide homes for Azerbaijani refugees who were expelled from the Nagorno-Karabakh region. These attacks resulted in hundreds of thousands of Armenian refugees fleeing from Baku (Kaufman 29).

That being said, the ethnic conflict between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis in the territory of

Nagorno-Karabakh was also exacerbated by ethnic elites. For example, the current Azerbaijani president, Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly mobilized his ethnic group against Armenians in order to achieve his political goals. For example, Aliyev has been encouraging and fostering hostilities against Armenians by both continuously referring to all Armenians as Azerbaijan's enemies and by rewarding atrocious crimes that were committed against Armenians. In 2012, for example, Aliyev convinced the government of Hungary to transfer Ramil Safarov, a convicted murderer responsible for the death of a sleeping Armenian lieutenant, to Azerbaijan with the promise that he would complete the rest of his prison sentence in his home country. When Safarov, arrived back to Azerbaijan, however, he was given a hero's welcome. Not only did the president pardon Safarov for his atrocious crime, but he also promoted the man's rank in the army, gave him a free apartment, and payed him money for the eight years that he spent inside of a prison in Hungary ("Azeri Killer" 7). Furthermore, Aliyev has also used the conflict between the two ethnic groups as a diversionary tactic. Amid the growing public unrest in Azerbaijan because of the falling oil prices, the president, who spent \$4 billion to buy new, modern Russian weapons, felt a growing pressure to demonstrate that he had something to show for his expensive investment (MacFarquhar 17). Thus, it is believed that Aliyev, hoping to demonstrate Azerbaijan's newfound military superiority, ordered an offensive military attack against the Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh. This attack also served as a reminder to the Azerbaijanis that their president had not given up on Azerbaijan's claim to the separatist region ("A Frozen Conflict" 5). In fact, during a recent speech, Aliyev was quoted saying that in order for the conflict between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis to come to an end, Azerbaijan must restore its territorial integrity and Armenia must accept that Nagorno-Karabakh is never going to be granted independence (Nazarli 10).

Therefore, given that the research shows that the ethnic conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region arose

because of both manipulative elites and because the two ethnic groups living in the region had conflicting interests and goals, it is clear that the instrumentalist theory accurately explains the reasons why there was an ethnic conflict between ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azerbaijanis.

5. Case Study 2: Georgia

5.1 Testing Primordialism

The ethnic conflict in Georgia is a conflict over the region of South Ossetia, a de-facto state under the control of ethnic Ossetians, which is internationally recognized as a territory of Georgia. That being said, the rightful ownership of the region of the separatist region of South Ossetia has been a subject of debate between Georgians and Ossetians for several hundred years.

The people known as Ossetians, who were previously known as Alans (a group of Persian-speaking tribes), moved into the region of South Ossetian when their homeland Alania was destroyed by the Mongols in the year 1230 (“South Ossetia” 5). During this time, this territory was a part of the Kingdom of Georgia; however, the Georgians’ political power in this region was weak (“South Ossetia” 8). Thus, the fragmented power in the region allowed the Ossetians the ability to live in relative autonomy (“South Ossetia” 11). That being said, given that a large number of Ossetians have been residing in this territory ever since that time period, they claim to be the rightful owners of the region.

The nation of Georgia, which contained the current South Ossetian territory, can be traced back to the 8th century; however, in the 13th century, the Georgian kingdom was torn apart during an invasion by the Mongols (“Early Kingdoms” 1-2). Later on, this territory was further fragmented as the Georgians fought against Ottoman, Iranian, and Russian domination; however, Georgia was able to obtain its independence from 1918 to 1921 (“Cultural Life” 15). Nevertheless, this independence did not last very long

given that after three years of independence it was absorbed into the Soviet Union. That being said, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Georgia, which again included the territory of South Ossetia, became an independent state (“Cultural Life” 13). Thus, today, Georgians argue that the territory of South Ossetia, which was a part of their territory throughout history, is rightfully theirs.

Despite the current debate regarding the ownership of the territory, however, the two ethnic groups in this territory lived in relative peace with one another for centuries. In fact, the Georgians and the Ossetians were able to coexist peacefully for most of the Soviet period. During this time, intermarriage between the two ethnic groups was very common and many Ossetian and Georgians lived side by side in harmony (Hays 16). Therefore, given that these two groups were able to peacefully cohabit the same land for centuries, the primordialist theory does not accurately explain the conflict between the ethnic Ossetians and the ethnic Georgians.

