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2. In the aftermath of the war the Russian Federation, Nicaragua and, recently, Venezuela and Nauru have recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. From a UN perspective, however, the two regions remain part of Georgia.
3. The Russian ‘Near Abroad’ (blizhnee zarubezh’e) consists of the now independent post-Soviet republics. Usually, this term is used to define the Russian sphere of interest.
4. See e.g. Omur Ribeiro Thomaz and Fredrick Lavoie, edited by Birgit Kachinsklishvili, Friederick Lavose, and three anonymous AT reviewers.

Fig. 1. A Russian soldier during the war.

I must protect the life and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they are. We will not allow their deaths to go unpunished. Russian President Dmitrii Medvedev, 8 August 2008

The peculiarity of the citizens addressed in Medvedev’s statement, which marked the beginning of a massive military confrontation with Georgia in August 2008, is that most of them are neither residents of the Russian Federation nor ethnically Russian. The Russian president’s stated aim of protecting Russian citizens refers to around 70,000 Ossetians living in South Ossetia, a self-proclaimed, internationally unrecognized republic at that time, juridically belonging to the state of Georgia. The majority of the South Ossetians were granted Russian citizenship in the early 2000s, as were most of the inhabitants of Abkhazia, another breakaway republic of Georgia. At the same time, attempts by the Abkhazian leadership to issue ‘national’ Abkhazian passports were encouraged by the Russian government. The breakaway region’s law on citizenship accordingly allows for dual citizenship, but only with the Russian Federation.

In Western media reports, Ossetians and Abkhazians holding Russian passports are frequently mislabelled as Russians, in the sense of ethnic Russians. In the last census, conducted in 1989, however, only about two per cent of the population in South Ossetia identified themselves as ethnic Russians. This confusion of categories ethnicizes the notion of citizenship in the public discourse to such an extent that Russian passport-holders in South Ossetia become quasi-natural subjects of the Russian state. Their primary belonging to self-proclaimed states with limited international recognition, but with a significant degree of functionality and sovereignty, is lost from view. Oddly enough, Abkhazian and South Ossetian citizenship are downplayed and ultimately invalidated not only by Georgian, but also by Russian politics.

Despite harsh criticism of the Russian military and political strategy from some Western countries (chiefly the US), the fact that there are Russian citizens in South Ossetia and Abkhazia who potentially deserve protection from the Russian Federation mostly goes unquestioned. This has only recently changed with the August 2009 report of the EU-sponsored Fact-Finding Commission on the Conflict in Georgia (IFFMCG 2009), which explicitly states that the issuing of Russian passports to the populations of South Ossetia and Abkhazia violated international law. This statement, however, remains largely ignored by the public, the media, and academic observers outside of political science and international law.

Rather than taking the Russian ‘passportization’ of South Ossetia as self-evident, I propose to explore the political ‘work’ of passports in more detail and interrogate it along the following lines: How did the dissemination of Russian passports among non-Russian extra-territorial populations come about? What were the aims driving this policy, and what entitlements were embedded? What arguments were used to legitimize it? How was this policy received on the ground? Was it supported ‘from below’? In what follows, I take these questions as a starting point for an investigation of aspects of contemporary Russian citizenship policy that carry a potential risk of leading to conflict and war. Alongside attempts to gain political control over disputed territories beyond Russian borders, this policy comprises a post-Soviet paternalistic salvage mission, directed towards the protection of extra-territorial minorities from the putative danger of genocide. This rhetoric is not restricted to titular Russian citizens, but expands to the roughly 22 million ethnic Russians residing in former Soviet territories outside the Russian Federation, and even to merely Russian-speaking communities there. In this way, the Russian government not only takes upon
itself the duty of protecting its (titular and potential) citizens wherever they are, but has also arrogated the right to defend Russian-speakers throughout the post-Soviet space. This perspective allows for an exercise of political power in any country of the Russian ‘Near Abroad’, including Georgia, Ukraine and the Baltic states.

