

# The ‘Mingrelian Question’: Institutional Resources and the Limits of Soviet Nationality Policy

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## *Abstract*

Based on primary source materials from the Georgian Party archive and periodical press, this article examines the conflict between central and local elites in the Soviet Republic of Georgia over whether or not to grant linguistic and territorial rights to residents of one of its regions. The case demonstrates how the promises and aspirations of Soviet nationality policy were actually negotiated and interpreted on the local level in the early years of Soviet power, and how actors attempted to make use of nationality policy in order to mobilise the institutional resources available to them.

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES THE CONFLICT BETWEEN CENTRAL AND LOCAL elites in the Soviet Republic of Georgia over whether or not to grant linguistic and territorial rights to residents of one of its regions. The case demonstrates how the promises and aspirations of Soviet nationality policy were actually negotiated and interpreted on the local level in the early years of Soviet power, and how actors attempted to mobilise the institutional resources available to them. This confrontation over the implementation of Soviet nationality policy in turn became one over the definition of Georgian national identity. This article makes use of reports, letters and petitions from the Georgian Party archive as well as the public discussion of the issue in the local periodical press.

From 1925 until early 1933, the local leadership of Mingrelia in western Georgia, headed by a local district Party First Secretary, Isak Zhvania, an Old Bolshevik who had played a role in the Soviet victory in the Caucasus, demanded from the central republican leadership in Tbilisi (then Tiflis) that their local ethnic sub-group be recognised as a distinct nationality and should therefore receive the administrative, linguistic and territorial rights and privileges afforded to ethnic minorities. The Georgian central leaders, several of whom themselves came from the Mingrelia region, denied that this group comprised an ethnic minority separate from the Georgian nationality, and held that such rights and privileges therefore were not appropriate.<sup>1</sup> Both parties deployed the rhetoric of Bolshevik ideology and

<sup>1</sup>Library of Congress transliterations for Georgian are used in this article, except for Georgian surnames and place names, for which capitalisation and more standard letter combinations are used instead of special characters (e.g. Zhvania instead of žvania), and where appropriate Georgian transliterations are used rather than Russian ones (e.g. Beria rather than Beriya, Tsalenjika rather than Tsalendzhika).

nationality theory, made use of the institutional resources available to them in order to accomplish their goals, and made choices about definitions of their own identity. The dispute called into question the fundamental assumptions of Soviet nationality policy and exposed a contradiction in two of its essential imperatives: that of cultivating loyal *cadres* of local elites and enabling the propagation of the regime's goals and ideals in the national minority regions on the one hand, and the nation-building projects facilitated and inspired by that very same policy on the other. The case of the 'Mingrelian question' in 1923–1933 demonstrates the limitations of this nationality policy in the face of this fundamental contradiction, which in turn opened a space for an institutional conflict between competing regional authorities.

The main source base for this article is a file (fond 14, delo 266) in the Party Archive of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party, now referred to as Section II of the Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia (sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), formerly Partarkhiv TsK KPG), entitled 'Materials on the Mingrelian Question', comprising 284 pages of original copies of reports, correspondence and collective letters, many with notations in Lavrenty Beria's handwriting, dating from 16 October 1931 to 17 August 1933.

### *Background*

The Mingrelians (alternately spelled Megrelians, *megrelebi* in Georgian) are generally considered to be a sub-group of the larger Georgian ethnicity that was originally centred on the historical region of Mingrelia (*samegrelo* in Georgian) in the west of Georgia, formerly an independent principality that was fully incorporated into the Tsarist Russian empire only in 1857. The Mingrelian language (*megruli*) belongs to the Kartvelian family of languages together with Georgian (*k'art'uli*), Svan and Laz, and although Mingrelian is related to modern standard Georgian and shares some grammatical structures and vocabulary, linguists agree that they are separate languages and are not mutually comprehensible (Dzidziguri 1968, pp. 32–33).<sup>2</sup> Mingrelian was not historically a written language, however, and Georgian Orthodox Church services and official written communication were traditionally conducted in Georgian throughout the Georgian lands.<sup>3</sup> There are no precise data on the number of Mingrelians for any period, although estimates range from several hundred thousand up to a million.<sup>4</sup> Mingrelians also made up most of the Georgian population of Abkhazia,<sup>5</sup> and many settled in other Georgian towns and cities, particularly in the capital of Tiflis. Mingrelian surnames characteristically have endings such as *-ia, ua,*

<sup>2</sup>According to this same source, linguists believe that Mingrelian and standard Georgian (*k'art'uli*) diverged from one another approximately 2,000 years ago.

<sup>3</sup>There had been an unsuccessful attempt under Tsarist rule in the later nineteenth century to create a written standard and liturgical Mingrelian language. See Shukhardo (1899, pp. 47–114).

<sup>4</sup>Period documents mention estimated figures of 350,000–400,000. See Section II of the Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia (sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II)), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, ll. 71, 222. According to the 1926 census, the combined population of the Zugdidi and Senaki *uezdy* and the Poti *raion* was 257,400, and that of the Zugdidi *uezd* alone 129,856. Out of the total ethnic Georgian population of 1,788,186 people, 243,289 identified themselves as Mingrelians (although this was controversial—see sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, ll. 59–60 and l. 222), and notably only 160 residents of Tiflis identified themselves thusly (which is doubtful, considering that 16% of the Georgian Central Committee members (14 individuals out of 87) in 1929 had Mingrelian surnames: see Kompartiya (b) Gruzii (1929, p. 684)). Some 275,481 people indicated Mingrelian as their native language (of which only 51 resided in Tiflis). Also notable is that 31% of self-identified Mingrelians were literate, which is significantly higher than the Abkhaz (11.2%), but lower than Georgians in general (39%). See TsSU Soyuzs SSR (1929, pp. 5–43).

<sup>5</sup>Especially following large-scale migrations there around the turn of the century and again in the late 1930s.

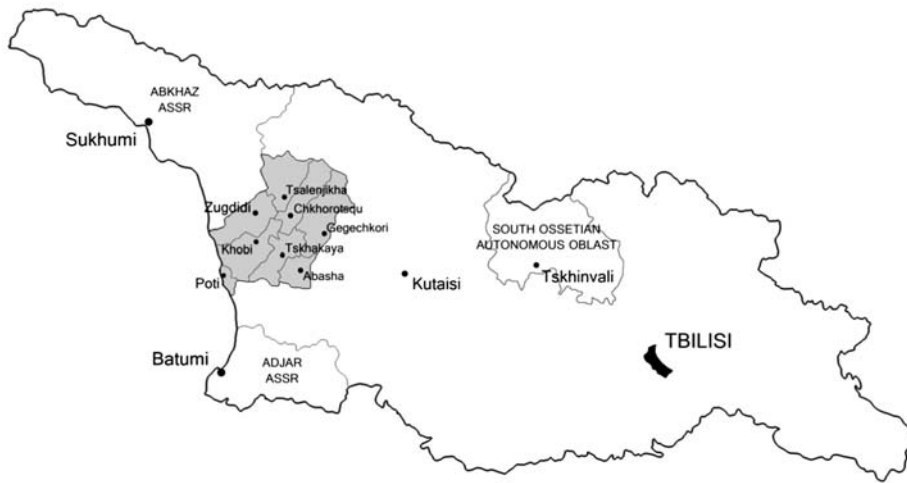


FIGURE 1. THE GEORGIAN SSR: ADMINISTRATIVE SUB-ENTITIES AND AREAS OF MINGRELIAN SETTLEMENT

*ava* and *aia*, as opposed to the *-dze* ('son of') and *-shvili* ('child of') endings common in surnames from other regions of Georgia. Following the consolidation of Soviet power in Georgia in February and March 1921, three administrative sub-entities were established there: the autonomous region [*oblast'*] of South Ossetia, whose titular nationality speaks an East Iranian language; the autonomous republic of Ajara, populated by ethnic Georgians who at the time were primarily Muslim; and the autonomous republic of Abkhazia, which is immediately adjacent to the Zugdidi region and has a titular ethnicity that, although having historical ties to Mingrelians, is more closely related to the ethnic groups of the Northwest Caucasus.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the South Ossetians, the Ajarans or the Abkhaz, however, the Mingrelians were not provided with a defined territory or recognised by the regime as a national group distinct from Georgians. Instead, the historical territory of Mingrelia was divided up into a number of smaller regions and the Mingrelian language had no official status (see Figure 1).

