

# HISTORICAL DETERMINANTS OF REGIONAL DIVISIONS OF GEORGIA AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE\*

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**ABSTRACT:** Georgia can be characterised by its turbulent history, centuries-old traditions, and a great ethnic diversity. This makes it necessary to include historical determinants, in addition to geopolitical and economic factors, when making a regional analysis of its territory and contemporary governance issues. Five stages of the development of the present territorial division of Georgia are distinguished. They have been identified by means of an analysis of key events (critical junctures) of significance in the formation of its historical regions. Additionally, their influence at each of the three levels of the current territorial division of independent Georgia is discussed, in particular in the context of territorial governance.

**KEY WORDS:** regional division, historical regions, Georgia, territorial governance

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## Introduction

Due to the significance of its geopolitical position as well as its rich culture and centuries-old traditions, Georgia has recently become a frequent subject of international publications (Cornell 2003; King 2008; Suny 1994). These articles aim to familiarise the reader with the history, traditions and current political trends of the South Caucasus countries in general and Georgia in particular. However, there is a shortage of comprehensive works exploring the historical

determinants of the current regional and administrative divisions of the country and their implications for governance. That is why the aim of this article is to determine important historical events and their influence on the present administrative divisions of Georgia, with a focus on the issue of territorial governance.

Georgia reclaimed its independence in the 1990s, which entailed the need of numerous administrative reforms including a comprehensive legal act describing the country's territorial division. The new regulations were intended to

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decentralise power and strengthen the role and capacities of local governments. The first legal activities directed towards changing the administrative *status quo* were carried out in 1994 during the presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze.

The current territorial legislation, introduced in 2006, is based on three levels of subdivision. In accordance with the constitution and legal provisions established during the Soviet rule, the regions of Abkhazia and Adjara have been given the status of first-level entities characterised by the highest level of autonomy<sup>1</sup>. Second-level administrative units consist of the nine remaining regions (Kvemo Kartli, Guria, Imereti, Kakheti, Shida Kartli, Mtskheta-Mtianeti, Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti, Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti, and Samtskhe-Javakheti) and the capital city of Tbilisi, which, because of its political and economic status, has self-determination competences comparable with those of bigger regions. The third-level division embraces 69 local entities, including 64 municipalities and five cities with a so-called 'special status' (Melua 2010).

When analysing the current administrative division of Georgia, it is necessary to consider historical events that have determined it in the context of the wider Caucasus region<sup>2</sup>. The region's geographical location can be seen as on the border between the two continents of Europe and Asia. Since ancient times, Caucasus has been regarded as a territory of high strategic importance by the neighbouring countries that aimed to secure it in order to establish their dominance. Due to an early adoption of Christianity and the development of its own culture, Georgia, like Armenia, has been heavily influenced by the European civilisation ever since its emergence as a state. The direction of political and economic activities and mostly Islamic surroundings resulted in frequent invasions of those two countries by their powerful neighbours (Furier 2011).

## Stages in the development of the current territorial division

The significant number of regions forming the present three-level system correspond directly to those existing in antiquity and the Middle Ages. The current administrative division of Georgia is, in a sense, a consequence of the one existing during the feudal fragmentation. The territorial units established at that time had their own social structures, nobility traditions, culture and dialects that are still used in those areas today. A change in the territorial structure of the country resulted in the formation of historical regions with borders coinciding with those of individual ethnic groups. The process of the emergence of those regions can be divided into five main stages described below.

### Stage 1: Antiquity

Stage one begins with the emergence of the first organised kingdoms in the Caucasus region: Colchis<sup>3</sup>, located on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, and Iberia<sup>4</sup>, situated in the east (Fig.