In spite of the fact that primordialism does not explain the reason why there is a conflict between ethnic Ossetians and ethnic Georgians, flawed primordialist ideas are still used by ethnic activists in order to justify the war between the two groups. For example, when Zviad Gamsakhurdia was elected as Georgia’s president in 1990, he argued the Georgians had to fight against the Ossetians, who had invaded their territory in the past, in order to protect the integrity of their ancestral homeland. Moreover, he claimed that the Ossetians couldn’t demand to have an autonomous state given that the territory that they resided in had been rightfully Georgia’s for centuries (Wolff 1).

5.2 Testing Constructivism

The Ossetians and the Georgians lived peacefully with one another until the period after the Russian Revolution. In fact, the first confrontation between these ethnic groups took place during the brief period of time when Georgia had regained its independence

from Russia in 1918 (“2008 Georgia-Russia Conflict” 1). At this time, as the Georgian government and the South Ossetian People’s Council failed to agree on the exact geographic territory that would be granted autonomy, several Ossetians began leading riots against the Menshevik Georgian government in order to demonstrate their dissatisfaction. That being said, these riots, combined with the fact that the Bolsheviks were trying to seize control of the South Ossetian territory, resulted in Georgia sending soldiers into the Ossetian territory in order to restore order in the region. Furthermore, the soldiers were also sent into the Ossetian territory in order to punish the Ossetians given that it was believed that they were working with the Bolsheviks in order to reunite Georgia with Russia (Jones 222). Having said that, although in the beginning it appeared as if Georgia was going to successfully suppress the Ossetian population, in 1921, Georgia was invaded by the Red Army, which eventually resulted in Georgia, along with the Ossetian territory, being incorporated into the Soviet Union (Hewitt 6).

When Georgia was absorbed into the Soviet Union, the Ossetians who lived in the current South Ossetian territory did not unite with the large North Ossetian population, who were considered to be a part of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic. Instead, following Stalin’s “divide and rule” policy, the South Ossetian territory was made into an autonomous oblast within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (“South Ossetia” 11). This decision was meant to be a compromise for both the Ossetians and the Georgians given that the Ossetians were given a considerable amount of autonomy whilst still legally being considered a part of Georgia. Thus, this decision helped to ensure that the Ossetians and the Georgians coexisted in relative peace during most of the years that they were a part of the Soviet Union. Having said that, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Ossetians’ requested to be an independent state from Georgia, which resulted in another confrontation between the ethnic Ossetians and the ethnic Georgians (“2008 Georgia-Russia Conflict” 21).

Therefore, the constructivist theory accurately explains that the ethnic conflicts between the Ossetians and the Georgians is at least partly a result of key events and agreements in history. In other words, the Russian Revolution, the inability of the Georgian government and the South Ossetian People’s Council to agree on the geographic territory that would be granted autonomy, Stalin’s “divide and rule” policy, the substantial amount of autonomy given to the Ossetians by the Soviet leadership, and the collapse of the Soviet Union changed the social and political norms in the region, which, in turn, resulted in the conflict between the two formerly peaceful ethnic groups.

5.3 Testing Instrumentalism

When South Ossetia first became an autonomous oblast of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Ossetians, who had been poor and underdeveloped under the Georgian rule, not only experienced development through the construction of a new railway to Gori, but also gained a substantial amount of autonomy, which allowed them to have the Ossetian language as the official language taught at their schools (“South Ossetia” 11). Thus, when in 1989, Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika policy was used by the Georgian government to establish the Georgian language as the official language throughout the Republic of Georgia (which included the territory of South Ossetia), and when in 1990, the Georgian government used the perestroika policy to ban regional political parties from participating during national elections, the Ossetians decided to mobilize their ethnic group against the Georgians, whom they considered to be a threat to the Ossetian identity. They did this by boycotting Georgian elections, electing their own government, and declaring their independence from Georgia (“South Ossetia” 13).