#### *Contradictions in nationality policy*

In consolidating its rule in the national regions, the Soviet regime made use throughout the 1920s and 1930s of a conciliatory policy towards ethnic minorities, referred to as indigenisation or *korenizatsiya*, which involved co-opting local elites into leadership positions, and also cultural encouragement to help these minorities speed up their progress along the stages of national development. Local languages were supported so that minority populations would more easily understand the regime's agitation and propaganda efforts in

<sup>6</sup>Abkhazia was initially granted the status of a Soviet Socialist Republic in March 1921, subsequently changed in 1922 to that of 'Treaty Republic' entering the newly-formed Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (*Zakavkazskaya Sovetskaya Federativnaya Sotsialisticheskaya Respublika*—TSFSR) through Georgia, and then reduced to an Autonomous Republic within Georgia from February 1931.

their own languages. Many large and small ethnic groups throughout the USSR during this period were recognised as distinct, affording them privileges, opportunities and investment. Yet the criteria by which ethnic groups might be so defined, and thus deserving of such concessions, left some room for interpretation. It was also not apparent which facet of this nationality policy should take precedence if they should come into conflict: that of encouraging national development or that of reaching out to local minority populations. This underlying contradiction in goals became particularly evident in the case of the Mingrelians: should Mingrelia receive territorial status that would facilitate administration and assure increased investment, and the right to publish newspapers and conduct official work in the Mingrelian language in order to reach out to the local peasantry; or, as an immutable constituent part of the larger Georgian ethnicity, would official status as a national minority for the Mingrelians undermine the Georgians' rights, privileges and aims under Soviet nationality policy? It was clear that in order to assert that an ethnicity did or did not qualify for recognised status, arguments had to be framed according to the canons of Soviet nationalities policy to show that such a group did or did not have the potential to develop into what the Bolsheviks defined as a distinct nation: the criteria of 'nation' as defined in Stalin's canonical 1913 *Marxism and the National Question* (Stalin 1942), i.e. a historically constituted, stable community with a common language, a common territory and a common economic life; and the requirements set out in the statements about 'good' and 'bad' nationalisms from the 10th and 12th Party Congresses in 1921 and 1923 that attributed the former to ethnic groups that had formerly been oppressed and that were culturally and economically 'backward' (*otstalye*). The institutions of autonomy or of linguistic and cultural rights without political organisation were intended to solve this contradiction in Soviet nationality policy between the goals of national development and of effective engagement. Yet in the question of who could make use of these institutions and where, the theoretical bases of nationality policy became elements of the political contest between competing regional authorities.

*The emergence of the 'Mingrelian question'*

*Korenizatsiya* began to be implemented systematically in the South Caucasus following the 12th Party Congress in April 1923. Earlier in 1922, Stalin came into conflict with the local Georgian Bolshevik leadership and with Lenin in the course of the so-called 'Georgian Affair', in which prominent Georgian Party officials opposed Stalin's intention to strip the Georgian republic of its formal independence (Lewin 2005, ch. 4; Suny 1994, pp. 214–17). This question of the relative rights of the union republics dominated the 12th Party Congress, and the issue of the status of Georgian nationalism played a role in the key policy outcome of that Congress concerning the relationship between local nationalism and 'great power' (or 'Great Russian') chauvinism and the declaration of the goals of *korenizatsiya*. Such 'great power chauvinism' was determined at the Congress to be the 'greater danger' in comparison with the nationalism of smaller nationalities that had been oppressed under Tsarist rule (Slezkine 1994, pp. 425–26). Like other large titular nationalities, the Georgians found themselves in an ambiguous position: in relation to Great Russian chauvinism they were considered an historically oppressed minority whose national development must be encouraged; while in relation to smaller national minorities on their own territory they were potentially great power chauvinists themselves (Martin 2001, pp. 7–8). In June 1923

the Georgian Central Committee (TsK) instituted Georgian as the language of official communication in all agencies in the republic, both in the centre and in the regions, except in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In regions with minority Armenian, Azeri and other ethnic minorities the language of communication would be that chosen by the populations themselves, and republican agencies were obligated to reply to all communications from such regions in the language in which they were submitted (Merkviladze *et al.* 1982, p. 396). Georgian was fully implemented as the official language in the Mingrelian districts, and overall linguistic *korenizatsiya* was much more effective and comprehensive in Georgia than in most other union republics.<sup>7</sup>

The practical implementation of *korenizatsiya* measures began to generate serious discussion with regard to Georgia's autonomous regions in the summer of 1925, shortly after the appointment of Isak Zhvania as First Secretary in Zugdidi. The issue of opportunities and privileges for Mingrelians came to the attention of a commission headed by A. Azatyan and A. Urushadze sent by the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic<sup>8</sup> Regional Committee (*Zakkraikom*) to investigate the situation in the regions of Georgia in the summer of 1925, when they were apparently met by a large demonstration in Zugdidi demanding Mingrelian autonomy. According to Zhvania's later retelling, 'at that time the Party, as represented by the regional committee [*raikom*], disavowed this movement, and its leaders were mainly non-Party members who sent a petition in the name of Kalinin and the USSR Central Executive Committee [TsIK]'.<sup>9</sup> The Georgian TsK then sent a commission, which included Shalva Eliava and Lavrenti Beria, both rising elites in the central Georgian leadership who were themselves Mingrelians, with orders to 'work out practical actions with regard to the Mingrelian question'.<sup>10</sup> A sub-committee formed from this commission (but without Eliava and Beria) recommended approving Mingrelia as a cultural-territorial unit entering into the USSR; allowing the publication of a daily newspaper as the organ of the Party Committee and other propaganda brochures of an 'agricultural character'; introducing teaching in Mingrelian in first stage schools in Mingrelia; introducing official paperwork in all state agencies in Mingrelia in the Mingrelian language.<sup>11</sup> The commission, however, 'consider[ed] autonomy for Mingrelia to be a harmful and reactionary idea, and indicate[d] to the [Zugdidi] *raikom* that raising this issue on the part of members of the Party [was] unacceptable'.<sup>12</sup> The Georgian TsK heard the report on 3 September 1925, and declared it 'essential to shine light on and explain these issues in the Zugdidi Party organisation and the non-Party masses through the press, by proposing that comrades knowledgeable about the issue, especially Mingrelians, place several articles in the press'.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup>The intention to list Mingrelians (and also Svans, Ajarans and others) as separate nationalities at the time of the 1926 census was strongly protested by the Georgian leadership, and although they were ultimately included as separate categories but sub-groups of the Georgians, there was controversy about how the respondents actually identified themselves and whether there was interference from the census takers. For a discussion of the role of ethnographers in this issue and their disagreements with Georgian Party leaders, see Hirsch (2005, pp. 132–33).

<sup>8</sup>To which the Georgian SSR was subordinated, together with the Armenian and Azerbaijan SSRs, from 1922 to 1936.

<sup>9</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 59.

<sup>10</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 59.

<sup>11</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, ll. 59–60, 222.

<sup>12</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 59.

<sup>13</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 223.