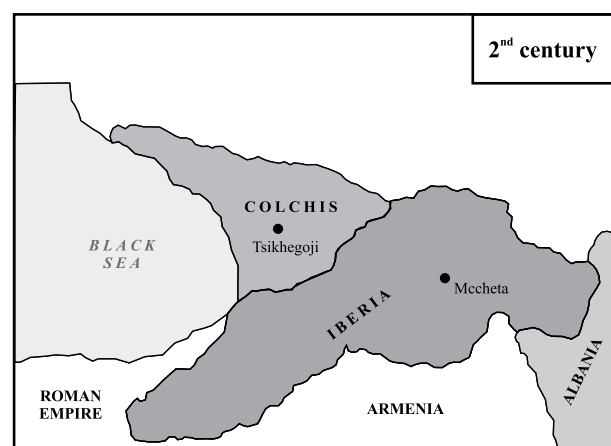


Fig. 1. Stage 1: establishment of the first historical regions of Georgia.

Source: own elaboration based on Baranowsky (1987).

<sup>1</sup> In 2007 the government of Georgia proposed South Ossetia to be regarded as one of the autonomous republics. Following the rejection of this proposal and the subsequent loss of administrative and military control in the region in 2008, South Ossetia has remained part of the administrative region of Shida Kartli.

<sup>2</sup> In the light of the path-dependence concept, these important historical events can be called critical junctures (Mahoney 2001, Gwosdz 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Colchis – an important place in Greco-Roman mythology, often referred to as an area where some of mythical events took place. The kingdom was situated in the Rioni river valley and the territories of later Samegrelo, Guria and Imereti (Lang 1972).

<sup>4</sup> The kingdom of Iberia linguistically united the main ethnic groups that inhabited the east Georgia region for centuries: the Diaokhi, the Moschi, and the population of the former kingdom of Urartu (Lang 1972).

1). In the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD the kingdom of Lazica (Egrisi) gained in importance. The kingdom, with the capital in Tsikhegoji, was located in the south-western part inhabited by representatives of the Kartvelian language group. In later centuries Lazica became one of the most important kingdoms in the region. The formation of the above-mentioned entities initiated the unification of different communities and territories that were to form the area of future Georgia (Baranowsky 1987).

### Stage 2: Attempt at the unification of Georgian territories

Stage two can be characterised by a rise in the political significance of two eastern principalities of Kakheti and Ereti and of the kingdom of Abkhazia as well as by the establishment, by Ashot I Bagratid, of the kingdom of Tao-Klarjeti<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 2). A descendant of Ashot I, Adarnase IV (II), proclaimed himself king of Georgians in 888. The establishment, by the Bagratids, of a single country can be perceived as a key element influencing the later history of the region.

The period referred to as the golden age of Georgia occurred during the rule of king David IV the Builder and his successors, especially queen Tamar. It was a time of the unification of all regions of Georgia under one ruler, which,

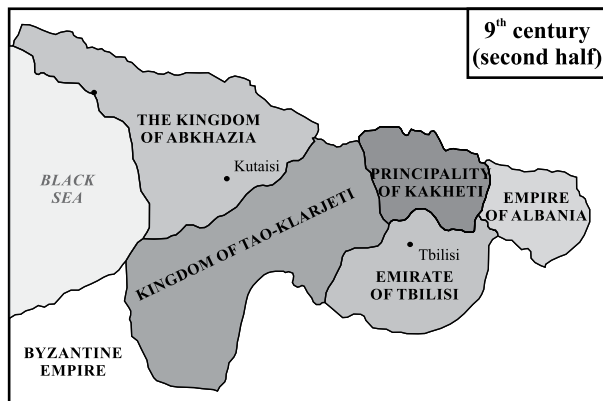


Fig. 2. Stage 2: Attempt at the unification of Georgian territories.

Source: own elaboration based on Baranowsky (1987).

<sup>5</sup> The territories ruled by Ashot I included: Shida Kartli, Tao, Artani, Kola, Klarjeti, Javakheti, Samtskhe, and Trialeti. The only territory that he failed to secure was Kakheti. The unification of the territories and the subsequent establishment of a new state earned Ashot the nickname of 'Great' (Suny 1994).

in turn, brought not only an increase in territory<sup>6</sup>, but also economic and civilisational growth (Baranowsky 1987).

### Stage 3: Feudal fragmentation

The third stage of the formation of modern Georgia began with feudal fragmentation which took place in the second half of the 15th century.

