2 Paradise lost

Autonomy and separatism in the South Caucasus and beyond

John Cuffe and David S. Siroky

Does local ethnic autonomy satisfy the demand for self-determination or rather foster the capacity and whet the appetite for more independence? At least since the Federalist Papers, this has been an important question in political science, and remains a pressing concern in current world affairs for decision-makers in states that face demands for ethnic autonomy. As ethno-political movements appear to be on the rise across the globe, in democracies as well as in autocracies and hybrid regimes, the problem of self-determination concerns more and more countries. Although a large body of literature addresses the causes of ethnic mobilization, and the circumstances under which it might become violent, scholarship is considerably more scattered when it comes to evaluating possible solutions, and remains far from having reached a consensus.

Proponents of political decentralization tend to see it as the primary mechanism that policy-makers can legitimately utilize to hold together ethnically divided societies and to relieve pressure from peripheral groups on the central government (Riker 1975; Lijphart 1977; Tsebelis 1990; McGarry and O’Leary 1993; Kaufman 1996; Bunce 1999; Stepan 1999; Gurr 2000; Bermeo 2002; Hartzell and Hodie 2003; Wibbels and Bakke 2006; Brancati 2009; Miodownik and Cartrite 2010). It has been applied, with varying degrees of success, in countries as diverse as Belgium and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Czechoslovakia and China, Spain and the Soviet Union. Recently, it has been proposed as a possible solution to current governance problems in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Politicians and scholars alike have extolled the virtues of decentralized governance. Politicians who cater to ethnic minority groups naturally see autonomy as an attractive campaign strategy that would enable them to dole out group-specific benefits to supporters. Majority politicians have also touted its efficacy in reducing inter-group conflict by providing a forum for expressing grievances, increasing loyalty, and reducing the incentive to exit (Brancati 2009). Advocates of autonomy of course differ in the degree of devolution they recommend—from full-blown federalism to milder forms of decentralization—but most see representation, participation, and some transfer of powers from the center to the regions as critical to addressing the self-
determination demands of spatially concentrated, culturally distinct minority groups, and thus reducing the impetus to secession.

However, other scholars have argued that decentralization and the associated institutional arrangements are frequently ineffective in satisfying the demand for self-determination and often exacerbate ethnic mobilization, creating a slippery slope of increasing concessions, while at the same time reducing the government’s legitimacy among its core constituency (Horowitz 1991; Roeder 1991, 2009; Slezkin 1994; Brubaker 1996; Bunce 1999; Hale 2008b). The reasons these authors provide for the belief in the adverse effects of autonomy are sundry, but the outcome is similar: the institutional architecture does not satisfy group demands for self-determination, and tends to reinforce ethnic particularism, sharpen group boundaries, providing regional leaders with access to political and economic resources that can be exploited to mobilize support for separatism. In short, autonomy provides local political actors with experience, resources, and networks that make their claims to secession more credible when the opportunity arises, and it institutionalizes ethnic differences that may have otherwise remained more fluid, thus creating the basis for secessionism and “hindering attempts to create interethnic harmony and peace” (Cornell 2002, 252–256; Rogowski 1985; Treisman 1997; Hale 2000; Kymlicka 2008).

Some attempts to resolve this apparent “paradox” have made significant progress by highlighting conditional relationships and by making nuanced threshold arguments about the point after which increasing autonomy yields decreasing returns to the state (Jolly 2006; Brancati 2009; Erk and Anderson 2009; Miodownik and Cartrite 2010). As Hechter and Okamotot (2001) put it: the empirical record is “murky”: autonomy is associated with conflict in some countries and regions, and peace in others. Some scholars have therefore suggested that there is no direct link between autonomy and collective action (Horowitz 1985; Gurr and Davies 1998; Saideman et al. 2002; Sorens 2005).

