



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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## **OVERVIEW OF KEY TRENDS IN JAVAKHETI**

***EKATERINE METREVELI***

**EXPERT OPINION**



**2013**



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## Key Trends: Javakheti\*

### INTRODUCTION

The issues of minority communities in Georgia involve complex points and counterpoints which form the core of the debate even in Western democracies whose paths to democracy were trod long ago. The relationship between individual and group rights, power sharing versus state integrity and ethnic or civic nationalisms are questions which are still waiting to be answered.

In order for Georgia to succeed, the state-building process must be accompanied simultaneously by the building of a national identity that is rooted in citizenship and unified by common civic ideas. Without fortifying these bases that underpin the Western-type of nation-state model, Georgia will continue to falter as it seems to strengthen and develop its state. National unity, unfortunately, has not yet been fully achieved and minority community representatives in Georgia still face problems that hamper their integration into the Georgian state.

The following paper is based on the extensive work that the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) has been carrying out in the ethnic Armenian populated region of Javakheti since 2002 in support of the nation-building process.

Javakheti lies in the south-western part of Georgia along the border with the Republic of Armenia and Turkey in an overall mountainous terrain. Its geographic isolation has been in the past compounded by poor infrastructure linking it with the rest of Georgia, stronger cultural ties with Armenia than with the Georgian state and a legacy of neglect by the national government in Tbilisi. Javakheti's economy is primarily agricultural. During the last years, the principal cash employer in the region was a Russian military base that was handed over to Georgia in 2007. Few Armenians speak Georgian well which limits their opportunities for full participation in the Georgian state.

In recent years, the central government has sought to redress this isolation and promote the integration of Javakheti through investment in infrastructure, education and social services; legislation guaranteeing rights to national minorities and other efforts to promote the multi-ethnic charac-

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\* The present article is shortened and updated version of a research "Social Relations and Governance in Javakheti, Georgia" by Eka Metreveli and Jonathan Kulick. Initiative for Peacebuilding 2009.

ter of the Georgian state. Certain progress has been made but much still needs to be done.

## **OVERVIEW OF KEY TRENDS IN JAVAKHETI**

### **Political Community**

The 1990 Law on Citizenship granted citizenship to all those who resided on the territory of Georgia with a legal source of support by the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> This process did not depend upon the origin of the individual or the knowledge of the state language. Herein, Georgia differs from some other post-Communist states where language was held as a necessary precondition for obtaining citizenship. Even so, building a Georgian civic identity and political community has remained a challenge as the Soviet legacy of identifying the nation with the ethnos endures up to today.

Georgia acceded to the Council of Europe in 1999 and took on the obligations for a legal framework in line with international human and minority rights standards.<sup>2</sup> Georgia ratified the Framework Convention for National Minorities (FCNM) in 2006 and submitted its first two progress reports in 2007<sup>3</sup> and in 2012.<sup>4</sup> It has yet to sign and ratify the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML). The Charter is controversial in Georgia. Some argue that recognition of minority languages might impede minority integration as it will partially institutionalize the differences.

A serious step forward by the Government of Georgia in line with the FCNM was the adoption of a State Strategy on National Integration and Tolerance prepared by the State Ministry for Reintegration Issues (SMRI) in 2009. The Strategy includes a five-year Action Plan and covers education, state language, media and information accessibility, political integration and civic participation, social and regional integration, and cultural aspects of minority integration. The Strategy provides clear guidelines to pursue minority integration; instead of a new law on minorities, existing legal acts have been amended to reflect the Strategy. Simultaneously, the SMRI has opened a regional representation in Akhalkalaki, headed by a local community representative. Currently, the SMRI is working with target groups to identify future areas for intervention.