Numerous invasions by Persian and Mongolian armies, a war in the country between those two competing empires as well as ongoing conflicts within the nobility group weakened the royal power. This resulted in the fragmentation of the territory into three independent kingdoms: Kartli, Kakheti and Imereti (Fig. 3; Furier 2000), and a number of smaller semi-independent principalities (*samtavro*), among them Samtskhe-Saatabago, Guria, Svaneti, Samegrelo (Mingrelia) and Abkhazia. Additionally, a large number of feudal holdings (*satavado*) were established by the nobility in individual principalities. Those holdings were ruled as private property and often depended on a central authority (Baranowsky 1987).

From the point of view of a regional analysis, the fragmentation of the Georgian territory is one of the most important historical events that have influenced the current administrative division as well as the cultural and ethnic

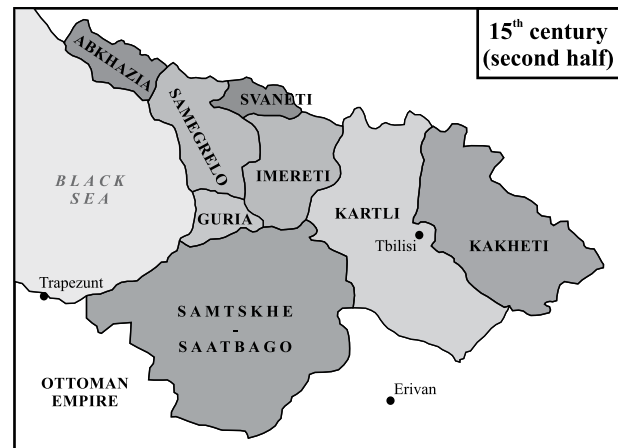


Fig. 3. Stage 3: Feudal fragmentation.

Source: own elaboration based on [www.wikipedia.pl](http://www.wikipedia.pl).

<sup>6</sup> At the turn of the 12th to the 13th century, Georgia ruled over a territory stretching between the Black and the Caspian Seas. Its population is estimated at approximately five million (Baranowsky 1987).

diversity in individual territorial units of present-day Georgia. It is worth noting that the borders of the 15th-century kingdoms and principalities coincided with those between major ethnic groups in the region. Even though the main power remained in the hands of the Bagratid family, the segmentation of the region stimulated the development of local communities and became a reference point for the development of a sense of ethnic identity and belonging.

#### Stage 4: Unification of Georgian territories

There are two major events marking the beginning of the fourth stage of the development of regional divisions in Georgia: the failure to honour the terms of the Treaty of Georgievsk (1783) between Catherine the Great and the king of Eastern Georgia, and the incorporation of the Kartli-Kakheti region into the Russian Empire in 1801. Georgia was part of the Russian Empire till 1918, when it regained independence (Fig. 4).

A constant increase in the spheres of influence of the Russian Empire resulted in a gradual loss of autonomy by smaller principalities and their eventual merger with the rest of the Russian-occupied Caucasus area. This situation drastically changed the centuries-old territorial division in Georgia. All state entities and feudal holdings were fused and divided into two administrative regions: the Tiflis Governorate and the Kutaisi Governorate (Materski 2000). Paradoxically, creating two separate and abstract (as far as ethnic groups are concerned) administrative units resulted in the unification of very different communities. A decreased importance of the regions and a difficult political situation united people seeking one goal: the independence of Georgia.



Fig. 4. Stage 4: Unification of Georgian territories. Source: own elaboration based on Furier (2000).



Fig. 5. Stage 5: Georgia as part of the Soviet Union. Source: own elaboration based on Baranowsky (1987).

#### Stage 5: the Georgian SSR

Being one of the republics of the Soviet Union can be seen as the last historical stage influencing the present regional structure of Georgia. It is important to note that Soviet administration granted the status of autonomous units to Abkhazia, Adjara and South Ossetia, fuelling separatist ambitions of those regions (Fig. 5).