The Georgian government, on the other hand, regards the inhabitants of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as de jure Georgian citizens. This understanding is based on a concept of citizenship tied to territory. In the Georgian state perspective, South Ossetia and Abkhazia belong to Georgia, as does the local population which – regardless of ethnic identity – consequently has to be protected from foreign aggression. In the course of daily politics, however, the emphasis is placed on protecting ethnic Georgians from ‘ethnic cleansing’, meaning their displacement from South Ossetia by ethnic Ossetians. The Russians counter-accuse the Georgians of practising genocide in South Ossetia with regard to the Ossetians.

Citizenship as a means of defining belonging and differentiating friend and foe became an area of dispute for Georgian militias during the war with Russia. The loyalty of ethnic Ossetians holding Georgian passports to the Georgian state was frequently cast into doubt, implicitly accusing them of solidarity with the enemy. In this situation, ethnicity as codified in the family name became the prime signifier of belonging and political solidarity, undermining citizenship as manifested in Georgian passports. For those Georgian citizens with a ‘dubious’ family name, proving their loyalty and affiliation with the Georgian state depended on their ability to mobilize social networks, as I shall illustrate below.

In order to understand fully the tight nexus between nationality, ethnicity and citizenship in this context, the heritage of Soviet nationality politics has to be taken into account, as I do in the final section of this article, and elaborate further in my conclusion. I argue that, paradoxically, both the devaluation and the revaluation of nationality in relation to citizenship in the Russian and Georgian cases respectively can be traced back to and at least partially explained by the shared heritage of Soviet citizenship policy. In the Georgian case, citizenship claims as derived from passports are undermined by unofficial and semi-official practices that take the family name as an indicator of nationality and hence substantive political membership. In the Russian case, on the other hand, the way citizenship is enacted and politicized points to citizenship as a stronghold for empowerment, a locus of civil rights and a sphere of political participation and consciousness. What we are witnessing here is rather the instrumentalization of citizenship to justify territorial claims, that is, a form of imperialism by civic means. This conclusion pays tribute to the call of Glick Schiller (2004) and others to revive the notion of imperialism in the analysis of transnational social and political processes. As the present example illustrates, however, the West does not have a monopoly on post-Cold War imperialism.

The Russian ‘passportization’ of South Ossetia and Abkhazia

In the 1990s, inhabitants of the then internationally unrecognized republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia did not possess passports for international travel. After having fought successfully for secession from the Georgian state (and its legal apparatus) immediately after the break-up of the Soviet Union, Abkhazia and South Ossetia both prohibited the distribution of Georgian passports, yet were unable to provide their citizens with internationally acceptable documents. Georgia, in turn, lost its political agency in these territories.

This caused serious hardships in the social and economic life of the respective populations. The self-proclaimed Republic of South Ossetia therefore filed a petition to the Russian government to grant Russian citizenship to its inhabitants, on 30 March 1992. At the time, the Russian government rejected this appeal and recognized the territorial integrity of Georgia when it joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (Luchterhandt 2008). Further attempts were made by the international community to alleviate the situation, e.g. by granting UN passports, but these were rejected by the Georgian side. Finally, the Russian government unilaterally decided to step in and start providing Russian passports in 2000, an act declared to be humanitarian and aimed at providing basic rights to human beings. This step, however, can also be interpreted as being fuelled by Putin’s policy of regaining influence over the former territories of the Soviet Union.

Holding a Russian passport usually does not entitle a citizen to social welfare support from the Russian state (only an ID card plus registration does), but the Abkhazians and South Ossetians were (and still are) granted pensions by Russia. These pensions are much higher than Georgian pensions and are administered directly by Russian state agencies in these territories.

In the present example illustrates, however, the West does not have a monopoly on post-Cold War imperialism. The latter finding puts into perspective prevailing positions in the anthropology of citizenship, which tend to depict citizenship as a stronghold for empowerment, a locus of civil rights and a sphere of political participation and consciousness. What we are witnessing here is rather the instrumentalization of citizenship to justify territorial claims, that is, a form of imperialism by civic means. This conclusion pays tribute to the call of Glick Schiller (2004) and others to revive the notion of imperialism in the analysis of transnational social and political processes. As the present example illustrates, however, the West does not have a monopoly on post-Cold War imperialism.
10. In one instance in the summer of 2008, the Georgian government provided evidence of Russian passports that were mass-produced for inhabitants of South Ossetian villages (including those with Georgian names), with made-up retrospective dates. These 50 or so passports were seized in a car that fell into Georgian hands and presented at a press conference. (Hans Gutbrod, personal communication).
11. The system of patronage largely dominates the social sphere in Georgia and is ritualized in the form of banquets, which are crucial institutions for settling one’s personal as well as business affairs (Manning 2009, Mühlfried 2006).

