1
Democratisation, Civil Society and Communist Legacies

In broader terms, this book aims to explain why the post-communist civil society fails at facilitating democratisation in the Caucasus. This study considers civil society to be a feature of democracy and a contributing factor to democratisation. Yet, it does not attempt to investigate why democracy does not work in the Caucasus. It is the role of civil society in democratic transition or lack thereof that is of particular interest for this book. First and foremost, this study does not consider democratisation as either expected or inevitable, but rather as one of the possible outcomes of the post-communist transformation. This book also does not assume consolidated, participatory or representative democracy as the most desirable, righteous or correct form of political governance. Rather, it is the establishment of equalitarian, transparent and free-from-corruption state and civil institutions that is crucial for effective post-communist state- and society-building.

The minimalist understanding of democracy employed in this book is synonymous with the classic Schmitter and Karl’s (1991: 76) definition of democracy as ‘a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives’. Furthermore, democracy as a political system needs to be distinguished from democratisation as a process which includes not only a transition to democracy but also consolidation and continuity of a democratic system (Ranker et al., 2007: 8). This book perceives as necessary, yet not sufficient, for democracy a synthesis of ‘three minimal conditions’, described by Linz and Stepan (1996b: 15) as: (1) quintessential existence and legal presence of the state; (2) opportunities for free and uncontested election; and (3) ruling elites’ support for democratic governance, represented in the respect for constitution, rule of
law, human rights, ‘the legitimate function of the legislature’, and equal participation in political and social processes of the state. As general as it is fundamental, the above formulation provides a basic description of democracy and allows this book to avoid in-depth discussions on the conceptual definition of the term ‘democracy’, rather emphasising the need for the closer inspection of the dimensions of democratisation as a process. Yet, before indulging in theoretical debates on varieties of democratisation, this chapter presents a brief analysis of what happened to democracy-building in the Caucasus and why it is claimed in this book that no democratic transition occurred in the region.

Democracy in the Caucasus and the former Soviet Union

Political regimes of the contemporary Caucasus, similarly to those of other post-Soviet states, are the successors of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and accordingly are the survivors of the Soviet political system, described by scholars as either totalitarian or post-totalitarian. In this book the USSR’s political system is described as a mixture of totalitarianism and post-totalitarianism. Adopting the classification suggested by a prominent scholar of Soviet and post-communist society, Vladimir Shlapentokh (2001: 11–12), the Soviet Union under Lenin, Stalin and Brezhnev is described in this study as a totalitarian state and the USSR during the New Economic Policy (NEP) under Khrushchev and Gorbachev as a post-totalitarian regime. The definition of totalitarianism employed throughout this research is borrowed from Linz (2000: 70), who presents such regimes as ‘a monistic but not monolithic centre of power with an exclusive and elaborate ideology employed by its leaders to control the masses, and collective involuntary citizen mobilization and participation in political and social life’.

The break-up of the USSR led to the ultimate demise of both totalitarianism and post-totalitarianism across the former Soviet Union. Yet, the collapse of the Soviet state did not result in the democratisation of the non-Baltic former Soviet republics. The failure of democracy in the Caucasus is well documented in the academic literature (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011; Levitsky and Way, 2010), and is also evident in numerous reports and democracy ratings, annually compiled by authoritative organizations in the field. Often cited in academic studies, the reports by Freedom House (Habdank-Kołaczkowska, 2014; Walker and Habdank-Kołaczkowska, 2013) and The Economist suggest that only a handful of post-Soviet states managed to embark on post-communist democratisation, transforming themselves into hybrid or transitional regimes (Georgia, Moldova and