

“FEDERALISATION REMAINS THE BEST WAY FOR GEORGIA TO AVOID OUTBREAKS OF FURTHER INTERNAL DISPUTES”

Interview with Prof. George Hewitt**

Professor, London School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS)

Conducted by Jesse Tatum

CRIA: In light of a tumultuous past—but with a view to the immediate future—would you give your thoughts on national reconciliation between Tbilisi, Sukhum and Tskhinval (and other parts of Georgia), and how progress might be best achieved?

Hewitt: Sukhum and Tskhinval as metonyms for the Abkhazians and (South) Ossetians respectively, would strenuously object to the implication that Abkhazia and South Ossetia represent “parts” of a Georgia wherein they could be parties to any “national” reconciliation.

Tbilisi has had no say in South Ossetian affairs since the war instigated there by Georgia’s first post-communist leader, the late Zviad Gamsakhurdia, ended with the Dagomys Agreement in June 1992, just as it has had no say in Abkhazian affairs since the war imposed on the republic by Eduard Shevardnadze on 14th August 1992 ended with the expulsion of Georgian forces at the end of September 1993. Georgia, thus, effectively lost ‘de facto’ control over these one-time autonomous entities in 1992/3 — South Ossetia became an Autonomous District within Georgia in 1922, whilst Abkhazia was downgraded by Stalin from being a full republic with treaty-ties to Georgia to become a mere Autonomous Republic *within* Georgia in 1931. After the events of August 2008 there can be no realistic prospect of their reintegration within Georgia.

Even if one accepts the definition followed in Georgia since circa 1930 as to who is correctly categorisable as a “Georgian”, “Georgians” constituted only around 71% of Georgia’s population in 1989, when the last Soviet census was taken. Even with Abkhazia and South Ossetia out of the equation, there are still potential ethno-territorial problems within Georgia proper. In July 1989 fatal clashes occurred not only in Abkhazia

* *Prof. George Hewitt is a leading scholar of Abkhazian and Georgian languages and culture, and author of: Georgian, a Structural Reference Grammar (John Benjamin, 1995), and A Georgian Reader (SOAS, 1996); Hewitt is also a contributor to OpenDemocracy.net. Some of his other works include ‘Peoples of the Caucasus’ (in F. Fernández-Armesto, ed. Guide to the Peoples of Europe (Times Books, 1994)); and The Abkhazians, a handbook (as author & editor, Curzon Press, 1999).*

* The views expressed in this interview do not represent the views of the Editors of CRIA.

but also in the southern Dmanisi-Marneuli region, which is heavily populated by Azerbaijanis, whose high levels of fertility were openly described in objectionable articles in Georgia as a threat to country's demography.

Georgia's state-relations with Azerbaijan have been good in recent years; in part no doubt as a result of the decision to export Caspian oil and gas through pipelines that cross Georgian territory, but one should not ignore the reports of problems on the ground in Azerbaijani-populated areas of Georgia, leading in recent years to an outflow of Azerbaijanis from the republic. As for the Armenians, Georgians and Armenians have been rivals in many spheres for centuries, and the predominantly Armenian-populated district of Dzhavakheti in south-western Georgia looks more to Yerevan than to Tbilisi: Armenian is spoken, and the Armenian flag is flown. Tbilisi's insistence on the closure of a Russian military base in Dzhavakheti has caused local unemployment to rise. Armenia does not want a dispute with another neighbour (sc. in addition to its disputes with Azerbaijan and Turkey), but Dzhavakheti could easily prove another flashpoint for Georgia. For some years Armenians in the region itself have accused the Georgian authorities of ignoring their needs; attempts to take over Armenian churches and graveyards have been seen as an extension of the policy to "georgianize" non-Georgians that started on the eve of the collapse of the former USSR with the move to introduce a language law in 1988 that would have denied access to higher education in Georgia to anyone unable to pass a test in Georgian language and literature — Georgian was/is not widely known amongst Armenians and Azerbaijanis outside the capital (and in Abkhazia in general).