Our approach

We build on this literature and seek to contribute to it theoretically and empirically by unpacking and disaggregating the heterogeneous category of “non-autonomous” groups, which typically represents the baseline for comparison. “Non-autonomous” status, we submit, includes two distinct scenarios that have very different consequences for collective action: it covers groups that have never had autonomy—the true “non-autonomous” groups—and it includes groups that had autonomy, but lost it. As the effect of autonomy on secession will depend on the composition of the reference group—non-autonomous, in this case—it stands to reason that the results will be muddled if that category includes disparate types and treats them the same. We argue that the loss of autonomy is likely to have a powerful and positive effect on separatist activity, whereas groups that were never autonomous should be highly unlikely to engage in separatism. On average, currently autonomous
groups should also be unlikely to pursue secession, although they are likely to be more capable in this regard than groups that have never been autonomous. Lumping historically autonomous and never autonomous groups together is therefore apt to lead to confused findings. A trichotomous conceptualization enables us to observe the important behavioral differences.

Although autonomous groups may have the elite capacity to facilitate mobilization, we theorize that the masses will frequently lack the incentive to mobilize for secession on account of the considerable benefits to be gained from the status quo and the possibility of using voice to redress any outstanding grievances (Hirschman 1970). In contrast, having autonomy retracted significantly increases the motive for mobilization by increasing the cost of choosing voice over exit, while not appreciably decreasing the ability to engage in collective action.² It also considerably weakens the government’s ability to make credible commitments that might prevent tensions from escalating (North and Weingast 1989). Groups that are not and have never been autonomous may possess grievances and motives for mobilization, but almost always lack the material and leadership resources to follow through. For these reasons, we expect groups that have recently lost autonomy to be the most prone to pursue secession, groups that were never autonomous to be the least prone, and groups that are currently autonomous to engage in moderate amounts of ethnic mobilization. These theoretical expectations are summarized in Table 2.1.

Although the details differ in individual cases, introducing historic autonomy as a theoretical category within the umbrella of non-autonomous groups contributes to our understanding of the center—periphery dynamics by disaggregating the category into more meaningful components with distinct empirical consequences. We develop this approach and test its empirical implications on a broad sample of currently, formerly, and never autonomous groups across Europe and Asia, including both democracies and autocracies, before briefly examining particular cases. We are cognizant that the meaning of autonomy may be contextual and may vary not only from place to place but also over time. In particular, we are aware of the possible measurement error that could be introduced by including autonomies in autocracies where the degree of self-rule is merely pro forma. In China, for instance, formal autonomy is mainly a fiction—Xinjiang and Tibet are arguably less autonomous than Shanghai or Guangdong—and we do our best to account for this crucial nuance in our coding of autonomy status across countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.1 Theoretical expectations of ethnic mobilization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low capacity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak motives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong motives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never autonomous, included groups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The empirical analysis reveals that historically autonomous groups do indeed exhibit the highest levels of separatism, whereas groups that are currently autonomous were significantly less likely to engage in ethnic mobilization, and groups that were never autonomous are conspicuously unlikely to pursue separatism. We explain this empirical regularity by emphasizing the disparate group motives and collective action opportunities associated with these institutional arrangements. Finally, we explore these findings further through a discussion of intra-regional variation in the former Soviet space and sub-national variation in the South Caucasus, before concluding with implications for future research on separatism.

A bird’s eye view of autonomy and separatism

To examine patterns in separatism across a broad sample of cases that covers different regions, we created a dataset consisting of 115 ethnic groups from Europe, Asia, and North America. Autonomy was defined using the same criteria as the Minorities at Risk (MAR) project, and each group was coded as autonomous, never autonomous, or lost autonomy (MAR 2009). The classification of the cases originates in the MAR variable, PRSTAT, which describes the prior status of each individual group from never autonomous to autonomous and cephalous all the way to former states and republics. We also created an index of separatism, which follows MAR’s separatism index (SEPX), and codes the presence of sustained political or violent separatism over the past half century.

