



Achieving a Peace Settlement between Abkhazia and Georgia: Lessons from Swiss Federalism

by Philip K. Abbott

Since the end of the Georgian-Abkhazian War of 1992-93, negotiations failed to come up with a viable solution considered satisfactory to either side. To a great extent, any meaningful settlement must first rule out the subordination or exclusion of ethnic minorities by the majority. Thus bringing us to the unique political culture of Swiss federal democracy, where leaders generally avoid speaking in terms of “majority and minority”. Instead, “Swiss political structures strive to be *volksnah* [in touch with the people] and to every extent possible, respond to the wishes of all citizens.”¹ While such an approach is not often observed in most democratic societies, this is one of many subtle features of the Swiss model that may offer a fresh look at addressing separatist movements. It is within this context, that the paper aims to highlight distinguishing features of Swiss federalism and how this unique form of government may add value and possibly transferable lessons for a peaceful solution to the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict.

The Feature Benefits of the Swiss Model

“There is an old European saying: Mountains are the land of freedom.”² The Swiss have been free, at peace, and self-governing for over seven centuries, but Swiss democracy is uniquely different. Unlike the democratic model in the Republic of Georgia, where the majority rules and therefore directs the political agenda, Switzerland has a completely different approach. On the one hand, in a linguistically, religiously, and ethnically divided country such as Switzerland, “majority rule is not only viewed as undemocratic but also dangerous.”³ This is perhaps where the Swiss mindset is quite different from citizens of most other democratic societies. Whereas the Georgian and Abkhazian political systems produce winners, the Swiss prefer to protect the loser.⁴ In Switzerland, being nice to each other [“sind lieb miteinander”] in local dialect is an essential component in a democracy built on consensus.⁵

Many argue that Switzerland’s direct democracy and proportional representation makes up for the deficiencies associated with a representative-style democracy as seen in the Republic of Georgia and the Republic of Abkhazia, because it allows minority groups to move their agenda onto the political stage and not be ignored. Conceivably, this is one of the reasons why

¹ Brunno Coppieters and Robert Legvold, Editors, “*Statehood and Security: Georgia after the Rose Revolution*,” (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 87.

² Richard Rose, “The End of Consensus in Austria and Switzerland,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 11.2, 2000, 6, http://muse.jhu.edu/journal_of_democracy/v011/11.2rose.html.

³ Joseph A. Schumpeter, “*Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*,” (New York: Harper Perennial Press), 23.

⁴ Jonathan Steinberg, “*Why Switzerland?*” (Cambridge University Press: 1996), 75.

⁵ Alfred Cattani, “Erinnerung an Emil Landholt,” *Nue Züricher Zeitung*, 21 April 1995, 32.

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the Swiss democratic model successfully addressed the Jura separatist movement before it became violent, and perhaps why the Republic of Georgia failed to address Abkhazia's separatist ambitions by way of a peaceful democratic process.

Herein lays the seemingly radical difference between Switzerland and most democratic federations in which Swiss federalism not only aims to share power, but also serves the purpose of uniting and preserving different minority groups.⁶ It can be said that Switzerland counts on integration through the preservation of linguistic and cultural differences, whereas Georgia and Abkhazia attempt to achieve this through either ethnic cleansing or linguistic and cultural assimilation. The fractional distribution of political power over a number of non-central entities makes Swiss federalism particularly attractive to ethno-national group seeking self-rule like Abkhazia.⁷ Under these political conditions, Swiss Cantons are partially sovereign States, which is precisely what Georgia intended to block when Abkhazia vied for more autonomy within the Republic of Georgia. It is through this lens, that the Georgia-Abkhazian dispute serves as an excellent laboratory to test the Swiss democratic model.

Recognizing the Value of Cultural Differences

Although it is easy to notice certain similarities (population size, linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity) between the Republic of Georgia and Switzerland, the political culture and mindset are perhaps the most profound differences. While Switzerland has striven for over 700-years to maintain ethnic, cultural and linguistic variety, the Republic of Georgia and the Republic of Abkhazia aim at pursuing ethno-nationalism. If Switzerland yielded to the same temptations of constructing a state based on only one language, one culture and one religion, Switzerland too may have been held hostage to the multitude of problems now confronting Georgia and Abkhazia.⁸

Some scholars argue that “democracy never exists without nationalism,” whereas others point out that in the Swiss model, nationalism is not the monopoly of the ethnic majority, but rather the political inclusion of national minorities.⁹ Again, this brings historical perspective to the distinct political culture and mindset of both Switzerland and Georgia. Under the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, as long as the Soviet Union maintained an effective apparatus to suppress ethnic mobility, large-scale violence rarely occurred. Moreover, it was what prevented minority groups from participating in the political decision-making process.¹⁰

In contrast, under Swiss federalism, the State is not viewed as an instrument of self-fulfillment of a particular ethnic group, but rather as a guarantor of equal protection and liberty for all minorities. Almost every Swiss knows from experience what it means to belong to a minority. “This is very important in developing a culture of tolerance and pluralism.”¹¹ Central to

⁶ Brunno Coppieters, David Darchiashvili, and Natella Akaba, editors, *Federal Practice: Exploring Alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia*, (Brussels, Belgium: VUB University Press: 2000), 76.