Given the demographics, federalisation was the obvious way to restructure the state when Georgia gained the opportunity to control its own affairs. Instead, the dangerous flames of nationalism were fanned, which antagonised many/most of the ethnic minorities living within the country's Soviet borders. Had the sensible course been followed, one could hypothesise that the S. Ossetian and Abkhazian conflicts (not to mention the civil war that was conducted in Gamsakhurdia's home-region of Mingrelia following his ousting in January 1992) might have been avoided with the result that Georgia might have proceeded to peaceful and prosperous independence with no shrinkage of borders.

However pointless it is to engage in speculation about how different history would have been with more sensible politics being followed in late- and post-Soviet Tbilisi, federalisation remains the best way for Georgia to avoid outbreaks of further internal disputes.

CRIA: How does Tbilisi re-earn the trust of these regions? How would the Abkhazian and South Ossetian leadership promote the return of displaced refugees (IDPs) and rights for ethnic Georgians and the other minorities in the areas?

Hewitt: If Georgia were prepared to accept federalisation and also to reverse the denial of language-rights for example to Mingrelians, such a demonstration of equitable treatment for those living within Georgia proper might persuade Sukhum and Tskhinval

that Georgia's yearning for regional "overlordship" no longer presented a danger. Most of the refugees from S. Ossetia following the events of August 2008 are ethnic Georgians, whilst most of those who fled from Abkhazia after Georgia's defeat in 1993 were ethnic Mingrelians (and local residents who abandoned their homes when Georgian military personnel were finally ejected from Abkhazia's Upper K'odor Valley on 12th August 2008 were mainly ethnic Svans).

Emotions are undoubtedly still too raw to envisage an imminent return of Georgians to S. Ossetia; the Abkhazians have raised no objections to Mingrelians staying in, or returning to, the south-easternmost province of Gal, where, whatever the (disputed) ethnic origins of these locals, there had been a preponderance of Mingrelian-speakers for decades, and Svans who did not take up arms against Abkhazians during the war or thereafter are free to live in their homesteads in the K'odor Valley. Sadly for the refugees themselves, failure on the part of the Georgian authorities to recognise the post-1992/3 realities and to pretend that re-establishing control over the lost territories and a mass-return of the refugees have been ever imminent has only resulted in extra misery for the people concerned, for whom no adequate housing has been built or found despite the fact that large numbers have migrated out of Georgia since independence, presumably vacating many domiciles into which refugees could easily have been moved.

With particular reference to Abkhazia, the exiles in whose repatriation the Abkhazians are most interested are the descendants of those Abkhazians who migrated to the Ottoman Empire at the end of the great Caucasian War (1864) or following the Russo-Turkish war of 1877/8, a population-shift which denuded Abkhazia of its native inhabitants and created the opportunity for the start of large-scale inward Mingrelian migration, something which became state-policy under Stalin's anti-Abkhazian campaign from the late 1930s and which had such a disastrous consequence for the republic's ethnic balance, Abkhazians forming only 17.8% of Abkhazia's population by 1989.

As regards the denizens of the Gal District who view themselves as Mingrelians/Georgians, the question of citizenship is certainly problematic. Any dual Abkhazian-Georgian citizenship is, for obvious reasons, out of the question.

CRIA: How widely spoken are Mingrelian, Laz and Svan in (and outside) Georgia? And how far apart are groups of speakers in geographic terms?

Hewitt: Georgian, Mingrelian, Laz and Svan are the four members of the South Caucasian (or Kartvelian) language-family. This family cannot be demonstrated to be related to any other language or language-family spoken today or at any time in the past. The compact area in which these languages are spoken is concentrated on Georgia (proper) and extends into eastern parts of modern-day Turkey, where the bulk of the Laz are to be found. Within Georgia, because of census-practices since circa 1930, no-one knows how many Mingrelians or Svans there are or, amongst each of those ethnic groups, how widespread is the knowledge of Mingrelian and Svan — there are only negligible numbers of Laz in Georgia. It is anecdotally believed that there are perhaps 50,000+