Table 2.2 and Figure 2.1 display the bivariate relationship between separatism and autonomous status, defined first as either autonomous or not. Table 2.3 and Figure 2.2 display this relationship once we include our trichotomous conceptualization of autonomy that disaggregates non-autonomous into “never autonomous” and “historically autonomous.” These data indicate that autonomous groups engaged in far less separatism (19 percent) than non-autonomous groups (45 percent). We suggest that one important reason for the relatively high incidence of separatism among non-autonomous groups is that the category of “non-autonomous” includes both groups that have lost autonomy, and thus possess a high collective action capacity and an intensified sense of injustice and resentment (Petersen 2002), as well as groups that

---

**Table 2.2** Bivariate relationship between separatism and current autonomy status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-separatist</th>
<th>Separatist</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-autonomous</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Cells represent the number of groups in the corresponding categories. Bivariate chi-square test significant at 0.05 level (4.68).
have never been autonomous. The theory suggests that the former, but not the latter, should be prone to separatist activity. When we disaggregate the data according to this logic, the results look quite different.

When the data are rearranged to differentiate groups that have lost autonomy from those groups that never possessed it, we find that the vast majority of groups that lost autonomy have in fact launched separatist campaigns (89 percent), compared with only a small fraction of groups that were never autonomous (2 percent) and currently autonomous groups (21 percent, see Figure 2.2). Although only associational and hardly dispositive, these findings lend support to our argument that retracted autonomy, and not the presence or absence of autonomy in general, is most liable to be associated with separatism. In fact, the incidence of separatism among non-autonomous groups that were never autonomous before is the lowest of the three categories examined. Although currently autonomous groups are more likely than never-
autonomous groups to engage in separatism, the difference in the incidence of separatism is far less striking than the difference between either of those categories and historically autonomous groups.

Back in the USSR: paradise lost and found in the former Soviet space

Part of the existing confusion over the relationship between autonomy and separatism in the empirical record can be attributed to the selection of cases. To paraphrase one author’s memorable phrase: the answers you get depend on the cases you select (Geddes 1990). Although some studies have taken a broad, cross-national view of the issue, much of the scholarly literature has focused on the post-Communist world, for this is a region where various forms of ethno-federalism have historically been and still are abundant (Gorenburg 1999, 2003; Hale 2004, 2008a; Roeder 2009). Whereas lower levels of autonomy in the Soviet context were relatively meaningless and pro forma, “autonomous republics look considerably more like states,” writes one scholar, “than the lower-ranked autonomous oblasts and autonomous okrugs, insofar as they had their own legislatures, executives, and judiciaries. ... ASSRs were also allowed greater ... representation in the federal government ... ” (Giuliano 2006, 277). Although autonomy in the Soviet context may have been more symbolic at lower levels, these higher levels of autonomy were quite meaningful, especially in cultural matters, and to a lesser degree in economic and political affairs.
In two of the seminal studies on this region, Bunce (1999, 49) and Roeder (1991) argued that autonomy in the former Soviet Union served as the critical building block “necessary for the rise of nationalist movements.” The fact that all of the union republics (e.g., Estonia, Georgia, Ukraine, etc.) seceded and became independent states would seem to be prima facie proof of this proposition (cf. Carter and Goemans 2011). Other scholars have of course shown that the degree of separatism varied considerably within the Soviet Union federal republics (Hale 2008b; Giuliano 2010) from places that were exceptionally independence minded (Estonia, Georgia, Ukraine) to those that wished to preserve the Soviet Union as the most preferred outcome (Uzbekistan, Transnistria, Abkhazia) (for further discussion, see next chapter). What we observe across the former Soviet Union republics, we also see sub-nationally within those republics: for example, Georgia had two autonomous republic regions—Abkhazia and Adjaria (and one autonomous okrug, South Ossetia)—but Abkhazia pursued secession far more vigorously from Georgia than did Adjara (Derluguian 1998).