⁷ Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 287.

⁸ Brunno Coppieters, David Darchiashvili, and Natella Akaba, editors, *Federal Practice: Exploring Alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia*, (Brussels, Belgium: VUB University Press: 2000), 75.

⁹ Ghia Nodia, “Nationalism and Democracy,” in Larry Diamond and Marc Platter, editors, *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Democracy*, (Baltimore: 1994), 4.

¹⁰ Stuart J. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, (Ithica, New York: Cornell University Press: 2001), 32.

¹¹ Brunno Coppieters, David Darchiashvili, and Natella Akaba, editors, *Federal Practice: Exploring Alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia*, (Brussels, Belgium: VUB University Press: 2000), 76.

any democracy is the right of all groups and individuals to participate in the political process and the right of citizens to freely associate and express their ideas. But in the multi-ethnic society of the Republic of Georgia, it is the majority that acts as the constituting force and the “others” are expected to behave as loyal citizens.¹² Therefore, Georgians viewed the disintegration of the Soviet Union as their opportunity to strengthen the unity and territorial integrity of the Georgian State, which essentially meant that there would be little compromise in preserving Abkhazia and the other autonomous entities within the Georgian republic.

Given the direction of the Georgian independence movement, especially in view of slogans such as “Georgia for Georgians,” which implied suppression of minority political and cultural rights, *glasnost* also proved to be the impetus for the Abkhazians to address their growing concerns.¹³ Interestingly, the prevailing mindset in Abkhazia is very much like that in Georgia, whereby ethnicity plays a paramount role in the political landscape. And so despite being the ethnic minority in the Republic of Abkhazia, they too moved quickly to dominate the states’ political and economic system at the detriment of other ethnic groups.¹⁴ As for allowing the 212,000 internally displaced Georgian population safe return to Abkhazia, societal attitudes are generally opposed to the idea, citing fears of Georgians again becoming the largest ethnic group.¹⁵ Moreover, some Abkhaz have said that ethnic Georgians would be permitted to return only after more Abkhaz diasporas returned.¹⁶ However, most of the internally displaced Georgian’s property has already been officially nationalized by decree in the 1990s.

Notwithstanding the many merits of Swiss democracy, relations between Abkhazia and Georgia can only be settled if mutual distrust and negative experiences can be overcome. To achieve this, however, there needs to be a genuine move toward compromise and tolerance, but time is neither on the side of Georgia nor on the side of Abkhazia.

Maintaining a Political Balance in Society

For generations, Switzerland has been an extreme example of “consensus democracy.”¹⁷ According to the Swiss, democracies are not just about elections, it is about connecting government to its citizens. A democracy built on consensus is characterized by a decision-making structure which aims at involving and taking into account as broad a range of opinions as possible, as opposed to systems where minority opinions can potentially be ignored by vote-winning majorities.¹⁸ Unlike the Republic of Georgia, the Swiss view of democracy does not regard elections as a democratic activity of primary importance, because the people cannot always control their representatives by way of elections. With its considerable ethno-culture and linguistic variety and three autonomous entities within, this had serious consequences for the

¹² Natella Akaba, “*The Swiss Experience and Prospects for a Peaceful Abkhazian-Georgian Peace Settlement*,” (Brussels, Belgium: VUB University Press: 2000), 81.

¹³ *ibid.*, 102.

¹⁴ Brunno Coppieters, David Darchiashvili, and Natella Akaba, editors, “*Federal Practice: Exploring Alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia*,” (Brussels, Belgium: VUB University Press: 2000), 7.

¹⁵ “Abkhazia: Deepening Dependence,” International Crisis Group: Working to Prevent Conflict Worldwide, *Europe Report* No. 202, February 26, 2010.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Richard Rose, “The End of Consensus Democracy in Austria and Switzerland,” *Journal of Democracy*, 1.

¹⁸ Jonathan Steinberg, “*Why Switzerland?*” (Cambridge University Press: 1996), 73-78.

Republic of Georgia.¹⁹ On the other hand, Switzerland remains uniquely successful despite these same conditions.

No matter how the popular vote is divided, the seven seats in the Federal Council (Swiss Cabinet) remain in the hands of the parties that are partners in a Grand Coalition. The principle of proportionality is also applied to the presidency of the Federal Council, the highest executive office in the Swiss government.²⁰ For more than a century, the office of president actually rotates annually among the coalition partners, ensuring equal representation by the various minority groups. Therefore, each January the Swiss have a new president without the associated costs, potential corruption, and anxiety of a national election.

In Switzerland, the principle of power-sharing applies both to the seven-member Federal Council and to all important institutions. Even the Swiss army selects its seven three-star generals based on that principle. Furthermore, the Swiss federal postal service is headed by three directors sharing the position according to their linguistic affiliations. These are just a few examples of Swiss federalism where the division of political units can often ease tension or prevent conflict. Yet, even in Switzerland trouble can and does sometimes arise.