### **Language and Education**

Language has been the most serious impediment to forming a unified political community. The components of national integration policies pro-

moted so far have emphasized the need for increased teaching and administrative use of the Georgian language in the regions populated by minorities. According to the Administrative Code of Georgia (1999), administrative proceedings must be in Georgian while the Law on Public Service (1998) requires that all public sector employees speak Georgian. The Law has proved impossible to enforce and has been enforced only partially. While courts in Javakheti have made an effort to hire people proficient in Armenian and Georgian, municipalities have had less enthusiasm in hiring bilingual staff.

Ignorance of the Georgian language in the minority regions is the most serious challenge to their integration. Soviet nationality policies and the imposition of Russian as the language of social mobility discouraged minorities from studying the languages of the titular republics and so drove wedges between majority and minority groups. Since 2004, significant steps have been taken to increase the knowledge of Georgian within minority communities. The OSCE and other international organizations have supported a range of programs from kindergarten to adult education which were then handed to the Ministry of Education and Science for support. The Ministry of Education and Science has developed textbooks to teach Georgian as a second language and has begun to elaborate a strategy for bilingual education for minority schools. Although language programs have not always been coordinated and there is a general lack of a coherent approach, an absence of qualified teachers and insufficient financing in parallel with inadequate teaching methodologies, these efforts still started to change attitudes towards the Georgian language in a positive way. The ethnic minority community of Javakheti is more inclined to study Georgian but Georgian-language programs alone are of little value unless the local population sees clear incentives leading to the improvement of employment opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

Access to higher education has been a major issue for most of the ethnic minorities and ethnic Armenians of Javakheti among them. The 2004 Law on Higher Education introduced national entrance exams for state accredited higher education institutions including, among other topics, Georgian language and literature. Hence, a very low number of ethnic Armenian graduates from minority schools were able to enroll at Georgian universities in 2005 when the exams were held for the first time. Since then, the system for national examinations was modified and the existing system of '1 plus 4'<sup>6</sup> increased the chances of ethnic minority graduates to access higher educational institutions through taking a general aptitude test in their native language.<sup>7</sup>

## Political Competition

Since the mid-1990s, the center exercised almost no control over Javakheti which was run by a local paramilitary group, Javakh. President Shevardnadze, with his mastery of a personal network of patron-client relations, managed to establish control over the region by balancing local power holders against one another and offering them lucrative governmental positions within the region or parliamentary mandates in Tbilisi. The local authorities, mostly ethnic Armenians, had been turned into political and economic elites who provided their extensive family networks and friends with social and economic benefits.<sup>8</sup> While Javakh is now weakened and Tbilisi has more authority, national authorities still take local power structures and their interests into consideration.

In nationwide elections, ethnic Armenians from Javakheti have always been included in the ruling party list. MPs from the 1999–2004 Parliament belonging to Shevardnadze's Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG), made a swift transition after the Rose Revolution to the National Movement list and were seated in the 2004–2008 Parliament. As for the October 2012 elections, the trend stayed partially the same. While several minority MPs stayed with the initial parties and alliances, a majoritarian from Ninotsminda from the National Movement has become an independent MP, leaving the National Movement fraction. In general, minority MPs keep a low profile in the Parliament and do not represent their constituencies by participating in debates or delivering speeches. The excuse for this passivity is often explained to be their poor knowledge of the Georgian language.

The ethnic minority regions, Javakheti among them, have always voted strongly for the party in power; the almost unanimous support for Shevardnadze and the CUG has been followed by similar support for Saakashvili and the United National Movement (UNM). In the October 2012 elections, 76.54% voted for the National Movement in Akhalkalaki and 79.59% in Ninotsminda in contrast to 21.29% and 17.13%, respectively, in favor of the Georgian Dream. Majoritarians from Akhalkalaki from the National Movement got 77.7% while from Ninotsminda – 83.57%.<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, political parties in Javakheti have barely been engaged in the campaign process. In the May 2008 Parliamentary elections, only the UNM ran a candidate for the Ninotsminda majoritarian district or opened a campaign office. In Akhalkalaki, 12 political parties registered with the Central Election Committee but only two – Labor and the Christian-Democratic Movement – operated offices although neither had any special appeals to ethnic minorities in their agendas or any ethnic minorities on their party

lists.<sup>10</sup> As for the October 2012 elections, although the Georgian Dream coalition operated an office with serious difficulties in Akhalkalaki, the outcome of the elections for majoritarian candidates was again in favor of the ruling party. UNM majoritarian MPs both from Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda unanimously won elections.