The same story has played out in many other places across the world. In both the developed and the developing worlds, we can cite cases where autonomy is associated with peace (e.g., Spain, Germany, United States, Switzerland, Australia or Nigeria, India, Mexico, Ethiopia). “Autonomy,” writes Larry Diamond (1999, 156), “has done more to relieve or contain secessionist pressures than to stimulate them.” Indeed, “every single long-standing democracy in a multilingual and multinational polity is a federal state” (Stepan 1999, 19). To evaluate the autonomy argument in any setting, we should first agree on a clear baseline. In the Eurasian context, the risk set might be the universe of Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs). This yields a list of twenty-three ASSR cases. Most of these republics are located within Russia itself, although several exist in the other republics, particularly Crimea in Ukraine, Karakalpak in Uzbekistan, Nakhchivan in Armenia, and Abkhazia and Adjaria in Georgia (Gorenburg 1999; Treisman 1999, 237ff; Hale 2000; Giuliano 2006). Only two of the twenty-three ASSRs engaged in secessionist conflict—Abkhazia and Chechnya—whereas twenty-one (91 percent) did not. Moreover, most of the secessionist conflicts in the former USSR were not ASSRs, including the most prominent ones: Transnistria, Nagorny-Karabakh, and South Ossetia.

We could of course also take a more lenient baseline and consider Autonomous Oblasts (AOs) and not only ASSRs. Although it is true that both Karabakh and South Ossetia were AOs, the baseline should then include the other forty-seven AOs (96 percent) that did not lead to secessionist conflict. At the level of the autonomous district (okrug), the evidence is even less supportive: Chukotka, Khantia-Mansia, Nenetsia, and Yamalia all failed to escalate into secessionist conflict. Additionally, not a single one of the cases that the Supreme Soviet granted autonomy on July 3, 1991 (Adygeya, Gorno-Altai, Karachai-Cherkessia, and Khakassia) pursued secession (Sakwa 1996, 179; Giuliano 2010, 277). In short, many of the critical cases of secessionist
conflict were not ASSRs, the majority of ASSRs were not secessionist, and most of the secessionist cases were those in which the group’s status was threatened by the end of the Soviet Union with a functional downgrade in autonomy.

The Soviet Union had many autonomous administrative units, being divided into eighty-seven entities at one point: fifteen autonomous Soviet socialist republics, six kraya, forty-nine oblasti, two federal cities, five autonomous oblasti, and ten autonomous okrugi. The vast majority of autonomous entities were non-secessionist, including Adygea, Chuvashia, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Kalmykia, Karachay-Cherkessia, Karelia, Komi Republic, Mari El, Mordovia, Nenets Autonomous Okrug, North Ossetia-Alania, and Udmurtia. In the Caucasus alone, there were nine ASSRs and AOs: only three sought greater independence of any kind. Outside the Russian Federation, we observe a similar phenomenon among autonomous political entities such as Gaugazia in Moldova, Sardinia in Italy, and Vojvodina in Serbia, which did not pursue separatism. Of course, we could also mention Krajina and Republika Srpska as counterexamples of autonomous regions that became separatist, but we would argue that these regions became separatist largely once the group’s status was under threat of being reversed from a privileged to a marginal one dependent upon the protection of the newly independent state’s dominant ethnicity (see also Chapter 4). Italy hosts five autonomous regions—Sicily, Sardinia, Aosta Valley, Trentino-Alto Adige Sudtirol, and Friuli-Venezia Giulia—and none is associated with secessionist conflict. Portugal’s autonomous regions, Azores and Madeira, are also not secessionist.

Our claim is not that autonomy is unimportant—quite the opposite, we agree it creates the capacity for collective action—our point is rather that it also frequently generates immanent and important benefits that favor the status quo. For this reason, it is less likely to lead to separatism than autonomy retraction. Autonomy is important because it can both construct and reinforce strong ethnic identities, group solidarity, and collective action (Olson 1965; Hechter 1987). Evidence from the post-Communist world, however, suggests that it is neither necessary nor sufficient to produce strong secessionist insurgencies. Three of the five main cases of violent secessionist conflict—Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria—did not have the status of autonomous republics. Even Chechnya is not a clear case, as it was only one part of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR. The only case that seems to fit the theory well in this part of the world is Abkhazia; and here, an explanation based on autonomy retraction can also account for this case (and others) quite well. Although autonomous status per se plays some role in understanding separatism, its effects are mixed and contingent.