As the South Ossetians declared their independence from Georgia, several Georgian elites used the ethnic conflict between the two groups in order to advance their political interests. For example, when

Shevardnadze, a man who did not consider the recapture of the South Ossetian territory a priority for the Georgian government, was reelected as Georgia's President, Mikheil Saakashvili, who was a member of the Georgian Parliament, used ethnic outbidding in order to gain political support and in order to become the president of Georgia. He did this by launching a protest against Shevardnadze's reelection, during which time he argued that there was a falsification of votes which led to Shevardnadze's reappointment. Then, after Shevardnadze resigned from office, Saakashvili campaigned for the presidential seat by making it clear that his intention was to reclaim the Georgian territory from the Ossetians ("South Ossetia" 16).

Thus, the instrumentalist theory correctly explains some of the causes of the ethnic conflicts in Georgia given that the real and perceived fears and inequalities of the Ossetians and the Georgians resulted in them using their ethnicity as a political instrument against one another in order to achieve their ethnic interests and needs. That being said, it is important to also note that the elites' politicization of their ethnic identity in order to achieve their personal political goals was also a factor which contributed to the violence between the ethnic groups.

6. Case Study 3: Moldova

6.1 Testing Primordialism

The rightful ownership of the region of Transnistria is a subject of debate between the ethno-linguistic Slavs currently in control of the territory and the ethnic Moldovans (a sub-group of ethnic Romanians), who are recognized by the international community as the legal owners of the land. This is the case because both of the groups claim that their people have been residing in this territory for centuries.

To support their claim that the territory of Transnistria is rightfully theirs, Transnistrians bring to attention the fact that this region has been a hub for Slavic people for centuries. For example, they argue

that in 1792, when the southern part of Transnistria was ceded by the Ottoman Empire to the Russian Empire, the Russians encouraged Ukrainians and Russians to migrate into the region to fill out the sparse populated territory ("National Identity" 3). Moreover, they note that from 1812 to 1917, all of Transnistria was under the control of the Russian Empire, which resulted in a lot of Russian-speaking people migrating into this region (Cash 29).

The Moldovans, on the other hand, claim that the Transnistrian territory is rightfully theirs because while the Transnistrian territory was never considered a part of Moldavia (a Romanian principality, which covered most of the territory that is currently a part of Moldova), some areas of today's Transnistria were owned by Moldavian boyars in the 16th century, which means that Moldavian people lived in this region (Magocsi 369). Also, in order to further support their claim to the Transnistrian territory, the Moldovans cite the fact that in 1775 Russia lured Romanian settlers from Moldavia to settle into the territory because they wanted the sparsely populated region to become a new Russian dominated principality known as New Moldavia ("History of Transnistria" 18). Last not least, the Moldovans highlight that not only were the territories of Bessarabia (the new name given to Moldavia once it was captured by the Russian Empire in 1812) and Transnistria joined together to form the Moldavian Autonomous Socialist Republic within Ukraine in 1924, but, in 1941, their ethnic kin, the Romanians, gained control over the territory for three years, which resulted in ethnic Romanians migrating into the region ("History of Transnistria" 32).

Regardless of the current debate regarding the ownership of Transnistria, however, the Slavs and the Moldovans living in this territory peacefully coexisted with one another for centuries. In fact, marriages between the ethno-lingual Slavs and the ethnic Moldovans used to constitute one-fifth of all the marriages in this region (Chinn 312). Thus, the primordialist theory of ethnic conflicts does not correctly explain the cause of the violence between the Slavs and the Moldovans.

Although the primordialist explanation of the conflict between the Russian-speaking Slavs and the ethnic Moldovans is fundamentally incorrect, ethnic elites have used primordialist ideas to explain the conflict between the two groups of people. For example, Mircea Cosma, the Chairman of the Prahova County Council, claimed that the event known as the Bridge of Flowers, which allowed the inhabitants of Romania to cross the Prut River and to enter the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic without a passport or a visa, was a “nice revenge” against the Russian-speaking people given that former Russian leaders, Tsar Alexander I and Joseph Stalin, had split up the territory of Greater Romania (“Bridge of Flowers” 8). In other words, he argued that the conflict between the Slavs and the Moldovans was a result of past grievances.