The implementation differed from the spirit of the declaration. Thus the Mingrelian issue came crashing into the public spotlight with an open letter by Beria, then the Deputy Chairman of the Georgian secret police, published on the front page of the newspaper *komunisti*, the Georgian-language organ of the Georgian TsK, on 13 September 1925. Clearly to an ambitious and rising young official like Beria, the idea of encouraging his native provincial Mingrelian identity held little interest, and promised few advantages. One of his first public actions, Beria's letter was apparently in reaction to a meeting held 12 days earlier of a 'Committee for Mingrelian Autonomy' comprising Mingrelian 'autonomists' (also referred to in Georgian as *'map'aluebi'*, and in Russian as *'mapaluisty'*).<sup>14</sup> Beria listed the supposed participants, indicating that they were former aristocrats, social federalists and Mensheviks, and he lambasted the idea of autonomy for Mingrelians as one that was not appropriate given their level of social, economic and cultural development, and that would 'be a step backwards of 300 years'. More ominously, Beria's letter insinuated that the *Zugdidi raikom* and its leader Zhvania were complicit in supporting or encouraging the idea of autonomy:

all of this would be an irrelevant farce, if not for the fact that some officials of the *Zugdidi* organisation, including Zhvania, were supporting this campaign and its ideas. Zhvania hasn't studied the matter properly as a Marxist, and is under the influence of [the former nobleman] Dadiani. He probably doesn't realise how bad it looks that an old Party member dances to the tune of a former aristocrat. (Beria 1925, p. 1)

Zhvania played down the accusations and distanced himself from demands for Mingrelian status. He replied with an open letter in the next edition of *komunisti* on 15 September, again on the front page, in which he denied his association with the *map'aluebi*, and disavowed the concept of Mingrelian autonomy:

My opinion on this issue has not been uncertain or hesitant: autonomy for Mingrelia is the idea of a handful of dreamers and does not reflect the will of the working people; it does not meet their political, cultural or economic interests or meet the country's objective conditions; ... [this is] a dangerous venture [*avantiura*] initiated by rash gamblers [*avantiuristebi*]. Soviet power cannot and should not take a step. (Zhvania 1925, p. 1)

More front page open letters followed over the course of the next several days, all criticising the idea of Mingrelian autonomy as both intentionally divisive between Mingrelians and other Georgians, and as great power chauvinism in that it replicated the attempts of the Tsarist administration to use Mingrelian language and identity as a means to divide and rule the Georgians in the late nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> A public meeting was held on 23 September in the Rustaveli Drama Theatre in Tbilisi of Mingrelian public figures residing in the capital, at which speakers one after another, including the renowned writer Konstantine

<sup>14</sup>As the contemporary Georgian historian Aleksandre Daushvili (2000, pp. 145–81) points out, if such a meeting took place at all, it may have been instigated by the *Cheka* itself.

<sup>15</sup>It seems significant that all of these letters were published on the front page of the paper, which like in other Soviet regional newspapers in the period was usually devoted to reproducing important union-level headlines and international news, and that the public discussion took place only in the Georgian-language organ and, contrary to more usual practice, was not mentioned at all in the Russian-language organ *Zarya vostoka*.

Gamsakhurdia, criticised the *map'aluebi* and the concept that the Mingrelian language is a separate one from Georgian and that Mingrelia could be an autonomous entity.<sup>16</sup>

*The 'cultural revolution' and the 'Mingrelian question' reframed*

The topic was revived several months later in Mingrelia itself, when officials of the Darcheli district Party bureau accused the leadership of the Zugdidi regional committee, including Zhvania, of agitating for Mingrelian autonomy and 'inciting discord between Mingrelia and the rest of Georgia' (Daushvili 2000, p. 148). Led by Darcheli Party Secretary Mikha Mamporia, the 'Darcheli opposition' argued that the Zugdidi leadership was exploiting the issue only as a means to expand their own power base and were attempting to frighten the peasants into supporting their cause. The Darcheli Party committee appealed to the Georgian TsK to 'remove these individuals from the region' (Daushvili 2000, p. 148). Zhvania and his colleagues appear to have been able to use their influence to counter this threat, and Mamporia and his supporters in Darcheli were themselves expelled from the Party and their accusations labelled baseless slander. As the Georgian historian A. Daushvili argued, 'at this point the Georgian TsK was unwilling to spoil relations with the Zugdidi *raikom*, and they closed their eyes to Mamporia's accusations' (Daushvili 2000, p. 148).

The issue remained dormant for the next several years, although in mid-1926 several collective letters and petitions were sent in the name of the 'workers of Mingrelia' to the Georgian TsK. These letters contained no mention of autonomy, but focused rather on requests for the publication of a newspaper in Mingrelian and that Mingrelian be used in schools and for government paperwork.<sup>17</sup> This change in emphasis towards linguistic *korenizatsiya* rather than territorial demands is significant, as it would characterise the findings of the All-Union Central Committee Commission under K. F. Pshenitsyn that visited Zugdidi in the summer of 1928. In his final report to Tbilisi and Moscow, and in his speech at the 4th Plenum of the Georgian Central Committee on 25 September 1928, Pshenitsyn suggested that the implementation of Party policy might be facilitated by the publication of brochures in the Mingrelian language.<sup>18</sup> The Zugdidi Party delegate G. Gabunia supported this proposal, emphasising that while any talk of Mingrelian independence should be considered unacceptable, supporting the Mingrelian language was in line with Soviet nationality policy, as 'nobody should be opposed to a Mingrelian peasant being able to read something in his native language'.<sup>19</sup> The Georgian Bolshevik Akaki Kobakhidze<sup>20</sup> disagreed, warning of a slippery slope: 'If today you publish brochures in Mingrelian, the day after tomorrow you create an autonomous republic'.<sup>21</sup> Daushvili points out that the most significant effect of the Pshenitsyn committee resulted not from the cautious suggestions of its chairman, but from a letter by one of its members, an Azerbaijani

<sup>16</sup>This was recounted in detail in *komunisti* and summarised briefly in the Russian-language organ *Zarya vostoka*. See 'samegrelos "avtonomistebis" šinaaǵmdeg: tp'ilisši mc'xovreḅ samegrelos mkvidrt'a kreba', *komunisti*, 24 September 1925; 'Mingrel'skie avtonomisty: Sobranie mingrel'tsev', *Zaria vostoka*, 24 September 1925.

<sup>17</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 6, d. 266, ll. 268, 273–74.

<sup>18</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 4, d. 5, ll. 108–9.

<sup>19</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 4, d. 5, l. 109.

<sup>20</sup>Known to history as the Georgian TsK member who was struck in the face by Sergo Orjonikidze during the 'Georgian Affair' in 1922.

<sup>21</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 4, d. 5, l. 109.

named Seit Kadyrov, sent in early 1929 to the All-Union Central Committee and the Control Commission.<sup>22</sup> In his letter, which ‘triggered the resonance like the explosion of a bomb among the leadership of the Georgian TsK’, Kadyrov stated that during the commission’s visit to Zugdidi 300 people came out to express their anger at ‘Georgian rule’ and to demand autonomy and protection of their cultural and linguistic rights (Daushvili 2000, pp. 160–61).<sup>23</sup> By bringing the Mingrelian issue to the attention of the central authorities in Moscow and in framing it in the context of Georgian ‘great power chauvinism’, the Georgian leadership could no longer sweep it under the rug, and had to deal with it within the context and vocabulary of Soviet nationality policy.

With the start of Stalin’s ‘revolution from above’, unlike the New Economic Policy (NEP), the conciliatory nationality policy of the 1920s (that some have argued was the ethnic corollary to NEP) was, contrary to the expectations of some, bolstered rather than phased out (Martin 2001, p. 240; Slezkine 1994, p. 236). As part of what is often referred to as the ‘cultural revolution’ (Fitzpatrick 1978),<sup>24</sup> throughout the union there was renewed support for the cultural autonomy of minorities and ‘a feast of ethnic fertility, and exuberant national carnival sponsored by the Party’ (Slezkine 1994, p. 438) that Stalin himself referred to as a ‘flowering of national culture’.<sup>25</sup> The new atmosphere that resulted from this ‘escalation’ of the nation-building campaign<sup>26</sup> seemed to have emboldened Zhvania. In a seeming reversal of his outright denials of 1925, at the 2nd Plenum of the Zugdidi *raikom* on 31 March 1929 Zhvania now brought up both the creation of a Mingrelian district and support for the Mingrelian language, while framing both issues firmly within the Bolshevik lexicon. He began by arguing that the ‘special conditions’ of the Mingrelian peasantry and the ‘new principles of territorial delimitation’ would allow the creation of a large district combining Mingrelia and Svaneti, including also the port city of Poti and possibly even the central city of Kutaisi, to facilitate the implementation of industrialisation and collectivisation. He then moved on to the instrumental necessity of support for the Mingrelian language: ‘Why have we, the Zugdidi Party leadership, brought the issue of the Mingrelian language before the Central Committee? Because the fundamental issue for the peasantry is their enlightenment, that working peasants can best understand their political and economic interests in their native language’. Citing Marx, Zhvania emphasised the functional role of language and argued that Mingrelian was necessary in the region ‘as a medium, and not as a principle’ because of the peasants’ weak knowledge of Georgian. ‘Village Soviet chairmen and the secretariats don’t know Georgian well enough, and they translate the circulars terribly. This obstructs us from implementing collectivisation’. Referring back to the 1925 discussion, he argued that the fundamental problem then was not the ‘Mingrelian question’ in and of itself, but rather the fact that ‘it had

<sup>22</sup>A copy of the Kadyrov letter is held among Nestor Lakoba’s personal papers at the Hoover Institute: see ‘1929 May, Kadyrov, Seid, report (“strictly confidential”) on the national question in Georgia’, Hoover Institution Archives (HIA), N. A. Lakoba Papers, Box 2, Folder 42.

