



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

GEORGIA'S ECONOMY PRIOR TO THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION

JOSEPH ARCHVADZE

133

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Introduction

Despite the fact that almost three decades have passed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the interest of political scientists and other scholars, both within the post-Soviet area, as well as outside it, in the collapse of the system and the reasons for it remains high.

In addition, within the past decades, economic and political disagreements have deepened between the individual Soviet republics that were once part of a unified state and confrontations have arisen. The legal successor of the USSR, the Russian Federation, is involved in all of these to varying degrees as it has failed to free itself from the phantom of imperial pains and ambitions. Russia believes that the problems that the republics coming from a “single overcoat” (meaning the USSR) encounter are exclusively their own fault and categorically refuses to admit its own role in the creation and growth of these problems. Russia’s goal is to hold all of the post-Soviet states on a short leash within its orbit. And for this purpose, it uses, among other things, romanticizing the Soviet period and praising the economic condition and the welfare of the populations of these countries under the Soviet Union.

Recently, Russia has amplified the propaganda aspect of its hybrid warfare waged against Georgia – by exercising psychological influence over the population of Georgia on the basis of a two-component narrative, as though:

1. Georgia in the Soviet period existed at the expense of other republics (primarily Russia) through which the average per capita consumption in Georgia exceeded the average union-level per capita consumption by several times.
2. The poor economic condition of Georgia in the post-Soviet period is exclusively “thanks to” the Georgians themselves and also due to the fact that Russia no longer provides for Georgia.

These two claims actively roam Russian editions – from academic ones to the “yellow” ones. With this, they are trying to convince the Georgian population as well as their own that the population of Georgia “lived well” in the Soviet Union thanks exclusively to the center (meaning Russia) while Georgia’s current economic situation, which is indeed not good, is

exclusively the fault of the incompetence of the Georgians themselves and their inefficient governance. Hence, if the population of Georgia desires to once again “live well,” it must tie itself to Russia economically, politically and mentally...

The abovementioned approach is fully compatible with the concept of the so-called “liberal empire” voiced by the famous representative of the Russian political establishment back in the 2000s – Anatoly Chubais.

Below, we present data that dispel the aforementioned Russian narratives and myths about Soviet Georgia, discuss Russian policy towards Georgia and present an objective picture of the state of the Georgian economy in Soviet times.¹

Georgia’s Macroeconomic Conditions

A fairly frequent message disseminated by Russian media that each person living in Georgia during the Soviet period supposedly consumed four times more than what was produced in their own republic (respectively, USD 41.9 thousand and USD 10.6 thousand)² carries a classical mark of hybrid warfare.

These data are produced out of thin air as it is impossible for the Georgia of 1990, as a part of the Soviet Union in a deep and prolonged crisis, to have had such a large-scale consumption while the GDP per capita³ of the United States at that time was only USD 24 thousand, reaching the USD 41.9 thousand attributed to Georgia by the Russian media only 13 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 2004.

And yet, how much was the GDP per capita of Georgia during the late period of the USSR?

Given the fact that there was no unified official conversion methodology from the Soviet ruble to USD during the Soviet period, by various estimations the GDP of the USSR varied from 36.5% to 46.5%⁴ with regard to the GDP of the United States. We believe that the first indicator, 36.5%, would be closer to reality, especially since the Soviet economy reduced significantly by 4% in 1990 as compared to the previous year.⁵ Taking the population number into account (USSR – 288.6 million people and US – 248.7 million people) in 1990, the GDP per capita by PPP in the USSR was only 31.3% of the same US indicator at the time.⁶

In 1990, the per capita produced national income in Georgia was only 79.1% of the average union level while the national income for consumption and savings was even lower – 76.5% of the union average. Given the fact that the large share of services provided in Georgia was purchased by foreign tourists and the service component significantly increases the GDP, Georgia has a much lower shortfall as compared to the USSR average by produced GDP than according to the Soviet methodology of the produced national income. Taking into account that the average annual population of Georgia exceeded the permanent population by 7-8%, we can presume that **by 1990, the GDP per capita of Georgia was about 85% of the USSR average.** In 1990, the GDP per capita (in USD) was: USSR – 7,563, Georgia – 6,420, USA – 24,000. **Therefore, Georgia’s economic development was 15% lower than that of the USSR and almost 3.8 times lower than that of the US.** Given the fact that the USSR was trying to achieve and maintain military-strategic parity with the United States, resources for direct social necessities were allocated with the principle of using leftover funds because of which the actual level of wealth in the USSR/Georgia was becoming even lower as compared to the United States.