### **Local Power Structures and Distribution of Power**

Local power structures in Javakheti have been and remain organized around influential individuals such as MPs, *gamgebeli*, *sakrebulo* chairmen and chiefs of police. They are the main providers of jobs, resources and socio-economic security to their relatives and friends. In a region as poor as Javakheti, it is relatively easy to earn loyalty by providing basic goods or minor employment opportunities. This reflects an ongoing merging of formal and informal actors in Javakheti that started as early as the mid-1990s through legitimizing local authorities as governors, parliamentarians and representatives of law enforcement agencies. These three circles of power created influential informal networks based on ethnicity and common interests with central authorities.<sup>11</sup>

### **Private Business and Infrastructural Projects**

Javakheti's remote location and the presence of the Russian military base sealed its economic isolation from the rest of the country for many years and was the reason for having a limited civilian infrastructure. That, coupled with the corrupt traffic police and poor road infrastructure, made it almost impossible for local residents to transport their agricultural products to the main markets, thus making the local population solely dependent on the Russian military base.

The situation has changed in recent years with road rehabilitation in Samtskhe-Javakheti and its adjacent Kvemo Kartli region and the Kars-Akhalkalaki railroad construction as well as the closure of the Russian military base in 2007. It became both necessary and possible to look for the markets outside the region. Overall, with the opening of branch offices of Georgian commercial banks, as well as credit-giving organizations, economic activity and integration with the rest of the country has increased. Most of the income-generating businesses, such as fuel supply, restaurants, hotels and hydropower stations, are in the hands of influential local authorities.

The Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Baku railway, to be completed in 2014, will link the railway systems of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. It is projected that during the first year of exploitation of the railway, 2-3 million tons of cargo



will be transported that will be increased up to 8 million tons gradually. These projections will definitely increase Georgia's transit function as a whole and contribute to the economic development of Javakheti, specifically.<sup>12</sup>

### **Mass Media and Civil Society**

All of the ethnic minority regions, and Javakheti especially so, suffer from an information vacuum. There is a limited transmission of information to the region from the center. According to the survey carried out by the GFSIS in spring of 2013, 82.9% of respondents indicated that their major source of information are relatives and friends, followed by Armenian (76.1%) and Russian television channels (59.3%). Only 24.6% get information from the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB).<sup>13</sup>

Two local TV companies, one in Ninotsminda and one in Akhalkalaki, operate in Javakheti. In addition, TV channels from Armenia, Russia and Georgia (GPB and Imedi) can be received. The most popular are the Russian and Armenian channels. Imedi TV provides almost no non-Georgian-language programming and the GPB's second channel broadcasts a news program, once per week, in Armenian twice a day.<sup>14</sup> After the coming to power of the Georgian Dream, the Russian language PIK channel stopped its broadcasting which resulted in an even more limited transfer of information to Javakheti.

The prominent source of information on Javakheti is available through the Russian news agency Regnum which is unreliable and strongly biased against Georgia.

There are about 90 registered civil society organizations in Javakheti but not many of them are active or exercise any influence on internal regional developments. Most have been set up by different donor-supported projects and, as their agenda was donor driven, are not sustainable.