Given that secessionist conflict is a rare event, even in the former Soviet context, the fact that so many of the critical cases were not ASSRs, and the fact that the overwhelming majority of ASSRs were not secessionist, casts doubt on the primacy of the theoretical framework linking autonomy directly
to secession. Autonomy fosters conditions that favor secessionist conflict. It strengthens regional identity and creates the conditions for collective action, but it also engenders benefits from non-action, which remove many of the strongest motives for mobilization. Autonomy retraction is much more strongly associated with separatism, as we see in the former Communist bloc, and as we saw in the large-N analysis. In the final section, we examine this claim more closely using sub-national variation in separatism and autonomy within the South Caucasus.

Separatism in the South Caucasus: sub-national evidence from Georgia

We now examine five regions in Georgia with serious separatist potential—Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Adjara, Javakheti, and Kvemo-Kartli—and explain why the first two became virtually synonymous with secessionist conflict, whereas the last three avoided large-scale violence. Georgia is an excellent case for at least two reasons. The first is that it has experienced several secessions, and the second is that it possesses groups exhibiting all three kinds of autonomy. Our core argument is that robust secessionist movements are most likely in regions with lost autonomy—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—and least likely in the absence of autonomy—Javakheti and Kvemo-Kartli. Finally, when autonomy is upheld, as it was in Adjara, secession is also unlikely (although more probable than in cases that were never autonomous). Cornell (2002) argues that Abkhazia and South Ossetia pursued secession because of autonomy, which provided these groups with the necessary organizational capacity to secede. We do not disagree that autonomy fostered the capacity to engage in collective action, but we dispute the assumption that autonomy automatically generated the demand for secession. Instead, we suggest that autonomy may sometime sate the demand for self-rule. Retracting autonomy, however, more uniformly engenders resentment and provides a more compelling causal explanation for secession, for it creates the motive for independence while not significantly undermining the capacity to pursue it.

Let us consider the evidence, starting with Abkhazia. Although the Abkhaz have long been accustomed to life as a minority in their own land, their status under the Soviet Union was guaranteed through a formal autonomy arrangement that kept inter-group relations tame for many decades (Hewitt 1993, 271; 1925 Constitution; 1931 revisions). Despite some tensions in the 1970s and 1980s, it was not until 1992 that conflict fully erupted (Cornell 2002, 263). Sukhumi used Tbilisi’s distraction with ousting Gamsakhurdia to craft new laws that would allow the Abkhaz to override Georgian bloc voting in the regional parliament (Slider 1991, 170; Zürcher 2007, 120). While the Abkhaz sought to enshrine their status in the shadow of a rapidly changing political landscape, Georgians sought a new state that could govern a multi-ethnic periphery and embarked on a set of reforms that would strengthen the center but at the expense of the regions (Siroky and Aprasdize 2011).
Although known for his nationalism, Gamsakhurdia actually secured a peaceful arrangement with the Abkhaz that granted them a high degree of disproportionalty (Coppieters 2005, 383ff). It was under Shevardnadze’s watch that matters spiraled out of control. In 1992, Georgia’s Military Council declared that it would restore the 1921 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Georgia. Many Abkhaz interpreted this to mean that its autonomous status would be revoked. Even though the 1921 constitution contained a clause for Abkhaz autonomy (1921 Constitution, XI, A. 107–108), the damage had been done and, only a few months later, the Abkhaz unilaterally declared independence (Cornell 2001, 345ff).

Like Abkhazia, South Ossetia had its autonomy revoked. It first gained its autonomy in the early 1920s and maintained it throughout the Soviet period (Saparov 2010). In 1989, South Ossetia requested an elevation of the region’s status from autonomous oblast to autonomous republic. Instead of granting the request, Tbilisi instead increased its control over Tskhinvali. It also adopted Georgian as the official language throughout the regions, which disadvantaged many minorities that only spoke Russian and sometimes their native tongue, and then barred regional parties from competing in national elections (Fuller 1988). South Ossetians did not take these developments lying down, and proclaimed allegiance to the Soviet Union. In response, Gamsakhurdia abolished South Ossetia’s autonomy altogether in December 1990 (Fuller 1990; ICG 2004). It was this move that led to the war, which commenced on January 5, 1991 (Denber 1992). The parties eventually reached a ceasefire with Moscow’s backing, yet the issue of South Ossetia’s status, which was the trigger that initiated the conflict, remained unresolved. Saakashvili sought to impose control over South Ossetia by establishing a parallel pro-Georgian government in South Ossetia. Tbilisi also used the police to clamp down on corruption and arrest individuals in the black market that provided the region with its principal source of revenue. The conflict was settled provisionally with another ceasefire, but exploded again in 2008, when Georgia sought to re-assert control. Although a handful of states have recognized South Ossetia’s independence, most states have withheld recognition, leaving its official status subject to (possibly) violent revision again in the future.