**Fig. 4.** South Ossetian refugees returning home from Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia.

On the level of state politics, ethnic Russians and officials who are effectively delegated by state institutions of the Russian Federation played and continue to play a leading role in South Ossetia, and to a lesser extent in Abkhazia. Senior members of government in the two republics in mid-2008 included defence ministers Barankevich (South Ossetia) and the late Sosnaliev (Abkhazia), as well as the local intelligence chief Iarovoi (South Ossetia) and interior minister Mindzaev (South Ossetia), all of whom had formerly served in intelligence services or defence ministries based in the Russian Federation.

Immediately after the war with Georgia, the presence of former Russian state administrators significantly increased in the South Ossetian cabinet, arguably under the influence of the Kremlin. Both the chief of presidential administration Bolshakov, appointed at that time, and his deputy Pavliuchkov, as well as finance minister Panteleev, had all previously worked in the same local administration in the Volga district. Prime minister Bulatsev had earlier headed the federal tax service in the Russian Federal Republic of North Ossetia. His successor Brovtsev, in turn, had been in charge of the Russian-based construction firm Vermikut before he took up office in August 2009. All these appointments indicate the geopolitical and economic importance of the regions to Russia.

Taking the Russian policy of ‘passportization’, economic aid, political involvement plus the tangible advantages of this policy for the local populations into account, Georgian fears of a creeping Russian annexation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia are understandable. On the other hand, Georgian citizenship has little to offer the respective populations in terms of economy and security, and the normative claim that they are de jure Georgian citizens sounds like a threat to most people of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

**Fig. 5.** Refugees from the conflict zone find shelter in a Georgian kindergarten.

**Georgian citizenship and nationality**

After the outbreak of the war with Russia on 7 August 2008, the Georgian fear of losing citizens and consequently territory increased further. The fear was fuelled by rumours spreading in the Georgian capital Tbilisi that Russian passports were being offered to Georgian citizens even outside of South Ossetia, in the district of Gori. True or not, these rumours suggested that Russian soldiers were equipped with plenty of blank passports and had been ordered to

...
distribute them as widely as possible. The image of citizenship portrayed here is one of a mass product.10

Georgian citizenship laws, in contrast, denote privilege. This is especially apparent with respect to dual citizenship, a policy introduced after the Rose Revolution in 2003 and granted by presidential decree. In practice, dual citizenship is provided either to ethnic Georgians residing abroad (mostly ‘proven’ by their family names), or to (mainly Western) foreigners with stable links to Georgia and the willingness to defend their second homeland. There is no indication whatsoever that the Georgian government intends to follow the Russian example by distributing Georgian passports among compact settlements of ethnic Georgians or other nationalities outside of the state’s borders.

Officially, the Georgian state recognizes its citizens irrespective of ethnicity. The reasons for this policy are largely practical. First of all, it acknowledges that Georgia’s population consists of various ethnic and religious groups. Secondly, it aims at matching Western standards in support of the country’s EU and NATO aspirations. Thirdly, it is the only strategy that can potentially include the population of the breakaway republics in the Georgian state. Senior Georgian politicians' frequent declarations of intent to grant far-reaching autonomy to South Ossetia and Abkhazia within the boundaries of the Georgian state have to be seen in this light.