<sup>23</sup>See also Georgian Party First Secretary M. Kakhiani’s harsh criticism of Kadyrov and his letter at the 4th Georgian Party Conference in July 1929, *sak’art’velos šss ark’ivi* (II), f. 14, o. 4, d. 273, ll. 91–92.

<sup>24</sup>Francine Hirsch (2005, fn. 29) prefers to refer to this cultural revolution as ‘a campaign on the “ideological front”’.

<sup>25</sup>In his speech to the 16th Party Conference in June 1930 (Martin 2001, p. 243). As Martin points out, (pp. 245–48) Stalin began to publicly ‘intervene’ in the nationalities question to solidify this line of policy from February 1929.

<sup>26</sup>What Slezkine (1994, pp. 437–40) refers to as ‘The Great Transformation’.



not been raised in the proper manner', that it had not been initiated by the Party and therefore 'took on an ugly, un-Marxist tone', and 'those who raised the question [in 1925] made a real mess of it'.<sup>27</sup>

Zhvania and his colleagues continued this line at the 4th Congress of the Georgian Party in early July 1929, pushing the autonomy issue into the background and focusing on the practical need for Mingrelian language rights. Gabunia emphasised that there were rural areas where the peasants could not understand Georgian and that 'Communist culture must be conveyed to them in their own language', and stressed that in many places the peasants spoke only Mingrelian.<sup>28</sup> Georgian TsIK Presidium Chairman M. G. Tskhakaia expressed criticism, and Session chairman and Georgian TsK member A. M. Lezhava emphasised that 'I must not say that I'm a Mingrelian or a Rachan and that everything must be in my language. We're all Georgians and our foundation is the Georgian dialect [sic]'.<sup>29</sup> (Tskhakaia and Lezhava, both important figures in the Georgian Communist Party, were themselves known to be of Mingrelian origin.) Lezhava's speech provoked a furious reaction from the Zugdidi delegates, who repeated that the publication of materials in Mingrelian posed no danger to the status of Georgian. A. Urushadze, who had been a member of the Azatyan investigatory commission in 1925, supported the Zugdidi delegation's appeals.<sup>30</sup>

In a move similar to that of his colleague, the Abkhazian leader Nestor Lakoba, Zhvania met with Stalin in Sochi to discuss the 'Mingrelian question'. As Zhvania later wrote, 'we decided to "half officially" inform Comrade Stalin, and the Zugdidi *uezd* Party Conference "illegally" sent me to see Stalin in Sochi, and on September 12, 1929 I briefed him about everything'.<sup>31</sup> Zhvania claimed that Stalin promised to 'study' the problem and to 'take steps to resolve the issues' of Mingrelian autonomy and language, which Zhvania interpreted to mean 'Stalin gave the order' that these things be granted.<sup>32</sup>

Either as the result of Zhvania's agitation and appeals to Stalin or because of the more general policy towards the 'flowering of nations' of the 'cultural revolution', the Georgian leadership conceded to the Mingrelian demands. In September 1929, the Georgian TsK agreed to review the resolution of the Zugdidi *raikom* on the publishing of a newspaper in Mingrelian, and on 26 October the Secretariat of the Georgian TsK issued a resolution that acquiesced to all of the Zugdidi leadership's language demands: it authorised the conducting of official paperwork in regional, district and village executive committees and soviets and in courts in Mingrelian 'in those parts of Mingrelia where the majority do not understand Georgian'; the use of Mingrelian in primary schools 'as an enabling language to explain subjects', while Georgian would remain the standard language of education; the publication of a Mingrelian-language newspaper for the 'peasant and collective farm masses'; and the conducting of the literacy campaign (*likbez*) among the adult population in Mingrelian and the publication of propaganda materials and *likbez* textbooks in Mingrelian.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 28, o. 1, d. 718, ll. 15–26.

<sup>28</sup> According to the stenogram, this drew shouts of 'That's not true!' from the hall. See sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 4, d. 273, ll. 279–85.

<sup>29</sup> sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 4, d. 273, ll. 295, 388–90.

<sup>30</sup> sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 4, d. 273, ll. 571–74.

<sup>31</sup> sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 63. Zhvania was re-elected to the Georgian TsK at the Congress, despite the motion of Georgian TsK Member E. Pirtskulava to block his nomination. See sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 274, l. 491.

<sup>32</sup> sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 274, l. 491.

<sup>33</sup> sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 274, ll. 62–63.

*The institutional response of the republican centre: redistricting*

Yet while this resolution made wide-ranging concessions to linguistic *korenizatsiya*, the Georgian Central Committee quietly struck back at the Zugdidi leadership by invoking its right of redistricting, or *raionirovanie*,<sup>34</sup> to divide up the already small Zugdidi region [*mazra*]<sup>35</sup> into four new separate and even smaller districts [*t'emebi*],<sup>36</sup> the Zugdidi, Tsalenjika, Khobi and Chkhorotsqu districts, each with their own Party committees.<sup>37</sup> The redistricting was taking place throughout the union, and although it was originally conceived of as a means to facilitate economic planning, it inevitably had political implications.<sup>38</sup> Zhvania later claimed that work had begun on the formation of a consolidated Mingrelian region by the start of 1930, but that this was halted by the decision of the central authorities in Moscow on the union-wide dissolution of the regions [*okruga*] by October of that year. 'We didn't think that this would affect the Mingrelian *okrug*',<sup>39</sup> he complained, 'as it did not affect the other minority nationalities, such as Abkhazia, Ajaristan, Ossetia, Karachai, Ingushetia, and so on'.<sup>40</sup> Zhvania claimed to have received support at the 16th Party Conference in June–July 1930, when Mikhail Kalinin insisted, over the objection of Georgian TsIK Chairman Shalva Eliava, that 'We will give the Mingrelians an *oblast*'!<sup>41</sup> The Georgian Central Committee, however, used the pretext of redistricting to undermine this. Its resolution of 28 July 1930 stated that 'in conjunction with the implementation of *raionirovanie*, the creation of a separate Mingrelian *okrug* is not considered expedient', although it went on to endorse the earlier resolution on the publishing of a Mingrelian newspaper and the use of Mingrelian in *likbez* campaigns and in official and court paperwork.<sup>42</sup> The Zugdidi leadership protested this resolution to the *Zakkraikom*, arguing that 'separate regions will not be able to assure the implementation of the [October 1929] TsK resolution, so therefore we asked the *Zakkraikom* to leave in force the formula of a separate Mingrelian *okrug* or *oblast*' executive committee without a central executive or Party committee'.<sup>43</sup> Zhvania emphasised the 'instructions' of Stalin and Kalinin regarding this issue, but *Zakkraikom* Secretary Beso Lominadze was not sympathetic: 'they didn't take it seriously, and made fun of the Mingrelian question. We wanted to complain to a higher authority, but Lominadze threatened us, so we had to be silent and obey'.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the setback on the territorial issue, the Zugdidi leadership set to work immediately to implement the language measures (using a slightly modified Georgian script). Official paperwork was implemented rapidly, and publication of *qazaqishi gazet'i*, the new

<sup>34</sup>In this case micro, or *nizovoe raionirovanie*. See Martin (2001, pp. 33–35).

<sup>35</sup>Referred to in Russian language documents as '*uezd*'.

<sup>36</sup>Referred to in Russian language documents as '*raiony*'.

<sup>37</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 28.

<sup>38</sup>For a comprehensive discussion of the redistricting and nationality policy throughout the USSR, see Martin (2001, pp. 34–36).

<sup>39</sup>In Georgian-language documents the Russian '*okrug*' is rendered as '*olk'i*'. When writing in Russian, Zhvania and others often used '*okrug*' and '*oblast*' interchangeably, however in Georgian the term '*olk'i*' was used more consistently.

<sup>40</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 64.

<sup>41</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 64.

<sup>42</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 65.

<sup>43</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 66.

<sup>44</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 66.