speakers of Svan, whilst half a million would be the maximum for speakers of Mingrelian, though the number of ethnic Mingrelians would exceed this. Since there were no Russian-language schools in Svanetia, all Svans brought up in Svanetia will have been educated through the medium of Georgian, learning and speaking Svan at home. As there were Russian-language schools during Soviet times in Mingrelia, it can be concluded that not all Mingrelians will necessarily be fluent in Georgian, though most probably are; however, by no means all ethnic Mingrelians know Mingrelian, as many were brought up in a purely Georgian-speaking environment. Over many years Georgian has been extending its range westwards at the expense of Mingrelian, whilst Mingrelian extended its range westward at the expense of Abkhaz, but that process has now ended. Laz, given the geographical position of its speakers (along the east Turkish coast from the Soviet/Georgian border as far as Rize), has been influenced by both Greek and Turkish. The number of Laz speakers is unknown, estimates ranging between 100,000 and a quarter of a million. As with both the closely related Mingrelian and Svan within Georgia, the language has not been taught or officially encouraged. Only between Laz and Mingrelian is there any degree of mutual intelligibility.

CRIA: *What are some links between language, identity and citizenship in modern Georgia?*

Hewitt: Since Mingrelian, Svan and Laz were not regarded as official languages from c.1930, it has been impossible to see in census-returns the level of their retention as 1st or 2nd languages of the local populations. As Mingrelians, Svans, Laz and, most ridiculously of all, the North Central Caucasian speaking Bats community, which lives in the one east Georgian village of Zemo Alvani, have been classified as ‘Georgians’, it is extremely difficult to answer such questions as how they identify themselves in their own minds and how important they feel preservation of their mother-tongue to be. The Bats (their language being related to Chechen and Ingush) are reported no longer to be teaching their language to their children, and this language has been heavily influenced by Georgian for almost two centuries at least. Whilst most Svan lived secluded in the highlands of Svanetia, their language (with a bewildering variety of local variations) was pretty secure. But after a disastrous winter at the end of the 1980s, many were relocated from Upper Svanetia to lowlands in west Georgia, in some cases to villages where non-Georgians lived in the expectation that a Svan presence would georgianise [*sic*] them! The extent to which Svan can be preserved as populations move out of the mountains must be open to doubt. Back in the days of *glasnost*’ some Mingrelians living in Abkhazia voiced their concerns at the way their language/culture was ignored for the greater good of Georgian, and the backlash that such talk occasioned was not confined to verbal assaults. The issue of language-rights for Mingrelian has for some time been and still remains a very sensitive issue, as Georgian authorities seem incapable of distinguishing between language-rights and political rights, fearing that granting the former would lead to separatist-demands for Mingrelia. This is indeed a possible, but by no means inevitable, corollary, and my suggestion for meaningful restructuring of the state along federal lines is in part meant to avoid such a consequence. However, because of the situation that has evolved since c.1930 the fascinating question of the link between language, identity and

citizenship with reference to the Mingrelians, who are the largest of the minorities living within Georgia, plainly cannot be easily answered.

CRIA: You've met and worked with the last speaker of Ubykh Tevfik Esenc, who passed away in 1992. Can you summarise what this experience meant to you and any subsequent implications?

Hewitt: I had the immense privilege of meeting Tevfik Esenc in Istanbul in 1974 and of making recordings with him over the course of one week that summer. Travelling, courtesy of the British Council, to Tbilisi the following year to spend the academic year 1975-76 learning Georgian and gaining a familiarity with Abkhaz, Avar and Chechen (plus Mingrelian and Svan), I realised just how precarious was the future for several of the other indigenous languages of the Caucasus, which had by then become my area of specialisation. I determined that I had to do whatever I could to try to prevent any other such language following Ubykh to the grave. It was with this thought in mind that I decided to make a statement on the developing conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians as nationalism, directed against a number of local minorities, which began to explode in Georgia from late 1988. It seemed to me that the opinions being expressed in Georgian papers to which I had access in England could lead to a dangerous situation. I had hoped to persuade any open-minded reader who was prepared to read the Open Letter that I submitted in Georgian to the weekly 'Literary Georgia' in the summer of 1989 that the nationalism being championed by those leading the struggle to rid Georgia of communist rule could lead to disaster not only for the Abkhazians but also for the future of the Georgian state itself. The attempt signally failed ...