In the context of war, however, the role of titular citizenship in defining state belonging significantly decreased, particularly for Ossetians holding Georgian passports, and ethnicity came to the forefront. This is exemplified by the experience of Zalina Jioyeva (name changed), an ethnic Ossetian working in Tbilisi as a domestic assistant. When, amid the confusion of the war, she paid a visit to her relatives living in villages close to South Ossetia, she was stopped and interrogated by Georgian soldiers. Asked to provide her papers, she presented her Georgian passport. The soldiers looked at the document, but rather than her titular citizenship, they were much more interested in her family name, which ‘revealed’ her Ossetian-ness. Jioyeva then had to face tough questions about her place of residence, reasons for travelling and everyday activities. It was only when one of the soldiers found a business card in her passport that the interrogation came to an end. The business card belonged to one of her employers in Tbilisi, a Swiss woman working for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Not realizing that Jioyeva was a cleaner employed privately by the OSCE staff member, the soldiers seemed to have assumed that she was embedded in transnational networks with the potential to provide protection in delicate situations like this. This is not a haphazard assumption, as the placing of business cards in passports is a common strategy at Georgian border checkpoints to hint at some kind of patronage (Pelkmans unpublished).11 Presumably scared that they could end up in trouble, the soldiers let Jioyeva go.

Although told to me as a joke in Tbilisi, this story reveals the decline of Georgian titular citizenship as a means of protection in the August war. Nationality as encoded in the family name is taking over as a signifier for belonging, and the ‘wrong’ family name implies a certain risk. Nationality here is polyvalent. On the one hand, it indicates institutionalized ethnic identity (being Ossetian);12 on the other, it refers to the nation as the state society (being a citizen of the South Ossetian republic, a member of ‘the Ossetian nation-state’). It is precisely the term’s polyvalence that makes nationality so suspicious: in the eyes of Georgian security forces, Jioyeva’s ethnic identity translates into a potential belonging to the state of the enemy. Even in relatively stable political situations, family names and nationality play significant roles in border regimes, as

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12. As formerly promoted and administered by the Soviet Union – see below.
13. Armenians frequently replace the final syllable of their family names (‘yan’) with ‘ov’ or ‘ova’ in Russia or ‘oglu’ in Turkey, and drop this syllable in English- and French-speaking countries (e.g. Charles Aznavour).
14. The primordial and territorialized notion of nationality still prevails in most post-Soviet societies. More often than not, the titular nations control the state resources, and members of other nationalities, despite nominally being equal citizens, are deprived of full rights.
15. Many thanks to Kerstin Klenke for coming up with this concise formulation.
16. By contrast the border of the Russian Federation to the west (e.g. with Finland) is sharply defined, well demarcated and far from ambiguous. Consequently, then, ‘passportization’ and the state rhetoric of defending one’s citizens and co-ethnics indicate the Russian sphere of interest, which, as mentioned above, seems to coincide with the countries labelled ‘Near Abroad’.
17. My thanks go to Paul Manning for making me fully aware of this.

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Fig. 6. A Georgian government poster in the Georgian capital Tbilisi.

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Fig. 7. This billboard in the South Ossetian capital Tskhinval(i) proclaims ‘Indestructible union with Russia’, in Russian.
Pelkmans (unpublished) has observed on the Georgian-Turkish border. As in most other post-socialist societies, the indication of ‘nationality’ (institutionalized ethnic identity) in ID cards as a feature of citizenship has been abandoned in Georgia (1999). But this decision was highly contested, not only by dedicated nationalists but also by cool-blooded politicians like Eduard Shevardnadze (Reisner unpublished). The Soviet passport category of ‘nationality’ continues to haunt contemporary conceptualizations of citizenship, however, as the family name is popularly taken as its substitute. All over Georgia, the family name (gvari) is frequently considered a strongly essentialized indicator of belonging, and changing one’s family name in order to increase one’s social or political status is regarded as a breach of loyalty, a treacherous act stereotypically attributed to Armenians as the ‘others’.13

Soviet citizenship and questions of ethnicity and nationality

The unofficial yet powerful domination of Georgian citizenship by nationality is a way of defining solidarity and belonging in times of crisis and outright warfare. It also points to the fact that the multiple facets of citizenship are enacted situationally: more exclusive when it comes to ‘bare life’ (Agamben 1998), more inclusive when it comes to state politics of expansion and domination. The choice of criteria to delimit citizenship when political belonging becomes a matter of life and death is not purely coincidental, however, but informed by historical experience. Soviet citizenship still features prominently as a blueprint for citizenship for most Georgians. Notwithstanding the underlying communist ideology of equality, Soviet citizenship was far from non-discriminatory: ‘there were citizens, and there were citizens’ (Alexopoulos 2006: 487). Citizenship could be differentiated along lines of property possession, political attitude and/or nationality. Inscribed in passports, ID cards, residence permits, birth certificates and school ID cards, nationality set limits on spatial mobility, determined access to jobs, and conditioned party careers. Nationality was also recorded on property titles (Elizabeth Dunn, personal communication) and thus determined access to housing and land.