Mingrelian-language organ of the Zugdidi regional committee, began from 1 March 1930. Preparations started for a similar Mingrelian newspaper in the neighbouring Gali district in Abkhazia, titled *mshromeli qazaqi*, which began publication the following year (Bakradze 1947, pp. 108, 115). In late 1930, the Georgian TsK appointed a commission to study the implementation of the October 1929 resolution on the Mingrelian question, to which Zhvania expressed his frustrations in a letter on 9 December 1930. The use of Mingrelian for official and court paperwork was not guaranteed in all of the Mingrelian districts, or even in all of the Zugdidi region, he reported. 'What do our efforts to implement the TsK resolution meet with? Complaining, chuckling and making fun of the Mingrelian newspaper', Zhvania complained. Similarly, the attitude towards publishing *likbez* materials and textbooks in Mingrelian was dismissive, and 'they [the Georgian central leadership] support us in words, but ignore us in actions'. Resistance to the measures came from the leadership of the newly formed districts in Mingrelia, who were 'doing everything they can to be obstructive', and they were supported in this by 'both the Mingrelian and the Georgian bourgeois-chauvinist intelligentsia'.<sup>45</sup> What was more, 'certain Communists' had the impudence to criticise the Mingrelian newspaper, despite the fact that it was an official publication of the Party:

Why should there be special conditions for the Mingrelian paper? Making fun of other papers is not allowed, but doing so with regard to the Mingrelian paper is ok? The Mingrelian newspaper, like other papers of small nationalities, is the creation of the October Revolution, published by the Communist Party. Speaking against its existence should be punishable, no matter who is doing it, as it is against other papers in the USSR.<sup>46</sup>

This resistance to implementation that Zhvania described on the part of the leadership of the new districts that resulted from the Georgian Central Committee's redistricting of the Zugdidi region, and especially from the heads of the Tsalenjika and Chkhorotsqu districts, shows how powerful a tool this decision was against Zhvania and his colleagues in the Zugdidi leadership. The local Party chairmen of those districts, Ubiria and Begi Beria, had previously been supporters of Mingrelian autonomy, but it seemed that now preservation of their new positions and privileges took priority. Zhvania tried to win back their support by subsidising those districts out of the Zugdidi city budget, but to no avail. These new local elites, in Zhvania's opinion, had become agents of Lominadze, trying purposefully to discredit the Zugdidi leadership in order to get rid of it. The most competent personnel had been removed from Tsalenjika and Chkhorotsqu, he said, and were replaced by 'former Trotskyites'. This in turn was causing foot-dragging in other Mingrelian districts: 'Secretaries of village soviets are resisting, saying that other regions aren't switching over [to paperwork in Mingrelian]. These petty bureaucrats know how certain leaders in the centre feel about this issue, and therefore they resist implementation'.<sup>47</sup>

#### *The local argument of past oppression*

At this point Zhvania attempted to state the case for Mingrelians as a formerly oppressed people. Lominadze allegedly told Zhvania directly that 'I consider everything that is

<sup>45</sup> sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 31.

<sup>46</sup> sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 31.

<sup>47</sup> sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 34.

happening with regard to the Mingrelian question and the publishing of the Mingrelian newspaper and literature and creating a separate Mingrelian region to be an aristocratic charade, and we must put an end to this dirty affair'.<sup>48</sup> In response to this, Zhvania argued that historically the aristocrats had opposed the Mingrelian language. The nobleman Niko Dadiani had written to the Guria–Mingrelia Bishop in the mid-nineteenth century that 'Your Excellency and I and all of our contemporaries know that in our houses the servants do not speak in the presence of the master in this despicable worm language "*megruli*". Even the peasants call Mingrelians worms'.<sup>49</sup> The Georgian–Imeretian Synod in 1898 forbade the translation of prayer books and textbooks into Mingrelian, as this 'would be an artificial provoking of anti-Christian ideas and blasphemous doctrines'.<sup>50</sup> Zhvania thus accused Lominadze and others in the Georgian and TSFSR leadership of themselves supporting the 'bourgeois-aristocratic' position and of violating Soviet nationality policy:

Besides Lominadze there are others in the leading organs who do not share the views of Comrade STALIN on the Mingrelian question and of those activities mandated by the Georgian Central Committee. Those who disagree are opposing Leninist–Stalinist nationality policy. This means revising the Leader [*Vozhd'*] of the Party, even though in relation to the tiny Mingrelian question. This, in my opinion, is a *deviation*, against which we must struggle. The Leader of the Party must be agreed with on all issues, this is the essential definition of Bolshevism. To be a Leninist until lunch, and then a Kautskyite till dinner, this is already the behaviour of a Menshevik. Mingrelians are peasants, like the Abkhaz, Ossetians and the Lezgins, and we must treat them and their linguistic particularities with care, and not make fun of them.<sup>51</sup>

Thus to disagree on the issue was not simply to be wrong, it was to subscribe to an anti-Soviet deviation. Zhvania emphasised that 'I have personally informed Comrades Orjonikidze and Kaganovich in Borjomi in September 1930 in detail of how Lominadze had provoked us, and me in particular', and he implored the Georgian Central Committee Commission 'to clarify the affair in detail and bring it to the attention of the Georgian Party organisation and punish the guilty'.<sup>52</sup>

*The ascension of Beria and renewed conflict over the 'Mingrelian question'*

In the autumn of 1931 a dramatic change in the leadership took place in Tiflis, as the Transcaucasus network supported by Orjonikidze was removed and replaced by the secret police-based network of Lavrenti Beria. Lominadze and his clients had been purged from the *Zakkraikom* following a TsK decree in December 1930 condemning his 'factionalism' in opposing Stalin's policies together with S. I. Syrtsov (Suny 1994, p. 263). In October 1931 his successor L. I. Kartvelishvili, who, like Lominadze had been close to Orjonikidze, was removed as both Secretary of the *Zakkraikom* and First Secretary of the Georgian Party

<sup>48</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 34.

<sup>49</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 34.

<sup>50</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 34. Here Zhvania quotes from *Spravka ukazanii Gruzino-Imeritinskoi Sinodal'noi kontory ot 9-go marta 1898 g., No. 2132, no. 17.*

<sup>51</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 36.

<sup>52</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 36. In his later closed letter to Stalin, Zhvania mentioned that the Commission spent a month investigating the issue, but the Georgian Central Committee stalled for months on hearing its report. See sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, ll. 70–71.

Central Committee, and replaced in the latter position by Beria.<sup>53</sup> The rise of the Beria network to the leadership of the Georgian Party organisation seems to have given new impetus to the Mingrelian question. For the first time, Zhvania now faced a rebellion from within his own organisation, when in late October a letter was sent to the Georgian TsK, the *Zakkraikom*, the TsK in Moscow, and personally to Stalin, by two members of the Zugdidi Party Committee: V. Bokuchava<sup>54</sup> and M. Pertakhia.<sup>55</sup> They began by stating their approval of the linguistic measures of the October 1929 Georgian TsK resolution, such as the Mingrelian newspaper and brochures and *likbez* materials, but they argued that these things had been hijacked by Zhvania and his sympathisers: 'Instead of concrete struggle with the appearance of nationalism in practice in all its varied forms, the paper encourages an appeasing attitude towards specific local chauvinists, who are known as *map'aluebi*, and has become derailed from the Leninist path in its goals'.<sup>56</sup> Worse, instead of being used as an instrument to propagandise to the masses in their own language, 'it became a goal in and of itself'. As its chief editor, Zhvania was attempting to use the paper to develop Mingrelian as a literary language distinct from Georgian and thereby to argue the separate national status of Mingrelians, through reviving archaic Mingrelian words or creating neologisms for technical and political terms and using them in place of the Georgian loan words usually used in spoken Mingrelian, and where that was not possible, he introduced Russian words rather than use Georgian ones.<sup>57</sup> His campaign to develop literary Mingrelian, they asserted, was continued through his plans to publish the six-volume works of Lenin in Mingrelian, even though this had not yet been published in Georgian, and to publish other economic, political and artistic literature in Mingrelian. 'It's one thing to publish propaganda brochures in Mingrelian', they wrote, 'but this is going too far—this is an attempt to artificially create a Mingrelian culture, and Mingrelia has never had a culture independent of Georgia'.<sup>58</sup>

Bokuchava and Pertakhia then contended that the ultimate aim of Zhvania and his supporters in asserting the specificity of Mingrelian language and culture was to achieve the political goal of the creation of an autonomous *olk'i*.<sup>59</sup> Zhvania, they said, had been spreading rumours that the only thing that could prevent the three new districts (Tsalenjika, Chkhorotsqu and Khobi) from being eventually eliminated was the formation of such an *olk'i*, and Zhvania's supporters were 'carrying out agitation throughout the region that to oppose the *olk'i* was to oppose the building of new schools, hospitals, cultural institutions, and the building of new roads and apartment buildings, and that an autonomous *olk'i* would guarantee us millions of rubles in subsidies from the All-Union Fund'. Zhvania based his argument for autonomy, they complained, on the arguments that an *olk'i* would allow for the proper implementation of the TsK resolution measures and for the better realisation of the sowing and requisitioning

<sup>53</sup>Beria became Second Secretary of the *Zakkraikom* on 30 October and then First Secretary of the Georgian Central Committee on 14 November. He was appointed *Zakkraikom* First Secretary a year later in October 1932. For a discussion of how Beria subverted Orjonikidze's client network in the Transcaucasus and then supplanted it with his own, see Blauvelt (2011, pp. 77–78).