The data in the table below on the produced national income and the national income used for consumption and savings in the USSR and its individual member states per capita in 1990 present Georgia’s economic shortfall with regard to the average union level with maximum precision.⁷

Table 1

Produced National Income and National Income Used for Consumption and Savings in the USSR and its Individual Member States Per Capita in 1990
(USSR = 100)

Produced National Income		National Income Used for Consumption and Savings	
Estonia	126,3	Estonia	144,5
Latvia	123,0	Latvia	129,4
Belarus	121,3	RSFSR	115,2
RSFSR	118,2	Belarus	109,5
USSR	100,0	Lithuania	106,2
Lithuania	99,9	USSR	100,0
Ukraine	92,6	Ukraine	92,9

Armenia	83,9	Armenia	92,3
Moldova	81,9	Kazakhstan	91,9
Georgia	79,1	Moldova	89,1
Kazakhstan	74,8	Georgia	76,5
Azerbaijan	66,0	Kyrgyzstan	73,0
Turkmenistan	59,7	Turkmenistan	65,3
Kyrgyzstan	56,6	Uzbekistan	55,1
Uzbekistan	47,5	Azerbaijan	48,8
Tajikistan	36,4	Tajikistan	44,3

It must be pointed out that for the majority of the population of Georgia, the main weight of the criterion of wealth was focused on material wealth (house, flat, furniture, car...) while in terms of received/acquired services (both as a monetized expression of wealth as well as in terms of the ranking of wealth components) Georgia was significantly behind the Russian Federation.

Macroeconomic indicators do not confirm any sort of privilege enjoyed by Georgia in terms of wealth or superiority compared to the union average. Georgia held the 9th position among the 15 USSR republics with its produced national income while it was 10th by the national income used for consumption and savings. With these indicators, Georgia was behind the USSR average by 20.9% and 23.5%, respectively, behind Russia by – 33.1% and 33.6% and behind the best performing Estonia by 37.4% and 47.1%.

The claim that Georgia consumed more wealth than it produced is dismissed when we look at the data for the inter-field balance of the production and distribution of goods, according to which the share of imported goods to Georgia in the overall consumption was just 26.2% while the exports took up 25.1%⁸ of the goods produced within the country. At the same time, **negative balance (imports being bigger than exports) amounted to 380 million Soviet rubles⁹** which is just 3.8% of the national income produced in Georgia. Due to the Soviet mechanism of the creation of prices, only two out of the 15 union republics (Belarus and Azerbaijan) had positive trade balances (exports exceeded imports) while the remaining 13 republics had negative balances (imports exceeded exports). In addition, among the 13 republics that had negative trade balances, Georgia had the lowest ratio of

a negative trade balance to the national income. For comparison: Georgia – 3.8%, Russia – 8.4%, Armenia – 17.5%, Kyrgyzstan – 30.4%¹⁰... In fact, taking into account the equivalence in reciprocity, Georgia's share in the economy of the USSR, as well as profit from it, was the most optimal (after Belarus that had +0.9 p.p.).

Remuneration

Despite the fact that in the Soviet period Georgia had over 100 fields of industry, it was definitely not overloaded with giant industries if we do not count a few car, aviation, machinery-building and metallurgical plants. The real sector of the Georgian economy was loaded more with light industries as well as food manufacturing where the remuneration was relatively low. This was a major definer of the size of the average salary for those working in national production with which (1990 – 214 Soviet rubles) Georgia held the 13th place among the 15 union republics, only overtaking Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. In terms of the salary of Soviet agricultural workers (196.3 Soviet rubles), Georgia only held the 12th place (ahead of Armenia, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan) while it held the 11th place in terms of the remuneration of workers in collective farming (233.4 Soviet rubles and ahead of Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan).