The Jura Separatist Movement

Although it never led to war, for thirty years Switzerland faced a similar separatist movement as the Republic of Georgia, when the French region of Jura vied to separate from Canton Bern. From 1940 to 1979, Switzerland underwent a political crisis as a group of dissatisfied, historically marginalized, French-speaking Catholics from the Jura region of Switzerland, struggled to become a partially sovereign Canton within the Swiss federation. No doubt, this event pushed the tolerance and flexibility of Swiss democracy to its limits. The actual origins of the conflict can be traced back to the 1815 Congress of Vienna, which placed the area of the Jura within Canton Bern.²¹ As most of the Canton's population is German-speaking Protestants, it was among the Catholic francophone that the separatist movement developed.

The Jura separatist movement illustrates how the discontent of a minority group need not descend into violence as was the case in the Republic of Georgia. By way of direct democracy and referendums, the Jura separatists were allowed to address their grievances through public debate. Thus being compensated for what would normally be a lack of political representation, which has historically led voiceless minorities to violence.

In typical Swiss efficiency, a number of referendums were held over the course of several years to decide the fate of the Jura separatists. The process first took place at the Canton district level, and then moved up to the Canton community level and finally was decided during a nation-wide referendum whereby the Swiss public accepted Jura as the newest semi-autonomous Canton of Switzerland. It is interesting to note that the central government actually served as a mediator during the conflict between Bern and the Jura region. This is a phenomenal example of Swiss federalism, which may satisfy the aspirations of the Abkhazians or help calm the dispute with Georgia.

¹⁹ Brunno Coppieters, David Darchiashvili, and Natella Akaba, editors, *Federal Practice: Exploring Alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia*, (Brussels, Belgium: VUB University Press: 2000), 80.

²⁰ Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenge to America's National Identity*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 287.

²¹ Jonathan Steinberg, *Why Switzerland?* (Cambridge University Press: 1996), 88-89.

Conclusion

By looking into the unique aspects of Swiss democracy, we have uncovered how the political culture and mindset of a society can greatly influence both domestic and international outcomes. From a historical perspective, this is perhaps why during their euphoric independence from the Hapsburg Empire, Switzerland moved toward minority inclusion and cultural tolerance, whereas ethno-nationalism defined the independence movement of Georgia and Abkhazia.

While a direct democracy through referendum does not guarantee a favorable decision for all minority claims, it does give them a clear voice in government and the chance for their problems to be heard. We further learned from Swiss federalism, that a federation can only be based on the mutual desire and mutual trust of the constituents and center; this will only be possible if Georgian society can free itself from the fear of its country breaking up into partially autonomous states.

It is also important to emphasize the unique mixture of unity, diversity and tolerance in Swiss society. While there are many factors that contributed to a successful solution to the Jura separatist movement, the policy of sharing power through a unique form of federalism and proportional democracy are paramount. This is where I would contend that it was precisely these procedures, not nationalism, which made possible the peaceful separation of the Jura region from Canton Bern in 1979. I would further argue that it was precisely Georgia's nationalist movement that not only triggered Abkhazia's violent separatist ambitions, but what continues to obstruct a peaceful resolution. For both Georgians and Abkhazians, the conflict continues to symbolize a struggle for national survival and the imperative of preserving their ethnic identity.²² It is therefore under this premise, that I believe by transforming Georgia into a power-sharing federal democracy, the ethno-political conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia may be either pacified or perhaps even solved. Additionally, this approach may also contribute to increased cultural tolerance and political maturity.

Meanwhile, although Abkhazia is *de facto* independent, it remains unrecognized by the international community. Many Abkhaz now worry that rather than winning their coveted independence in 1993, they may have simply traded one overlord for another.²³ As such, Russia is visible in the most basic ways, where Abkhaz residents carry Russian passports, the Russian ruble is their official currency, and they communicate predominately in the Russian language.

Seen by some as a textbook example of how to achieve harmonious coexistence within a State made up of several communities differing in linguistics, culture and religion, Swiss federalism may be a useful model in achieving a peaceful settlement between Georgia and Abkhazia. However, the fact that Switzerland is almost always cited as an extraordinarily efficient democracy is evidence that this experience is unique rather than an indicator that it might be universally applied. Therefore, any suggestion to directly imitate the Swiss democratic model to help settle the Georgian-Abkhazian dispute may be somewhat unrealistic given the political culture and mindset of these two nations.

²² Bruno Coppieters and Robert Legvold, editors, *"Statehood and Security: Georgia after the Rose Revolution,"* (The MIT Press: 2005), 206.

²³ Olivier Paye and Eric Remacle, *"UN and CSCE Policies in Transcaucasia,"* and Bruno Coppieters, *"Contested Borders in the Caucasus,"* (Brussels, Belgium, VUB University Press: 1996), 105.

Notwithstanding the limiting factors of directly adopting the Swiss model, perhaps what is needed for Abkhazia to gain legitimacy and for Georgia to retain its territorial integrity is to create a power-sharing or perhaps a more autonomous arrangement for Abkhazia within the Republic of Georgia. In this context, there just may be some transferable lessons from Swiss federalism.

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