<sup>54</sup>Regional Committee *Politbyuro* member and Culture and Propaganda Section head.

<sup>55</sup>Regional Committee *Politbyuro* candidate member and Regional Labour Union Chairman.

<sup>56</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 46.

<sup>57</sup>Bokuchava and Pertakhia alleged that, upon finding out that the Gali regional committee planned to publish its own peasant newspaper using a simpler version of the language, Zhvania was furious and used his connections with the Abkhazian leadership to have the project quashed.

<sup>58</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 46.

<sup>59</sup>See footnote 39.

campaigns of collectivisation. Zhvania and his ‘agents’ were ‘spreading provocations in all the regions of Mingrelia, as if Comrade Zhvania has “brought us autonomy from Moscow” and that therefore nobody has the right to oppose this’, and they were pressing the regional leadership in Tsalenjika, Khobi, Chkhorotsqu and also in Gali, ‘as if they don’t have the right to represent the working masses in their own districts’.<sup>60</sup> Finally, Zhvania’s claim that Mingrelia deserved autonomous status because, like Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it was culturally and economically ‘backwards’ was, in the opinion of Bokuchava and Pertakhia, unfounded:

Zhvania’s wailings that the Mingrelians have ‘specific’ cultural conditions, like the Abkhaz and Ossetians, are without basis. Mingrelians are not ‘backwards’ economically, politically or culturally, but instead have significantly outstripped some other regions of Georgia in areas such as collectivisation, local industry, *likbez* and technical education. There are a great number of Mingrelian Party cadres, and they can be found all over Georgia and in other republics. It is true that a small percentage of the Mingrelian population—about 40%, and not in all regions—cannot understand Georgian well, but this problem has already been effectively solved by the Bolshevik resolution of the [Georgian] TsK.<sup>61</sup>

As Daushvili observed, it is impossible to know what motivated Bokuchava and Pertakhia to attack their own regional leader in this way, whether it was out of personal convictions, political interests, or if they had been put up to the task by the Georgian leadership (Daushvili 2000, pp. 172–73). Regardless, Zhvania answered with all the force he could muster. In a demonstration of unity within the Zugdidi leadership, he summoned a plenary session of the Zugdidi *Politbyuro*, regional committee and regional control commission on 11 November 1931, which issued a sharply worded resolution denouncing the letter of Bokuchava and Pertakhia as ‘slander that could come only from the camp of Trotskyites and right-opportunist elements’.<sup>62</sup> The actions of the Zugdidi leadership were in line with the Georgian TsK resolution, and if Mingrelia was in fact not ‘backwards’ and had outstripped other regions of Georgia, then this was due to the successful work of the Zugdidi leadership in implementing the measures of that resolution. Finally, given the recent change in the leadership of the Georgian TsK<sup>63</sup> and the supposed endorsement of their position by Stalin, the Zugdidi leadership requested that the issue of an autonomous Mingrelian *olk’i* be brought up once again for consideration.<sup>64</sup> The resolution was signed by 37 members of the Zugdidi Party administration. On 19 November Zhvania sent a 15-page ‘Closed Letter on the Mingrelian Question’ addressed to Stalin, Kaganovich and the *Politbyuro* in which he gave a detailed account of his version of events related to the issue and reiterated his plea to take the linguistic measures to their logical conclusion by creating Mingrelian autonomy, all in the name of facilitating the policies of the Party and the implementation of Soviet power, and of strengthening the Georgian SSR rather than weakening it.<sup>65</sup> Zhvania then addressed an official letter to Beria, dated 20 November,

<sup>60</sup> sak’art’velos šss ark’ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, ll. 46–47.

<sup>61</sup> sak’art’velos šss ark’ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 47.

<sup>62</sup> That Trotsky was associated with the ‘left opposition’ rather than the ‘right’ one perhaps demonstrates that the political implications of such an accusation were more significant than the ideological content, *per se*. For a discussion of the left and right oppositions and the national question, see Martin (2001, pp. 228–38).

<sup>63</sup> i.e. the appointment of Beria.

<sup>64</sup> sak’art’velos šss ark’ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, ll. 17–23.

<sup>65</sup> sak’art’velos šss ark’ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, ll. 59–73.

requesting that the new leadership in Tbilisi give consideration and final resolution to the issues of the formation of the Mingrelian *olk'i* and the full use of Mingrelian in schools.<sup>66</sup>

On 23 November Bokuchava sent another letter addressed to the TsK in Moscow, with copies to the Georgian and Zugdidi committees, in which he reported that Zhvania at a bureau meeting said that they were using the phrase 'Mingrelian *olk'i*' and not using the term 'autonomous' as a 'tactical consideration'.<sup>67</sup> On 10 December the Georgian Communist Akaki Kobakhidze delivered an eight-page report 'On the Mingrelian Question' to the bureau of the Georgian TsK.<sup>68</sup> Picking up a theme that Bokuchava mentioned in his 23 November letter, Kobakhidze argued that Mingrelians were 'not a nation' in the 'scientific' sense of Stalin's definition from his 1913 *Marxism and the National Question* (Stalin 1942), because they lacked a separate culture, and that they could not be considered 'backwards' because their conditions did not differ significantly from those of surrounding, non-Mingrelian districts of Georgia. Like Boduchava and Pertakhia, Kobakhidze spoke supportively of the linguistic measures of the Georgian TsK as temporary means to an end, but attacked Zhvania and his supporters for misusing these measures as an end in themselves, to create a separate Mingrelian literary language with the goal of pursuing territorial autonomy:

Today a great deal of money is spent on publishing the *qazaqishi gazet'i* in Zugdidi, but instead of using the common language understood by the Mingrelian peasants, it is impossible to understand for the readers because Zhvania and his supporters are trying to implement new and totally obscure words in order to prove the existence of a Mingrelian literary language and to show a huge gap between Mingrelian and Georgian. In this way Zhvania is trying to prove the necessity of autonomy.<sup>69</sup>

Kobakhidze attributed Zhvania's success in pursuing his 'anti-Soviet' campaign for Mingrelian autonomy to the 'political spinelessness' on the part of the previous Georgian leadership, argued that Zhvania fought against the *raionirovanie* of the Zugdidi region into smaller districts, and that the leaders of these new districts were firmly opposed to Zhvania's 'unjustifiable nationalism'. In January 1931, he wrote, the regional committees of all of the Mingrelian districts, except for Zugdidi, appealed to the Georgian TsK to remove Zhvania from Mingrelia 'as an anti-Communist who obstructs the implementation of the decisions taken by the Central Committee'.<sup>70</sup>

A letter to Stalin from a student from Chkhorotsqu studying at the Institute of Pig Breeding in Moscow of 7 October 1931 showed the hostility of local officials to the Mingrelian language policies:

the middle and poor peasantry of the collective farms express their frustration that the Mingrelian newspaper *qazaqishi gazet'i* that is published in Zugdidi doesn't reach them, and the regional officials obstruct its distribution and spread rumours that it will be closed, while at the same time the peasants know that thousands of copies are distributed in Zugdidi, Gali and other districts.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>66</sup>Sending this together with copies of the 11 November *plenum* resolution, his closed letter to Moscow and his December 1930 letter to the commission of the Georgian Central Committee.