Within this legal framework, nationality (natsional’nost’i) and ethnicity (narodnost’i) were almost inseparably linked. As a rule, nationality was attributed to an ethnic group with a titular claim to the territory of a Soviet republic, autonomous republic or oblast’ (region). Each Soviet citizen had to define his or her territorial belonging in reference to nationality. Restrictive registration (propiska) regulations further contributed to the spatial disciplining of Soviet citizens. In certain cases, Soviet nations were punished collectively. The most prominent (and saddest) example of this policy is the collective deportation of Chechens, Meskhetians, Crimean Tatars and others to Central Asia and Siberia in the 1940s. A nation was taken as a primordial given, and its members assigned to a distinct place (or denied access to it).14

The close association between nationality and territoriality also provided opportunities for individual citizens and consolidated national elites, however. Comparable to the US policy of affirmative action, the Soviet republics had quotas for national groups in the spheres of education, political rule and economic administration (Martin 2001). Accordingly, the three power centres of the former Georgian Soviet Republic, namely Tbilisi (the Georgian capital), Tskhinval(i) the South Ossetian capital) and Sukhumi(i) (the Abkhazian capital) were dominated by ethnic Georgian, Ossetian and Abkhazian elites respectively. In the course of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, these elites immediately seized political power, prioritized national independence, and unleashed the latent nationalism of the Soviet Union (cf. Nodia 1997). However, the nationalism of South Ossetia and Abkhazia ran counter to Tbilisi’s goal of retaining its hegemonic position and the territorial integrity of the former Georgian Soviet Republic – there are nationalism, and there are nationalisms.15

Conclusion

Paradoxical as it seems, both the decrease and the increase in the status of nationality with regard to citizenship, as detected in the present analysis of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, can be traced back to and at least partially explained by Soviet citizenship policy. On the one hand, Soviet citizenship was shared from Karelia to Tajikistan. Undoubtedly, this created a feeling of belonging to an extensive and powerful polity, to a ‘trans-nation’ ruled by Moscow. The present-day Kremlin follows this model and tries to reinvent itself as the centre of transnational post-Soviet citizenship. On the other hand, Soviet citizenship was variegated, and nationality differentiated citizens from citizens, with some having more power in national and regional politics than others. Officially, nationality is no longer indicated in Georgian passports. Practically, however, the famous fifth line, which indicated nationality (as territorialized ethnicity) in Soviet passports, neither ceased to exist nor became illegible to the state or its citizens (cf. Das 2004). Rather, it became invisible, but effectively present. As illustrated by the example of Jioyeva, Georgianness as a citizenship category represented by the passport and not a category stamped in the passport is constantly undermined by unofficial and semi-official practice.

As a consequence of the – strongly selective – disconnection of citizenship from nationality and territoriality in the Russian case, certain borders of the Russian Federation become blurred. Whether intentionally or not, this poses a threat to the other former Soviet republics.16 Their borders are no longer sacrosanct: Russia has already permeated them and stepped inside. The Russian policy of ambiguity, as it might be called, is promoted as humanitarian aid. The popular rhetorical reference to the UN-approved principle of ‘responsibility to protect’ points to a potential abuse of human rights, as Jones (2008) correctly observes. Given that in the UN Charter the ‘responsibility to protect’ refers to real and potential citizens, citizenship itself becomes a means of manipulation. This is also illustrated by the report of the Fact-Finding Commission of the Conflict in Georgia (IIFMCG), which concludes that the ‘passportization’ of Abkhazia and South Ossetia violated international law. The effective ‘work’ of Russian passports in the contested areas lies in the extension of claims to control territories and bodies.