Table 2

Remuneration in Georgia, RSFSR and the Best Performing Estonia in 1990¹¹

(In Percent Compared to Average Union Level; USSR = 100)

	Average Salary of a Worker	Salary of Soviet Agricultural Workers	Remuneration of Workers in Collective Farming
Georgia	77,9	69,8	96,8
RSFSR	108,1	111,3	109,9
Estonia	124,1	118,1	145,8

Financial Income of the Population and Spending on Goods

The shortfall in remuneration was adequately reflected in the financial income of the population as well. In 1990, the average per capita income of the population amounted to (in Soviet rubles): USSR – 2,262.0 (100%), Russian Federation – 2,584.1 (114.2%) and Georgia – 2,216.1 (98%).

Georgia had a much lower shortfall in terms of financial income to the average union level than it had in the case of economic development. This is one of the arguments used in Russian sources to claim that Georgia was living at the expense of the union. However, at the end of the 1980s, when money had practically lost its universal equivalence and the absolute ability of proportional exchange,¹² with its purchasing power becoming dependent on the level of spending in specific regions and the availability of goods in the situation of a total deficit, such a difference lost practically any significance as compared to the other shortfalls mentioned above (between economic development and financial income).

This difference was mostly due to the so-called union-level division of labor within the USSR where southern and sub-tropical cultivars (tea, fruit, citrus) were produced through specialization. At the end of the USSR, Georgia produced 93.2% of the tea produced in the USSR and 96.7%¹³ of citrus fruit. This predicament somewhat alleviated the economic conditions of Georgian farmers; however, it failed to produce any substantial breakthrough. **The income of 1.3 million Georgian people who were involved in the production of southern and sub-tropical cultivars were as follows: from tea – about 200 million Soviet rubles,¹⁴ from citrus fruit – 270-300 million Soviet rubles.** This amounts to about 32 Soviet rubles per month for the people involved in production and just 7.6 Soviet rubles for each person residing in the republic. For comparison: the wage fund alone of those hired in Georgia at that time was 5.3 billion Soviet rubles.¹⁵ It should also be noted that the so-called union fund received about 50.1 thousand tons of potatoes, 45.2 thousand tons of vegetables, 99.8 thousand tons of fruit and berries as well as 95.8 thousand tons of citrus fruit,¹⁶ all in fixed prices (significantly lower than market price). This was practically a tribute that the republics had to offer to the center.

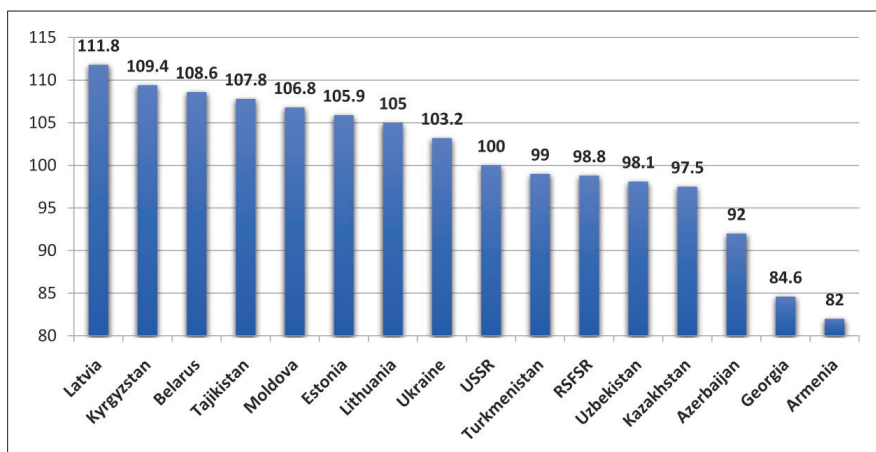
Georgia's shortfall from the average union level was especially stark in terms of the purchases of goods and services. According to retail goods turnover, Georgia's average per capita ratio (shortfall) to the union level

(78.4%) was practically the same as the economic shortfall, meaning that the aforementioned relative excess of financial income of the population as compared to the level of economic development (98.0% vs 76.5%) was practically eradicated during the spending of financial income on goods. For comparison: the same indicator in Russia – 109.5% and in Estonia (the best performing republic in this regard as well) – 166.9%.¹⁷ **If the average citizen of the USSR spent 76.2 Soviet rubles on the purchases of goods and services from every 100 Soviet rubles gained, in Georgia this only amounted to 64.5 Soviet rubles (84.6%).** In 1990, the per capita volume of purchased goods (excluding paid services) by the population of Georgia was lower than in the USSR (by 232.6 Soviet rubles, 12.4%), in the Russian Federation (by 424.0 Soviet rubles, 20.5%) and in Estonia (by 1,452 Soviet rubles, 46.9%). With this indicator, Georgia came second to last, or the 14th position, at the Soviet Union level. The inclusion of paid services did offer a small correction in these proportions; however, it did not seriously alter the situation or Georgia’s position among the USSR republics (see the diagram below).