The incorporation of Georgia into the Soviet Union meant the necessity of lower-level administrative divisions to facilitate the execution of centrally issued ordinances and laws. The republic was divided into 70 units (*raions*), 15 of them situated in autonomous units<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, a special status was given to the cities of Tbilisi and Poti. Due to their economic and administrative significance (the Poti Sea Port, Tbilisi – the capital of the republic), the two cities were granted rights similar to those given to units of the second-level administrative division<sup>8</sup> (Javakhishvili 1958).

#### Territorial governance in Georgia

Unexpected historical events, so-called critical junctures (the path-dependence theory), apart from being determinants of regional divisions,

<sup>7</sup> Publications dating from the Soviet times do not mention the administrative level of *oblast*. This can be due to the relatively small area of the country and the difficulty with introducing this type of division on ethnically diverse territories. These ethnic differences were the main reason for the emergence of separatist regions.

<sup>8</sup> Maryański (1987) mentions only one city granted special status: Tbilisi. In a research on territorial divisions, his main focus was on regions seen from a historical and a geographical perspective. This means that the second-level system (*raions*), introduced by the USSR, was excluded from his analysis.



have also influenced the evolution and eventual formation of territorial self-governance in Georgia. In order to fully characterise the emerged governance model, one must consider historical forms of Georgian administration that have led to its establishment.

A strong sense of belonging to local and ethnically compact communities ('little homelands') as well as the phenomenon of clannishness resulted in the formation of Councils of Elders, the first governing structures in Georgia. A Council effectively ruled a given territory in accordance with traditional, regional laws and was instrumental to the settling of any internal and external conflicts. The only documented example of a legal self-governance body in the Middle Ages is Tbilisi (approx. 1080).

Incorporation into the Russian Empire brought with it the centralisation of power. Artificial administrative bodies (*gubernya*, or governorates) were designed to be dependent on Moscow. At first the only city with a (limited) level of autonomy was Tbilisi. Later, tsarist autocracy gradually allowed more freedom to the other regions. Georgian villages began to hold regular village assemblies, and elective councils were introduced in bigger cities.

After the October Revolution, the republic regained independence and held, for the first time in its history, local elections (1919). However, attempts to introduce western principles to local governance stopped when Russian Bolsheviks took over power in Georgia (Losaberidze et al. 2001).

During the time of the Georgian Soviet Republic, even though a second level of state administration (*raions*) was officially established, its existence and work was purely formal with no practical activity to be reported. Till the 1990s, actual power was monopolised by a single party and the role of local administrative bodies was to facilitate the work of the central government in Moscow (Losaberidze et al. 2001).

The thaw period accompanying the *pere-stroika* resulted in the introduction of a new law giving the central government the authority to delegate tasks to lower administrative units. In the years 1990–1991 a three-tier model of territorial governance was introduced. The first level comprised villages, settlements and towns; the

second, districts and cities with a special status; and the third, autonomous republics.

The presidency of Zviad Gamsakhurdia as well as ongoing internal conflicts put any attempt to reform the country's administrative division on hold. Efforts to decentralise the governing system were renewed during the presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze (the mid-1990s).

One of the first changes implemented by the new government was the introduction of the position of a governor in the regions (beginning with Kvemo Kartli). Subsequently a four-level model of territorial governance was implemented, with autonomous units at level one, regions at level two, and districts and cities with a special status at level three. The fourth level was a communal one consisting of towns, villages and communes<sup>9</sup>. In theory, the widest array of competences was granted to districts having a double administrative function. In reality, however, only the units of the lowest level can be described as actual examples of territorial self-governance. The weakness of the decentralisation law was a lack of a clear description of the roles and functions as well as the absence of a clear financing plan for local governments (Melua 2010).

The economic and political problems following the country's political transformation had a negative impact on social well-being. Unemployment and legal chaos resulted in general impoverishment and the strengthening of separatist tendencies (people's increased awareness of their ethnic identities). This, in turn, resulted in the lack of trust towards the government and unwillingness to engage in local politics.