6.2 Testing Constructivism

In June of 1941, German and Romanian troops attacked and captured the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, which resulted in the territory being under the control of ethnic Romanians for three years. Thus, when in August of 1944, Soviet forces were able to regain control of this region, Joseph Stalin settled on a policy of Russifying the population living in the territory in order to ensure that they wouldn’t attempt to rejoin Romania (“Romania Captured” 1). In order to do this, the Soviet leadership decided to utilize a three step plan: secret police officers were instructed to attack Romanian nationalist groups; ethnic Russians and Ukrainians were encouraged to migrate to the territory of Transnistria in order to outnumber the Romanian population living in the region; and the Cyrillic alphabet was imposed as the new Moldavian language in order to discourage the large ethnic Romanian sub-group from using the Romanian language to communicate (“Moldova’s Transnistrian Conflict” 29). All of these events made the Romanian sub-group living in this territory feel oppressed, which, in turn, resulted in them turning to their ethnic identity in order to feel empowered. In other words, during this

time period, the Romanian sub-group developed a strong “Moldovan” identity in order to differentiate themselves from the other ethnic groups living in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. Thus, as the Soviet Union was on the brink of collapsing, and as Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost and perestroika gave the Soviet Republics more democratic freedoms, the Moldovans were able to take control of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic and to take steps to benefit their ethnic group at the expense of the minorities living in the region (Bellingsger 303).

Determined to resist the domination by the new Moldovan government’s policies, the Slavs living in the region of Transnistria constructed a new Transnistrian identity in order to create a strong base for their political and social demands. This identity, which utilized Soviet rhetoric about the need for a friendship between the different groups of people living under the Soviet rule, focused on uniting the Russian speaking people (mostly Russians, Ukrainians, and Bulgarians) living in the Transnistria region in order to protect their ethno-lingual identity (“National Identity” 3).

That being said, the constructivism theory accurately sheds a light on some possible reasons why there was a dispute between the ethno-linguistic group of Slavs and the ethnic Moldovans by suggesting that the conflict is a result of a combination of key historical events and agreements. In other words, the Romanian annexation of the current territory of Moldova for three years, Stalin’s Russification policy, Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost and perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union all changed the social and political norms in this region, which, in turn, created the right conditions for the start of a conflict between rival ethnic groups.

6.3 Testing Instrumentalism

Given that Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost allowed people to openly express their opinions and complaints, the ethnic and the ethno-lingual groups living the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic were

given the opportunity to politicize their group identities in order to achieve their goals (Bellginsger 303). However, given that some of these groups' goals conflicted with one another, there was an increase in the tensions between the different groups, which, later, resulted in violence.

Due to the fact that the majority of the people living in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic considered themselves to be a part of a sub-Romanian ethnic group, these individuals were able to mobilize together in order to improve the status of their people. They did this by creating an ethnic political group known as the Popular Front of Moldova and using this group to change the electoral laws in the region in order to require that all the candidates running to become government officials would be nominated by electoral districts instead of social organizations, which had been the practice in the past. These new laws benefited the sub-Romanian group because they helped the Popular Front of Moldova to win the majority of the votes in the first democratic elections in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. That being said, after taking control of the central government, the new Moldovan leaders in the region took several actions which made the Slavic people living in the territory feel more excluded and threatened. First, they changed the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic's name to the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova. Second, they changed their national flag to a flag identical to the Romanian tricolored flag. Third, they designated the Moldovan language (the Latin alphabet used by the Romanians), as the official language in the territory ("Popular Front of Moldova" 3). Fourth, they held a large-scale event known as the Bridge of Flowers, on the Prut River, which was meant to symbolize brotherly relations between Moldova and Romania ("Bridge of Flowers" 2). Fifth, they declared their independence from the Soviet Union ("Popular Front of Moldova" 1).

As a result of the increasingly exclusionary nationalist policies of the Moldovan Popular Front, the Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, and other Russian-speaking people living in the Transnistrian region came

together to form a political interest group known as Yedinstvo-Unitatea Intermovement in order to protect themselves from the Moldovans, whom they considered to be a threat to their well-being. Through this ethno-lingual political group, the Slavs were able to win control of some local governments, which gave them some political power; however, given that the central government in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova continually failed to address their grievances, this ethno-lingual group mobilized together to participate in political strikes in hopes of getting the Moldovan Popular Front to reverse their new policies (Moldova 6-8). Later, the Transnistrians, frustrated with the way that their group was being treated, declared their independence from Moldova (Perepelitsa 79). That being said, given that the Moldovans considered Transnistria to be a part of their territory, they deployed a lightly armed Moldovan police force to the Transnistrian region in order to restore the order in the region. Thus, viewing the Moldovan security forces in the Transnistrian territory as a military aggression against Transnistria, the Transnistrians attacked the Moldovan officers in order to protect themselves and their interests (Perepelitsa 81-84).