Diagram

Level of Spending of the Population of the USSR and its Member Republics in 1990

(Spending on every 100 Soviet rubles on Goods and Paid Services; Percentage to Average USSR Indicator; USSR = 100)



In fact, Georgia was discriminated against doubly as it was falling short of the average union level in two different ways: one was the average per capita financial income and second was the purchases of goods on every Soviet ruble gained by the population (for the latter, by about one-sixth).

Of course, given the unified state and a unified currency system, the financial resources flowed from regions with high levels of purchases of goods to those with low levels with the principle of communicating vessels. In this regard, Georgia and its population were no exception. From 1981 to 1989, the population of Georgia took over 5.3 billion Soviet rubles for purchasing goods in other republics.¹⁸ This enabled the population of Georgia that had a low level of purchases of goods with their income to increase their living conditions several-fold. Hence, even though this increased the level of the purchase of goods with their income for the population of Georgia (according to our estimations, increasing the purchase of goods per Soviet ruble by 5.2% from 64.5% to 69.7%), it failed to eradicate the difference (shortfall) with the average union level. **In addition, buying a unit of goods in another country (for an excess price), taking into account its transportation and various other expenses, made it 1.5-2.0 times more expensive for Georgians,** meaning that the level of the purchases of goods on income per unit of money was even less outside Georgia than it was within it – 2.4 to 4.0 times lower¹⁹ than the average union level. Also, the excess money paid for purchasing singular deficit items in other regions of the USSR created a false sense in the local population of the region that the population of Georgia had a high income and the ability “to buy half of Russia.”

Production and Consumption of Electricity

The average per capita indicator of the production and the consumption of electricity gives rather reliable information about the welfare of the society and its economic development. In 1990, by the average per capita production of electricity, Georgia was 14th among the 15 Soviet republics (2,604.5 kWh) which was only 43.5% of the average union level (5,992.2 kWh).²⁰ Even though in terms of a common energy system the per capita production of electricity in a specific republic did not have decisive importance, the per capita consumption of electricity in Georgia after the inter-republic re-distribution was 1.3 times higher than production but 1.8 times lower than the average union per capita consumption.

In fairness, it should also be said that due to the low energy capacity of industry in Georgia, the economy of the country practically did not have an electricity deficit and did not require consuming more.

Agriculture

Due to its low level of productivity, agriculture in Georgia was the weakest point of the economy. Even today, the productivity in this sector is nine times lower than the average of other fields while it is 2.3 times lower as compared to 1990.²¹ It should be noted that the agricultural sector of Georgia did not hold top positions even back at that time. For example, by per capita production of meat (31.2 kg), Georgia held the 10th place among the 15 republics, 11th place in the production of eggs and sharing the 13th and 14th places in the production of milk (121.1kg).²² In terms of the per capita production of meat, Georgia was behind the best performing Lithuania by 4.4 times, by seven times in the production of milk and by 2.5 times behind Estonia which was the best performing republic in producing eggs.

Wheat production prices in Georgia were not only significantly lower than the union level (by 20.1%) but even as compared to Azerbaijan (by 5.3%) and Armenia (by 27.1%)²³ which were practically in the same environmental and climate conditions. At the same time, due to low labor productivity, the livestock sector in Georgia was the least effective and profitable in the whole Soviet Union. The cost of every 100 kg of gains in livestock production in Georgia was 2.5 to 2.7 times higher than the average union indicator.²⁴

Per Capita Consumption of Food Products

Shortfalls in livestock production also influenced its per capita consumption. Among the 15 Soviet republics, Georgia held low positions in almost all main directions (except bread): 8th position in the consumption of milk and dairy products, 9th position in the consumption of fish products, 11th in potatoes and eggs and 13th in plant-based oil. For every kg of per capita consumption of bread and bread products, the consumption of meat and meat products was 239 grams in Georgia, 466 grams in the USSR as an average and 967 grams in Estonia.