Social forces influencing the development of territorial self-government were similar to the ones observed in Poland after 1989. On the basis of their own observations, Polish researchers came to the conclusion that "legal regulations, or in more general terms, macro processes, have a tendency to either stimulate or suppress local development processes. However, on the other

<sup>9</sup> Till 2006 the lowest level of self-governance consisted of approx. 1,004 units. The district level comprised about 65 units. The highest level incorporated nine regional units, Tbilisi and the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, characterised by a distinctive style of governance. Units outside Georgian jurisdiction were not included in the decentralisation reform (Losaberidze 2014).

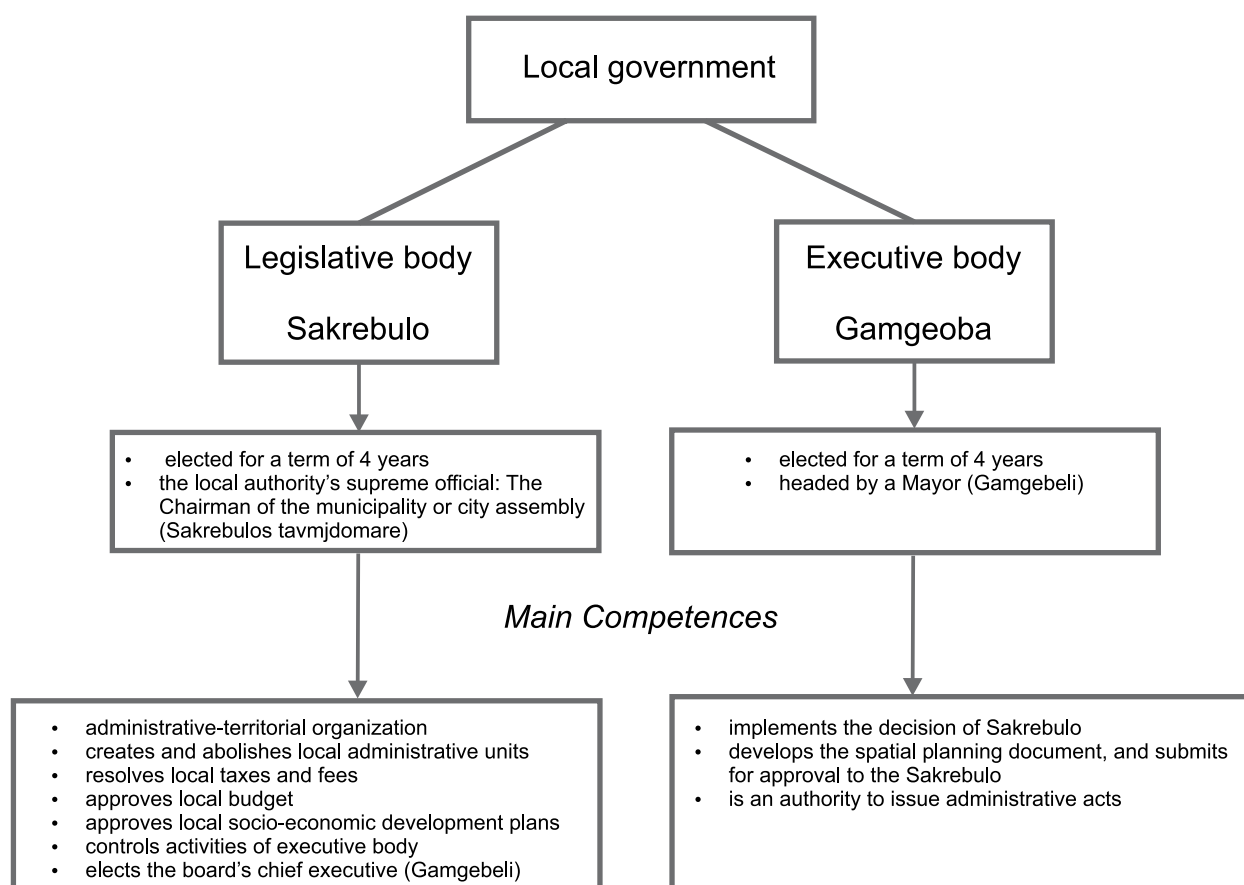


Fig. 6. Structure and competences of the Local Government of Georgia.