The next region is Adjara, which is a critical case, as it possessed autonomy—like Abkhazia and to a lesser degree South Ossetia—but it never lost autonomy. Consistent with the theory, Adjara also did not seek secession. We would submit that this was largely because it lacked the motive—not having lost autonomy—and not because it lacked the capacity, which it possessed because it possessed autonomy. Formerly part of the Ottoman Empire, Adjara became part of Georgia in 1920, and the Treaty of Kars in 1921 guaranteed its status as an ASSR. Adjara maintained this status after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and preserved a significant degree of self-rule, but this arrangement came under increasing scrutiny after the Rose Revolution in 2003. Tbilisi pursued greater control, but did so by focusing on removing Adjara’s increasingly unpopular leader, Aslan Abashidze, rather
than on altering the region’s autonomous status. Unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Adjarian autonomy was never revoked. “Abashidze never raised any question of secession from Georgia” (Fairbanks 2001, 252), arguably as a result of being left to his own devices. Tbilisi was able to remove Abashidze without revoking the region’s autonomy, and thus avoided another secession. Unfortunately, this approach proved to be the exception in Georgia rather than the rule.

Finally, the regions of Javakheti and Kvemo-Kartli were never autonomous and were also largely tranquil. Javakheti is a remote region, bordering Armenia and Turkey, composed almost entirely of ethnic Armenians (Melikishvili 1999, 21; Wheatley 2009). The conditions that many theories associate with heightened likelihood of conflict escalation are all present in Javakheti—especially grievances grounded in discrimination, isolation, and inequality, but also high group solidarity and a neighboring kin state—yet armed secessionist conflict has been largely lacking (Guretski 1998). Sometimes dubbed “Georgia’s Siberia,” Javakheti did not receive a single tonne of fuel for over a year, as gas supplies were cut and roads were permanently blocked with snow. Secession from Tbilisi would have been relatively easy as Javakheti was in effect already separated (Rotar 1998). Although some groups in Javakheti, especially an organization called Javakh and its paramilitary wing Vikh, called for the region to be officially recognized as an autonomous republic, the popular demand for secession was not sufficient and the support from neighboring Armenia was largely lacking (Kavkasia 1998; Dgeh‘has 1999). Unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which were ethnically mixed, 97 percent of Javakheti is ethnically Armenian. Despite these favorable conditions for secession, Javakheti has remained firmly within Tbilisi’s orbit. This has nothing to do with the pacific qualities of Armenians, who fought heartily on the other side of the border in Karabakh. The absence of sustained separatism in Javakheti results from the lack of capacity rather than desire, but lately even the demand for secession may have disappeared as well.

The final region is the Azeri-dominated breadbasket, Kvemo-Kartli, located on the border with Azerbaijan, and composed of over 90 percent Azeris who live compactly in the Rustavi, Marneuli, Bolnisi, Gabardini, Tsalka, and Dmanisi areas. As one observer noted: “they live so homogeneously that many local people don’t even realize which state they live in …” (Zerkalo 2003). Like Javakheti (and several of the other regions), Kvemo-Kartli residents possessed abundant grievances against the new state. Although these sentiments may be widespread among Azeris, they have not found a political outlet. Azeri leaders, in both Georgia and Azerbaijan, have been quick to dismiss rumors that Azeris might pursue secession (Cornell 2001, 211; CIPDD 2003). According to Alibala Akaserov, “the Azerbaijanis have never had and will not have any separatist views” (Zerkalo 2003). It may be that there is little desire for secession, even though one paper called Azeris “fourth class citizens,” but a full explanation must also account for the lack of capacity. Partly this results from the absence of any autonomous institutions, but it
is also partly due to Azerbaijan’s stance toward its kin region, which has served to quiet any discontent and ensure stability.