Georgia was in the last or 15th place by the energy-equipment of labor in the agricultural sector both per capita as well as per worker (shortfall with the average union level – 29% and 26%, respectively). The energy-equipment of labor in the agricultural sector per worker was five times lower in Georgia than in Russia and 8.1 times lower than in Estonia.²⁵

Living Spaces Entering Exploitation

Georgia was ahead of the union average level of the per capita area of flats built with public money by about one-third while in terms of individual flat-building – by 26.2%.²⁶

Here we have to take two factors into account: one is that individual flat-building in the USSR was sort of a “voluntary” choice of the population that was caused by the overly prolonged prospect of getting a flat built through public money or the lack of such a prospect altogether. In such cases, families would re-distribute their financial resources, correct the order of meeting their demands and direct the freed-up resources to improving the conditions of their accommodation. As for the overall number of flats built for the similar number of the population, Georgia held the last or 15th position among other union republics which is, of course, not compatible with the aforementioned information pushed by contemporary Russian experts that Georgia consumed four times more than it produced.

Putting each square meter of accommodation in exploitation cost 8% less in Georgia as compared to the union average; however, despite this, the per capita living area put into exploitation in Georgia was 1.5 times lower (respectively, 1.41 square meters and 2.19 square meters – 14th position).²⁷

Georgia was also falling short of the union average in terms of per capita capital constructions (by 29.9%).²⁸ In addition, taking into account that in the 12th and last USSR five-year period (1986-1990), 30% of the capital investments in the republic was put in Myussera (Georgia, Abkhazia) for the construction of the USSR president’s state summer house, the actual scale of the shortfall should probably be at least 1.4 times higher.

Provision of the Population with Pre-School Facilities, Cars and Television Sets

The birthrate in Georgia (per 1,000 people) was practically at the union average level: respectively, 1980 – 17.6 and 18.3, 1990 – 17.0 and 16.8.²⁹

Despite this, the provision with pre-school educational facilities in Georgia was lower than the union average by one-quarter (the provision of children of the appropriate age with pre-school educational facilities, respectively, 42% and 55%³⁰).

With the number of light vehicles per 100 households, Georgia was ahead of the union average; however, it was significantly behind the Baltic republics (for comparison: Georgia – 32, USSR – 23, Estonia – 40).

At the same time, Georgia was significantly behind the union average in terms of the number of television sets: the number of TVs per 1,000 people was 1,035 in USSR and 690 in Georgia.³¹

Hence, as the information cited above confirms, **during the Soviet period Georgia was neither particularly privileged nor was it a republic living at the expense of the center.** The scale of production and consumption were maximally close to one another while respective indicators per capita were about one-quarter lower than the union average.

**Georgia's Economic Data in 1990 and Ratio to the Same Data of the USSR, RSFSR and
Best Performing Member Republic in that Indicator**

	Per Capita, Soviet Ruble	Ratio Per Capita, %			Position among 15 USSR Republics
		To USSR	To Russia	To Best Performing Republic in this Indicator	
Produced National Income	1,786.1	79.1	66.9	62.6 (Estonia)	IX
National Income Used for Consumption and Savings	1,689.8	76.5	66.1	56.6 (Estonia)	X
Average Monthly Wage of Workers, Soviet Ruble	214.0	77.9	72.1	62.8 (Estonia)	XIII
Average Monthly Wage of Soviet Agricultural Workers, Soviet Ruble	196.3	69.8	62.7	59.1 (Estonia)	XII
Average Monthly Wage of those Working in Collective Farming, Soviet Ruble	233.4	96.8	88.1	66.4 (Estonia)	XI
Financial Income of the Population	2,216.1	98.0	85.8	61.5 (Estonia)	VII
Purchases of Goods and Services	1,428.5	82.9	73.5	49.1 (Estonia)	X
Level of Spending of Financial Income, %	64.5	84.6	85.7	75.7 (Latvia)	XIV
Retail Turnover of Goods both Public as well as Cooperative (Including Food)	1,397	85.9	78.4	51.5 (Estonia)	IX
Paid Services	246	98.0	87.2	65.4 (Estonia)	VII