Source: own elaboration based on [http://www.ccre.org/docs/Local\\_and\\_Regional\\_Government\\_in\\_Europe.EN.pdf](http://www.ccre.org/docs/Local_and_Regional_Government_in_Europe.EN.pdf); <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/2244429>; <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=2041765&Site=COE>

hand, without active constituents, local pressure groups or local political leaders, even the best legal regulations are powerless" (Bartkowiak et al. 1990: 185). An inappropriate legal system (a high level of decentralisation), combined with the political apathy of the population, caused the first attempts at an introduction of a local self-governance system in Georgia to be unsuccessful.

Eduard Shevardnadze resigned from the presidency of Georgia after the Rose Revolution. This position was then taken by Mikhail Saakashvili, which was a sign of a new change in the structure of territorial governance. In 2004, Georgian government ratified the European Charter of Local Self-Government. The subsequent actions of the government led to the introduction of a territorial division project acknowledging the role of *raions*<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Non-governmental organisations were in favour of introducing two tiers of territorial self-government consisting of communal and regional units (excluding raions). Even though the project was accepted by the European Council, it was rejected by the ruling party.

Since 2006 Georgia has had single-tier territorial self-government based on the *raion* division. According to the Organic Law of Georgia on Local Self-Government (2005), a territorial self-governing unit consists of a legislative (*sakrebulo*) and an executive (*gamgeoba*) branch (Fig. 6)<sup>11</sup>. By lowering the level of decentralisation, this approach has facilitated the functioning of self-governments. Even though the law differentiates between local and assigned tasks, local self-governing bodies do not have much self-deciding power<sup>12</sup> (Swianiewicz 2009).

<sup>11</sup> The latest change in local self-governance legislation was introduced in February 2014. The most important adjustments were: an increase in the number of self-governing units (self-governing rights were granted to seven new towns), laws concerning the election process and the status of governing bodies within each administrative unit, an improvement in fiscal decentralisation (the budget), and legal supervision of self-governing units.

<sup>12</sup> The division based on the Organic Law of Georgia on Local Self-Government (2005).

The general characteristics of the Georgian nations (respect for their history and traditions) result in a strong identification with the historical regions which, in their national consciousness, coincide with the ethnic territories of specific groups. The current territorial division differentiates between nine regions. These, however, do not coincide with the traditional divisions. A good example is the region of Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti inhabited by two groups different in ethnic, linguistic and cultural terms.

A further division into artificial units (districts) seems to confuse the residents, which becomes evident during local elections. Lack of knowledge concerning the territorial divisions as well as unfamiliarity with different candidates discourages constituents from voting.

How little power the territorial governments have can be seen when examining voter turnouts (Table 1), assessing their operation, and testing the familiarity of citizens with their legislative and executive organs.

Statistical data show that the average voter turnout in the years 1998–2014 was never higher than 40%. Regardless of changes in the legislation, the voter turnout in the capital of Georgia was significantly lower than in the rest of the country. However, contrary to what these statistics may suggest, according to a 2005 research the citizens of Tbilisi are ones with the best knowledge about the structure of self-government units. The least knowledgeable on the subject are people living in small villages who seem to be mainly interested in the role of *rcmunebuli*<sup>13</sup>. It is worth noting that of all the participants representing the general population of Georgia, only 50% could name the mayor of their district. Also, fewer than 30% were able to name the politicians forming the *sakrebulo*. And when asked to assess the quality of work of the *sakrebulo* members, the majority of the respondents reported that, first, they saw their work as focused on the welfare of their constituents and, secondly, on tasks assigned by the central government. Even though they are mostly convinced about the validity of the actions of their local governments, the citizens rarely direct complaints to them. Instead, most people prefer to address somebody at a higher administrative level,

Table 1. Voter turnout in local elections in Georgia in the years 1998–2014.

| Year             | Voter turnout (%) |                         |
|------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
|                  | Tbilisi           | Georgia (incl. Tbilisi) |
| 1998             | 38.8              | –                       |
| 2002             | 44.0              | –                       |
| 2006             | 34.7              | 48.0                    |
| 2014 (1st round) | 37.3              | 43.3                    |
| 2014 (2nd round) | 34.3              | 36.0                    |

Source: <http://www.cesko.ge>.

a governor of a region, or even the president. This can be attributed to the fact that most of Georgia citizens (especially the elderly) are used to the Soviet model of governance (Swianiewicz 2011).

