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Ethnic and Civic Identity: Incompatible Loyalties?

A recurring subject in research on the stability of democratic states is the relationship between ethnic and civic identity. For a stable democracy it is essential that a large majority of the population has a strong civic identity, as shown by their legitimization of the political authorities of a state. It is often assumed that loyalty to an ethnic group stands in the way of an overarching civic identity because ethnic groups are tempted to see each other as a threat to their position and status.
But while many researchers pursue the theory that 'overcoming' ethnic identification is part and parcel of nation-building, if not sine qua non for political stability, there are also scholars who have found this incongruent with the reality they encountered in their fieldwork. It is therefore interesting to study the exact relationship between ethnic and civic identity: do they really always comprise incompatible loyalties?

Within the post-Soviet states this question is pressing since they have to establish their newly gained political authority, while still being confronted with the legacy of the so-called 'Soviet nationality policy' that stressed and even institutionalized the ethnic identity of its population. This study focused on Armenians in the post-Soviet state of Georgia in an attempt to determine the relationship between ethnic and civic identity there.

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