<sup>67</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, ll. 80–81.

<sup>68</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, ll. 84–91. The front page bears a note in Beria's handwriting: 'Distribute to TsK secretaries, L.B.'

<sup>69</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 90.

<sup>70</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 91.

<sup>71</sup>Copy of letter of Avto Kachkebia to Stalin, sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 113.

They were also frustrated with the fact that paperwork in their district had not been switched into Mingrelian, unlike in Zugdidi and other places, where its use ‘significantly simplifies work’, and that cultural activities were conducted only in Georgian, ‘a language they do not understand’.<sup>72</sup> A protocol from a meeting of the Party *aktiv* of the village of Lia in the Tsalenjika district on 14 March 1932 would seem to demonstrate that the *raionirovanie* of the Zugdidi region was motivated more by political reasons rather than by practical considerations. In this protocol, the village Party members complain that the attachment of Lia to the Tsalenjika district was unworkable since there were no good roads or means of communication with Tsalenjika, that competent personnel were forced to ‘run away’ from Tsalenjika because of poor living conditions and salaries, and that the lack of communication and distribution routes cut them off from vital goods such as oil and kerosene. They therefore implored the Georgian leadership to rejoin their village instead to the Zugdidi district.<sup>73</sup> Meanwhile, on 23 January Pertakhia sent a letter to Beria claiming that Zhvania and his supporters were making life impossible for him in Zugdidi, and asked to be transferred.<sup>74</sup> Bokuchava, now ‘attached’ [*momagrebuli*] to the Tsalenjika district, on 28 March 1932 sent a note to Beria stating that residents of the village of Chkadua in the Zugdidi district had made a declaration claiming that they were being persecuted for opposing the policies of the Zugdidi leadership and asking to be transferred from that district.<sup>75</sup>

Throughout 1932 Zhvania and the Zugdidi leadership continued issuing missives, with no apparent response from Tiflis. On 10 October the Zugdidi committee and its bureau issued a resolution that again celebrated the timeliness of the Georgian TsK resolution on language measures, but stated that the implementation of these measures was ‘undermined first of all by the refusal to formulate the issue of a Mingrelian *oblast*’. The Zugdidi Party organisation therefore ‘as in past years, and now as much as ever, unanimously seeks the intercession of the Georgian TsK to resolve in the positive sense this issue of the formation of a Mingrelian *oblast*’.<sup>76</sup> Shortly afterwards another collective letter was sent by a *plenum* of the Zugdidi regional committee and bureau (signed by 25 members), this time addressed to Beria and to Georgian Central Executive Committee Chairman Pilipe Makharadze, stating that Makharadze had promised in the spring that the Mingrelian *oblast*’ question would be brought up once the sowing campaign had finished, but that autumn had already begun and there was no movement on the issue. Quoting Makharadze, the resolution stated that ‘not resolving this issue by the 15th anniversary of October would be a great crime’, that ‘if anyone is still playing tricks and saying that the Mingrelian peasant is against the Mingrelian language and the Mingrelian *oblast*’, this is clearly counterrevolutionary slander against the Mingrelian working peasantry’, and that attempts to argue otherwise were ‘an anti-Soviet provocation’.<sup>77</sup> The Mingrelian worker-peasants ‘as one desire the Mingrelian language and a Mingrelian *oblast*’, this is how it should be, as this is the Leninist demand’.

<sup>72</sup>sak’art’velos šss ark’ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 113.

<sup>73</sup>sak’art’velos šss ark’ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, ll. 184–86. Zhvania had earlier been accused of trying to wrest the villages of Lia and Pakhulani away from the Tsalenjika district to increase his own influence. See ll. 29–30 in the same file.

<sup>74</sup>sak’art’velos šss ark’ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, ll. 118–19. The first page is marked ‘Distribute to members of the bureau. L.B.’ in Beria’s handwriting.

<sup>75</sup>sak’art’velos šss ark’ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 126.

<sup>76</sup>sak’art’velos šss ark’ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 191.

<sup>77</sup>The protocols of the 2nd Zugdidi Regional Committee Party Conference, held on 12 January 1932, fix Makharadze’s presence and state that the Conference commenced following Makharadze’s address, but this address itself has not been preserved in the files. See sak’art’velos šss ark’ivi (II), f. 59, o. 1, d. 159, l. 2.



At this point a new front in the conflict opened with the publication in Mingrelian of Zhvania's memoirs, entitled 'How the Mingrelian peasantry fought for Soviet power'. The book began as an article in Georgian in the journal *revoliutsiis matiane* in February 1931, and it was published in booklet form in Mingrelian in November 1932. Zhvania's critics in the Georgian Central Committee leapt at the opportunity to accuse him of rewriting history in order to make the revolutionary struggle in Mingrelia appear separate from that in Georgia, and of setting the 'Mingrelian question' as a 'Zhvania dialectic'.<sup>78</sup> In a statement addressed to Beria on 20 January 1933, Zhvania defended the objectivity of his book, and once again demanded that 'those comrades who do not address the Mingrelian question in a Bolshevik way (*ne po bol'shevitski*) and do not implement the resolutions of the [Georgian] TsK be brought to account', and that the measures in these resolutions 'be made mandatory in all of the regions of Mingrelia, as there cannot be a resolution of the Party that is implemented in some regions, and made fun of in others'. The resolutions 'must either be implemented to the fullest in all regions of Mingrelia or they must be repealed'.<sup>79</sup>

#### *The removal of Zhvania*

By now it seems that the Georgian leadership was finally fed up, and several days later, at the start of February 1933, it took the decisive step of removing Zhvania as First Secretary of the Zugdidi Party organisation (Aslanishvili 2005, p. 34). His replacement, I. Gvasalia, immediately sent a letter to Beria detailing the state of affairs in Zugdidi following Zhvania's ouster. Gvasalia criticised Zhvania's use of patronage: 'He is an ataman who has his own supporters; sometimes officials were evaluated not according to their abilities, but according to their support for Zhvania', and he was given to pursue his personal interest through the use of 'secret agents' who were personally loyal to him. Gvasalia's sharpest criticism centred around the Mingrelian newspaper and Zhvania's book. Zhvania 'abused' the *qazaqishi gazet'i*, using it to try to create an entirely new and separate Mingrelian terminology, and 'on his own initiative and without the sanction of the Central Committee' he published his book, which distorted history and 'presented Zhvania himself as the main organiser of the peasant rebellion in Mingrelia', with the goal of presenting 'himself as the leader of the Mingrelian working masses'.<sup>80</sup> Agitation did not end with Zhvania's removal, however. In April 1933 a collective letter with dozens of signatures was sent to Stalin, Kalinin and Molotov that reiterated all of the pro-Mingrelian arguments. Georgian TsK Secretary Agniashvili, they reported, stated at a *plenum* of the Zugdidi district committee on 14 February 1933 that 'we are transferring Com. Zhvania because he overstated (*preuvelichil*) the Mingrelian question' and because the demand for autonomy was 'reactionary'.<sup>81</sup> The letter also starkly outlined the supposed economic benefits of autonomy: while Abkhazia, with a population of 230,000, received 22.5 million rubles in the 1933 budget, and Ajara with its population of 123,000

<sup>78</sup> sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 202. See also the 21 page missive entitled 'Against the falsification of the Mingrelian revolutionary movement in and the dissemination of the "Mapaluisť" idea', sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, ll. 240–61.

<sup>79</sup> sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 205.

<sup>80</sup> sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, ll. 212–13.

<sup>81</sup> sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 228.

received 13.5 million, all seven Mingrelian regions combined, with a population of more than 350,000, received only 400,000 rubles.<sup>82</sup> But by now the official policy towards nationalities had changed, and the central Georgian leadership felt no compulsion to heed further appeals. Although the official policy of supporting nation building was not abandoned, the emphasis was now placed on the larger and titular national units.<sup>83</sup> By 1933 as Yuri Slezkine points out, '[n]ationality policy had abandoned the pursuit of countless rootless nationalities in order to concentrate on a few full-fledged, fully equipped "nations"' (1994, p. 45).