## Summing up

When examining the present three-level administrative system of Georgia, one cannot help noting the large number of second- and third-level units.

Also, when analysing the geopolitical situation of the country, one should consider the significance of autonomous Abkhazia and Adjara, which (in accordance with the 2006 resolution) are regarded as highest-level regions. Their existence within Georgia, their level of autonomy and self-determination capacities are outlined in the constitution.

An analysis of the historical determinants of the current territorial division of the country allowed identifying five distinctive stages in the formation of its historical and ethno-physiographic regions. The cultural and ethnic diversity, combined with strong historical consciousness and a sense of belonging, has resulted in its present territorial division.

As far as the second-level units are concerned, it is interesting to note that the names and locations of a significant number of regions coincide with the principalities and feudal holdings that existed here in the Middle Ages (stage 3). What is important, the decision of the Georgian authorities to design the current territorial division based heavily on the one present hundreds of years ago is not as illogical as it might seem. Even today, clearly visible are strong ethnic differences between the regions, e.g. strong language traditions and dialects that are only understood within specific ethnic groups.

<sup>13</sup> Governing authority and a representative of a village self-governing unit.

One of the most important periods that had a deep impact on the current territorial division was the time of Georgia as a Soviet republic. The clause in the constitution concerning the autonomous status of Abkhazia and Adjara can be seen as a reflection of this period. It was a Soviet government that granted the republics their autonomous status in the first place. Also the lowest level of the territorial division bears a strong resemblance to the one established during Soviet governance. In accordance with the 2006 territorial act, there are 69 third-level regions, which is almost exactly the number of units that existed in Georgia during the Soviet times<sup>14</sup>.

Even though the constitution grants Abkhazia and Adjara autonomy, Georgia's history after the land has regained independence as well as the ethnic conflicts in the region in 1993 and 2008 seem to suggest that the unification of the territory that has historically been part of the country for ages and that has been regarded as the cradle of the Georgian nation, is outside Georgian jurisdiction. This means that, in a sense, the Georgian SSR territorial division still seems to be valid today.

It is impossible to conduct an analysis of the structure of the current territorial self-governance system without acknowledging the solutions implemented in the past. As in the case of regional divisions, also here one can observe a strong influence of the time when Georgia was one of the Soviet republics. The regaining of independence and the abandoning of a centralised power model has forced politicians to devise an array of decentralisation mechanisms. A high level of territorial fragmentation, internal conflicts and a general lack of citizens' political engagement made the initial attempts to introduce a self-governance system in independent Georgia unsuccessful. In the initial phase of designing a new, decentralised legislative system, the government, fearing the difficulties of introducing such considerable changes, returned to the *raion* system used in the times of the Soviet Union. Decreasing the number of administrative units significantly improved the functioning of territorial self-governance. However, when designing the new legislation, the traditional territorial divisions, deeply rooted in national consciousness, were not considered. This, in addition to specific

characteristics of the Georgian nation, caused the local self-government of the republic not to function as intended, which can be seen in the general lack of interest in its functioning on the part of the general public.

In sum, it can be said that the present overall shape, territorial division and territorial governance of Georgia have been strongly influenced by the turbulent history of this small country, and by the Soviet Union times in particular. Even though the Soviet government attempted to blur all ethnic differences, a strong sense of identity, culture and typical traits characteristic of the Caucasus nations have resulted in historical divisions being still present in the national consciousness. This means that even though all these different ethnic groups have a deep sense of national pride, they still feel a strong need to emphasise their own, distinctive ethnic heritage. Traditional territorial divisions were not considered during the development of the new self-governance law, which was one of the reasons for its ineffectiveness.

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<sup>14</sup> There were 70 *raions* in the Georgian SSR in 1958.



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