This is not to deny that Russian citizenship implies real advantages for South Ossetians and Abkhazians and is
When Georgians, Russians, Ossetians and Abkhazians were still brothers in arms: Soviet has-relief in the Georgian town of Gori.


Reins, Oliver (unpublished). ‘A “testing ground for cosmopolitanism” or an “ethnic zoo”: The debate about the “ethnicity” category on Georgian citizens’ identity cards and the conflict between state and nation-building’. (Available from the author.)


an object of desire for many, but it is important to supplement the micro-perspective with a point of view that brings the grand power games to the fore. Citizenship has always been a tool of both social support and repression, as Weber (1998 [1923]), among others, attested. This is all the more true for Soviet citizenship, which still informs the experience and perception of citizenship regimes in most post-socialist societies, particularly with regard to claims to welfare and social support.

Recent enquiries into citizenship regimes tend to foreground agency ‘from below’ and depict citizenship as a means of negotiation, participation and/or way of thinking about oneself and the state (e.g. Holston [2008] on ‘insurgent citizenship’, Somers [2008] on the ‘right to rights’).

But what happens if the state does not negotiate, denies participation or does not even care about the feelings and thoughts of some of its citizens? And what if the state hijacks localized claims and desires and plays the citizenship card to enlarge its sphere of domination?

Taking citizenship as a set of rights and duties defining the relationship of the state to its members does not help much here. The contractual understanding of citizenship far too often assumes that it is based on eternal, universal values potentially existing everywhere and uniting all human beings in one family. Not only is this ideology part and parcel of 19th-century nationalism (Billig 1995), it also stands on weak heuristic grounds, as it consistently mistakes the ‘as if’ for the real. Rather than relegating citizenship to the arena of wishful thinking, we should take it for what it is: a struggle.

This struggle is fought on many fronts and from different approaches. Sometimes it is the excluded who demand rights and participation, and sometimes it is those in power who seek to strengthen their grip on their citizens and/or other states. Sometimes excluders and excluded (and their struggles) are almost inextricably entangled.

Taking citizenship as a mode of civil liberation, however, contributes little to the understanding of the ‘passportization’ of former Soviet republics. The mass production of Russian citizens is better understood as part of the Kremlin’s struggle to redefine its sphere of interest. The current deliberations in the Russian Duma on expanding the definition of ‘compatriot’ and ‘citizenship’ clearly point in this direction (Goble 2009).

What we are dealing with, then, is a new form of imperialism by civic means. Socialist international solidarity as a ground for intervention throughout the world is replaced by a paternalistic ideology of providing help to fellow citizens and ‘compatriots’ in need – an ideology formulated in the language of human rights in the international arena. Deconstructing claims to be defending human rights as in fact an act of neo-imperialism is a standing trope in the criticism of the politics of the US and, to a lesser extent, British and French governments. Anthropologists like Glick Schiller point to the need to ‘revive and revitalize older notions of imperialism’ in the analysis of transnational political processes, but usually reduce this perspective to neo-imperialisms ‘backed by the US military’ (2004: 465).

Conceptualizing Russian policy as neo-imperial, however, is a more intricate matter. In Chomsky’s view, for example, Russia is simply defending its sphere of interest against the aggressions of a global superpower which ‘demands a sphere of influence over the entire world’ (2008). This superpower, of course, is the US government, using its military force to defend its vital, not least economic interests. Russia, by contrast, is seen as a regional power, not a global player with imperial ambitions. For Chomsky, as for Glick Schiller, neo-imperialism has its locus in the West.

The present case points in another direction, however. Whereas the Georgians use territorial claims to substantiate citizenship, the Russian government exploits citizenship to justify territorial claims. The latter policy is simply a new form of imperialism adapted to the universal rules of the game as defined by the United Nations. Instead of situating new forms of imperialism exclusively in the realm of the West, it is analytically much more fertile to compare the nexus between a programmatic civic world order and new forms of rule. For, as Ong (1999) reminds us, the West does not have a monopoly on transnational oppression. •