The sub-national analysis of five Georgian regions primed for secession with varying autonomy arrangements affords an excellent test of the theory advanced here. The evidence is certainly not dispositive, but it provides strong support for the theory and illustrates that it provides some empirical purchase. Although the analysis of sub-national variation in secession in one country implies some important limits on what we can extrapolate to other cases, the theory is general and the empirical analysis is amenable to being tested in other countries and regions of the world. A clear advantage of examining a cluster of inter-connected cases in one country is that it allows us to hold constant many factors that vary drastically across states and can make drawing valid cross-national inference a thorny issue for researchers (Snyder 2001). In limiting ourselves to one country, we are able to obviate many of these challenges, although we recognize that it comes at the cost of generalizability, which we attempted to address in the first part with a large-N sample of cases.

Conclusion

This study explores the relationship between political autonomy and separatism. Rather than aggregating groups that have never possessed autonomy and those that have lost it into one category, and then comparing them together with groups that currently possess autonomy, the article distinguishes these three classes of ethnic groups: the currently autonomous, the historically autonomous, and the never autonomous. Our theory suggests that historically autonomous groups are most likely to engage in separatism because the retraction of autonomy stimulates the desire for self-determination, while not significantly diminishing the group’s ability to pursue it through collective action. At the same time, it considerably weakens the government’s ability to make credible commitments that might resolve the conflict prior to escalation.

The data that we have examined are generally supportive and show that the highest incidence of separatism is found among historically autonomous groups, and the lowest is found among groups that were never autonomous. Examining intra-regional variation in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, as well as sub-national variation in the South Caucasus, we find further empirical supports for the theory of lost autonomy. A caricature of our argument might seek to reduce our explanation for the incidence of separatism to a moncausal institutional logic. Instead, we see autonomy retraction as an exacerbating factor that, theoretically and empirically, is strongly associated with separatism in many countries. We are of course cognizant of omitted variables in the analysis, such as the regime type, level of economic development, the availability of external support, and the manner in which the political unit was initially incorporated, and therefore the results must be treated with caution and further examined with these issues in mind. Although this result does
not indicate whether, and if so when, autonomy might be a solution to ethnic conflicts, it should caution decision-makers and politicians thinking about retractor autonomy arrangements. Although centralization of this kind may build legitimacy among one constituency, it is likely to alienate another, and could engender inter-group conflict that leaves all parties worse off than before.

Notes
1 We are grateful to Aleksandar Pavkovic, along with the reviewers, for encouragement and comments, which have considerably improved the quality of the chapter, and of course we thank John Milton for the title. All errors are ours.
2 We recognize that organization capacity may decline over time and tested whether the results were robust by excluding cases of lost autonomy before World War Two. The results hold.

References
Bunce, V. (1999), Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Collapse of Socialisme and the State, New York, Cambridge University Press.
CIPDD (2003), Analysis of Conflict Factors in the Region of Marneuli Gardabani (Georgia), Results of sociological research.
Coppieters, B. et al. (2005), Statehood and Security: Georgia after the Rose Revolution, Cambridge, MA, American Academy of Arts and Sciences.
50 J. Caffee and D.S. Siroky


Dgeh’as (1999), ‘Paper Accuses Armenian Nationalists of Stirring up Ethnic Trouble in Georgia,’ 7, Tbilisi, 2 July.


Geddes, B. (1990), ‘How the Cases you Choose Affect the Answers you Get: Selection Bias in Comparative Politics’ Political Analysis, 2: 131–150.


Autonomy/separatism in the South Caucasus


52 J. Caffe and D.S. Siroky


Zerkalo, Baku (23 Dec 2003), ‘Paper warns against use of Georgia’s Azeri for “inter-political feuding”’, Interview with Zurab Melikishvili, Governor of the region.