### *The aftermath*

After being removed from his position in Zugdidi, Zhvania was reassigned as First Secretary of the South Ossetian ASSR, where he served until 1935. He was subsequently arrested and secretly sentenced to be shot in November 1937, and while his execution protocol concerns corruption and supposed counter-revolutionary activity as First Secretary of the South Ossetian committee, it makes no mention of his time in Zugdidi or the Mingrelian question.<sup>84</sup> After 1933 primary schooling in Zugdidi was conducted entirely in Georgian, and the use of Mingrelian in official paperwork ceased. The Mingrelian newspaper continued for two more years following Zhvania's departure, and was closed down in December 1935 (Bakradze 1947, p. 115). The Mingrelian newspaper in the Gali district of Abkhazia continued until October 1937, when it switched fully into Georgian (changing its title from *stalinuri sharati* to *stalinuri gzit'*).<sup>85</sup>

### *Conclusions*

The Mingrelian question clearly highlighted a contradiction in the imperatives of Soviet nationality policy that gave room for interpretation and negotiation of that policy in its implementation. The policy mandated nation building, and to do otherwise was considered sabotage. Yet the building of one nation might be considered the sabotaging of another. This incongruity in the policy opened a space for contradictory ways of interpreting and implementing the policy at the local level. The Mingrelian case demonstrated the ways in which local and republican elites attempted to interpret nationality policy in their favour, and the stakes that this process of categorisation of local groups and peoples into nationality categories held for them. It also showed the obstacles for minorities such as the Mingrelians to benefit from the promises of Soviet nationality policy when faced with a titular ethnicity able to use all of the institutional resources of a union republic to get its way and incorporate them into their own national project. The Mingrelian case was not unique: in other republics as well local elites sought to influence the categorisation of smaller groups to their

<sup>82</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 6, d. 266, l. 227.

<sup>83</sup>What Martin (2001, pp. 26–27) refers to as 'The Great Retreat'.

<sup>84</sup>Section I of the Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia (hereafter sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (I), also referred to as the Georgian KGB Archive), 'Protokol zasedanie' of the NKVD Troika, 22 November 1937, p. 267. Later official Soviet sources consistently gave Zhvania's year of death as 1946: k'artuli sabčot'a enc'iklopedia (1984, p. 249); Dzidzariya *et al.* (1965, pp. 177–78).

<sup>85</sup>sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, o. 11, d. 209, l. 102. On the amalgamation of Mingrelians and other sub-groups into the Georgian nationality in the 1937 and 1939 censuses, see Hirsch (2005, pp. 278–79 and 282).

advantage, such as with the Komi-Permyaks in Russia,<sup>86</sup> the Ruthenians in Ukraine, the Uighurs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the Oirots in the Kalmyk ASSR and Altai region, and the Talysh in Azerbaijan. This issue seems under-researched, perhaps because of the difficulties of access to local archives. The detailed archival materials available for the Mingrelian case sheds light on the nature of the infighting that took place over these issues of categorisation, and the roles played by politics and personalities and the ambitions of local and central figures in the realisation of nationality policy.

In Mingrelia, Zhvania and his supporters may well have been motivated in part by the desire to extend their own personal power, influence and privileges, as their opponents maintained. Yet even if this were the case, it would seem that if they had achieved their goal of creating an autonomous territory this would certainly have increased the overall allocations of resources and investment and would have consolidated and simplified the administrative structure to the benefit and advantage of the local population, and the contrary arguments of the opponents of such concessions ring hollow. The Mingrelian linguistic policies seem to have been generally popular among the population and to have been instrumental in furthering both official propaganda and the implementation of policies, despite Zhvania's attempt to make use of them for his own political aims, and there does seem to have been some popular support in Mingrelia for territorial autonomy. Based solely on the size of the Mingrelian territory and population (contentious as actual figures were), they objectively had a strong case for the privileges they sought. Many much smaller nationalities were given greater privileges, and even those nationalities within the Georgian SSR that received autonomy, such as the Abkhaz and Ossetians, were significantly smaller in terms of population. Moreover the ethnic and linguistic specificity of the Mingrelians was not necessarily less pronounced than among other nationalities around the USSR that received special status.

When the conflict reached its *apogee*, both sides struggled to frame their arguments within the context of Soviet nationality policy. Zhvania based his position on the argument that Mingrelians qualified for special privileges as a small, historically oppressed nation with a separate language and culture, and that resistance to these aims represented persecution by Georgian great power chauvinism. From his point of view, the linguistic concessions of the Georgian central authorities represented a tacit recognition of this, and they should have been carried to their logical conclusion of the creation of a separate territorial entity. The opposition to this among the Georgian central leadership—and it is certainly noteworthy that the most ardent opponents were most often themselves ethnically Mingrelian elites, for whom a separate Mingrelian identity could only limit their aspirations within the larger Georgian political arena—was centred on the argument that Mingrelians did not exist as a separate nationality from the Georgians according to Soviet (and particularly Stalin's) definition of the term, and that even if they did they were not 'oppressed' or 'backwards' and thus did not qualify for special privileges, and that the granting of such concessions would be harmful for the development of the larger Georgian nationality (which they surely viewed in its benign, formerly oppressed mode) that they themselves were in the process of elaborating. Elites in this case were clearly able to make choices about which definition of their own ethnic identity was the more beneficial to them in the given circumstances. In 1925 the Georgian leadership was willing to openly discuss the issue (although perhaps

<sup>86</sup>See the discussion in Jaats (2012) of the 'Komi question': a confrontation between the ethnically Komi leadership of the Komi Autonomous *Oblast'* and the ethnic Russian leadership of the Ural *Oblast'* over whether the Komi-Perimaks formed part of the Komi nation or were instead a separate ethnic unit.

significantly, only in the Georgian-language Party organ). After this the Georgian leadership made few public statements, aside from remarks at the 4th Georgian Party Conference in 1929, and they were resentful of the fact that the issue had been brought to the attention of the central leadership through the Kadyrov letter and Zhvania's meetings with and appeals to Moscow elites. It was only as a result of this attention from the centre, and their own vulnerability to accusations of great power chauvinism, that the Georgian leadership reluctantly consented to the linguistic measures, and they subsequently attempted to quietly diminish and subvert these concessions.

Thus at the very time when at the union level the centrally directed approach of 'flowering of nationalities' of the cultural revolution was in full swing, the Georgian Party leadership acted directly contrary to this understood direction of Soviet nationality policy by using the institutional resources of the Georgian SSR that were available to them to obstruct and undermine the Mingrelians' project. Lacking the resources that autonomous status conferred (and unlike the leaderships of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, for example), the Zhvania faction had very few institutional tools at its disposal. Ultimately the most effective instrument in subverting the aims of Zhvania and his supporters was the targeted use of redistricting (*raionirovanie*) in order to co-opt local elites with the privileges of leadership status within their own small districts (and all the benefits that went along with that) and to thus turn them from supporters of Mingrelian status into opponents. A similar tactic of co-optation seems to have been used with regard to other local opponents to Zhvania's goals within Mingrelia itself, although it is possible that these actors were also motivated by their sharing of the larger conception of Georgian nationhood for which the central Georgian authorities stood. By the time of the denouement of the conflict in early 1933, Soviet nationality policy had clearly changed such that the central authorities in Moscow were no longer as interested in the issue or in showing support for the Mingrelian appeals. At the end of the 'socialist offensive', the centrally directed nationality policy, as enunciated by Stalin himself, now shifted from one of encouraging the development of many different nationalities, however small, to one of consolidating and amalgamating them and supporting the larger (and especially titular) ethnicities. Georgian central authorities understood that they risked no sanctions from Moscow in acting more openly and putting a decisive (although still subtle) end to the question by moving Zhvania to a different region, preserving the territorial divisions of Mingrelia, and gradually eliminating the linguistic concessions and formally consolidating the Mingrelians into the larger Georgian nationality. The victory of the Georgian central leadership in the Mingrelian question was an early demonstration of this change of emphasis in Soviet nationality policy. The Mingrelian case demonstrates the ultimate limitations of the promises of Soviet nationality policy to encourage the national development of small ethnic groups when larger and more powerful groups perceived such development as a threat to their own national projects, even at those times when the centrally-directed policy line favoured precisely the smaller groups. The change in emphasis in nationality policy by the mid-1930s, while not reversing the policy of nation building in principle, clearly favoured the development of the larger and titular minorities at the expense of smaller ones, rendering the Mingrelian question moot. As before, to be on the wrong side of the Party line on the issue meant being anti-Soviet, the penalty for which had by now significantly increased.

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