The start of the violent clashes between the ethnic Moldovans and the ethno-lingual Slavs was also a result of ethnic elites politicizing their ethnicity as an instrument to advance their political interests. For example, given that the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed the privatization of businesses and industries and given that Transnistria had large industrial enterprises in their territory, Igor Smirnov politicized his Slavic identity in order to become Transnistria's first president, which, in turn, allowed him to ensure that Transnistria maintained its highly developed and profitable economy (Perepelitsa 54). That being said, after becoming president, Smirnov formed a national Transnistrian guard, obtained weapons from the Russia, and then fought against the Moldovan police officers that were stationed in Transnistria (Perepelitsa 81-84). This was the start of the Transnistrian conflict

which still has not been resolved even though a ceasefire agreement was reached in 1992.

The real and perceived fears of the ethnic Romanians and the ethno-lingual Slavs resulted in them using their ethnicities as a political instrument to achieve their ethnic interests and needs. This, in turn, increased the tension between the two different groups and eventually led to a violent conflict meant to resolve their disagreements. Moreover, it is important to note that the ethnic elites' politicization of their ethnicity in order to advance their personal political interests also played a part in causing the ethnic conflict.

7. Conclusion

Although ethnic elites have sometimes used primordialist ideas to justify the conflict between the warring ethnic groups in the three post-Soviet states of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova, the primordialist theory has the least amount of explanatory power when it comes to explaining the causes of ethnic conflicts. This is the case because the primordialist theory does not take into account the variations in the levels of conflict between the ethnic groups over time. For example, the primordialist theory does not explain why there were no serious conflicts between ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azerbaijanis until the 20th century; it does not reveal why the Georgians and the Ossetians were able to peacefully coexist with one another for most of the time that they were under Soviet rule; and it does not point out why marriages between the ethno-lingual Slavs and the ethnic Moldovans used to constitute one-fifth of all of the marriages in the region prior to the start of the violence between them.

Both the constructivist and instrumentalist theories, on the other hand, accurately explain some of the factors which caused the ethnic conflicts in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova. However, given that these theoretical explanations are incomplete on their own, the best way of explaining the causes of conflicts between these ethnic groups is by combining instrumentalist and constructivist ideas together in order to create a more comprehensive account of what

happened. After all, the qualitative research in this thesis suggests that the ethnic conflicts in the three post-Soviet states occurred as a result of key historical events and agreements which changed the social and political norms in these societies and created the environment where ethnic groups, along with their elites, could use their ethnic identities as a tool to achieve their conflicting goals. For example, Stalin's "divide and rule" policy, the Armenian Genocide, the new "Azerbaijani" nationalist sentiment established under the Soviet rule, and Gorbachev's glasnost policy all changed the social and political norms in Azerbaijan and created a permissive environment for ethnic conflicts to take place. Thus, as the different ethnic groups mobilized in hopes of achieving their interests, these people's conflicting goals resulted in numerous ethnic clashes. Moreover, the Russian Revolution, the inability of the Georgian government and the South Ossetian People's Council to agree on the geographic territory that would be granted autonomy, Stalin's "divide and rule" policy, the substantial amount of autonomy given to the Ossetians by the Soviet leadership, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Gorbachev's glasnost policy all changed the social and political norms in Georgia, which, in turn, created an environment where it was easy for two groups with conflicting interests to resort to violence. Furthermore, the three-year Romanian annexation of the current territory of Moldova, Stalin's Russification policy, Gorbachev's policies of glasnost and perestroika, and the collapse of the Soviet Union all changed the social and political norms in Moldova. Thus, the ethno-lingual Slavs' and the ethnic Moldovans' attempts to obtain their conflicting goals resulted in violent clashes between the two formerly peaceful groups.

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