Retail Turnover of Goods both Public as well as Cooperative and Paid Services Together	1,645.3	87.6	79.5	53.1 (Estonia)		IX
Household Services	70.8	124.0	119.8	73.0 (Estonia)		IV
TV Units (per 100 people)	690	66.6	59.6	59.6 (Russia)		IX
Production of Meat Per Capita, kg	31.2	44.9	45.6	21.8 (Lithuania)		X
Production of Milk Per Capita, kg	121.1	32.2	32.1	14.2 (Lithuania)		XIII
Production of Eggs Per Capita, unit	141	49.7	43.9	41.1 (Lithuania)		XI
Average Per Capita Consumption of Main Food Products, kg.:						
<i>Bread and Pastry</i>	190	142.9	159.7	100.0 (Georgia)		I
<i>Potatoes</i>	104	47.1	40.0	26.5 (Belarus)		XI
<i>Vegetables and Fruits</i>	102	85.3	88.8	64.4 (Armenia)		X
<i>Meat and Meat Products</i>	62	75.8	70.1	52.8 (Estonia)		X
<i>Milk and Dairy Products</i>	325	95.1	89.8	63.2 (Estonia)		VIII
<i>Eggs</i>	260	56.9	49.5	82.5 (Belarus)		XI
<i>Fish and Marine Products</i>	180	50.6	40.4	37.0 (Belarus)		IX
<i>Sugar</i>	42.2	103.1	93.6	92.9 (Latvia)		VIII
<i>Plant-based Oil</i>	9.7	58.8	58.2	46.3 (Moldova)		XIII
Production of Electricity Per Capita, kWh	2,604.5	43.5	35.6	23.9 (Estonia)		XIV
Average Annual Capital Investments (1986-1990), Soviet Ruble	524.0	70.1	67.3	57.3 (Russia)		XI
Direct Labor Spending for Producing 100 kg of Goods, Soviet Ruble						

<i>Cereals (excluding corn)</i>	2.8	280.0	280.0	280.0	350.0 (Ukraine)	X
<i>Potatoes</i>	8.8	325.9	338.4	463.2 (Belarus)		XII
<i>Weight Gain of Livestock</i>	102	268.4	275.7	390.0 (Lithuania)		XV
<i>Weight Gain of Pigs</i>	54	245.5	270.0	360.0 (Moldova)		XV
<i>Milk</i>	15	250.0	250.0	375.0 (Latvia)		XV
<i>Selling Cost of 1 ton of Wheat, Soviet Ruble</i>	250	79.9	83.3	47.4 (Moldova)		XV
<i>Selling Cost of 1 ton of Milk, Soviet Ruble</i>	548	98.7	83.8	83.8 (Russia)		V
<i>Number of Flats Built with Public Money per 1 Million People, 1986-1990</i>	928	94.3	189.8	33.8 (Tajikistan)		VIII
<i>Number of Flats Built per 1 Million People, 1986-1990</i>	3,731	50.7	45.4	41.0 (Belarus)		XV
<i>Area in Exploitation Per Capita, m², 1986-1990</i>	1.41	64.4	60.8	51.8 (Belarus)		XV
<i>Capital Investments in Flat Construction Per Capita, 1986-1990</i>	363.0	59.1	50.9	39.0 (Armenia)		XIV
<i>Providing Children with Pre-School Education Facilities (percentage of children of appropriate age)</i>	42	76.4	63.7	58.1 (Moldova)		IX
<i>Energy in Agriculture Per Capita, kWh</i>	0.59	29.1	28.2	15.8 (Latvia)		XV
<i>Energy in Agriculture Per Worker, kWh</i>	7.6	26.4	20.5	12.6 (Estonia)		XV

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21. Archvasze I. agraruli seqtoris roli da mniSvneloba Tanamedrove saqarTvelos ekonomikaSi, „ekonomikuri profili“, 17, 2017, p. 22.
22. Народное хозяйство СССР в 1990 году. М., «Финансы и статистика», 1991, pp. 503-504.
23. Ibid., p. 162.
24. Ibid., p. 457.
25. Ibid., pp. 441-442.
26. Ibid., pp. 183-184.
27. Ibid., pp. 177, 187.
28. Ibid., p. 553.
29. Ibid., p. 89.
30. Ibid., p. 244.
31. Ibid., p. 634.