The important players in the region in the early 1990s were Javakh and Virk which have been later joined by United Javakh and the Javakheti Youth Sport Union (JEMM). While Javakh was extremely influential, it has lost its importance. Virk is regarded as a one-person organization. Its leader, David Rastakyan, became known due to the refusal of the Ministry of Justice to register Virk as a political party. Both JEMM and United Javakh were known for their more radical stance and nationalistic agenda. United Javakh, which was established in protest against the withdrawal of the Russian military base from Akhalkalaki, unified several organizations including, most recently, JEMM. Most of the radical members of JEMM

were arrested in summer 2008, among them Vahagn Chakhalian for the illegal storage of weapons. Chakhalian was released under a new amnesty law in January 2013.<sup>15</sup>

The survey carried out in spring 2013 shows that the civil activism of the local population is extremely low with the highest percentage for participation in elections at 53%.<sup>16</sup>

### **External Actors and Citizenship Issues**

Official Yerevan has been reserved and careful in its approach to Javakheti and has not made any irredentist claims towards the region, even in the turbulent early 1990s when many ethnic Armenians from Javakheti participated in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Official Yerevan has frequently been criticized by Armenian organizations for its inactivity and ignoring issues of concern for ethnic Armenians in Javakheti. Public opinion and, especially that of Javakheti émigrés, is sensitive towards the developments in Javakheti and their organizations carry out activities aimed at maintaining and promoting Armenian identity within the region. The statements made by Armenian organizations or articles by Armenian political scientists often encompass views that are more extreme than in Javakheti itself.

Armenia's foreign policy priorities – especially its strategic partnership with Russia – also influence the attitudes of Javakheti Armenians towards Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and its deteriorated relations with Russia. During the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war, however, Javakheti remained calm.<sup>17</sup>

The Russian No. 62 military base in Akhalkalaki influenced developments in Javakheti until its final withdrawal in 2007. The Russian base was the main employer in the region and contributed to close economic ties with Russia and ensured the dependency of the local ethnic Armenian population as workers at the base were given Russian citizenship. The base was one of the major factors impeding the government's effort to integrate Javakheti into Georgia and it was used as a means of political pressure in support of radical elements active in Javakheti in their separatist demands. The possible withdrawal of the base, which Russia was obligated to complete by the CFE Treaty,<sup>18</sup> was also used as a means to mobilize protest rallies in Akhalkalaki.<sup>19</sup>

After the withdrawal, Russia's role in the region decreased although it has not disappeared. Many locals have been seasonal migrant workers in the Russian Federation. Due to the worsening Georgian-Russian relations – in particular, Russia's closure of the border with Georgia and restrictions on

visa issues – travel to Russia became more difficult. In order to easily commute to Russia, Javakheti Armenians are getting Armenian citizenship that gives them the possibility to travel to Russia without a visa. Amendments to the Armenian Law on Citizenship approved in 2007 reframed the conditions upon which those not born in Armenia could achieve citizenship with some residency requirement, language proficiency and knowledge of the country's constitution. These latter requirements are waived if the person is of Armenian ancestry. Thus, ethnic Armenians from Javakheti are acquiring Armenian citizenship without any complications. There is no exact data as to how many Javakheti Armenians have received Armenian citizenship, as Georgia and Armenia do not have a relevant agreement on exchange of information, but the dynamics is increasing. It has been reported that 15 of the 70 employees in one Akhalkalaki school have Armenian passports which gives them the possibility to travel to Russia through Armenia without complications in order to visit their family members working there. The Armenian visa regime poses several challenges. First, the Georgian citizenship law does not permit dual citizenship except by presidential dispensation, unlikely to be used *en masse* towards the ethnic minority population. In Georgia, citizens must relinquish their Georgian citizenship upon taking another country's citizenship (or apply for dual citizenship). Secondly, the Georgian experience during the 2008 war as well as recent developments in Ukraine created a context whereby citizenship regimes could be used as a club against a country's territory.

## **CONCLUSION**

While minority issues as a general topic of focus and concern in Georgia have become further fixed within the national political agenda – especially as concerns the ethnic Armenian community in Javakheti – progress has been made but there is still progress to come.

Although the formal structures of democratic governance have been instituted in Georgia, they do not ensure the full participation of the citizenry in the governing process. Minorities are not adequately represented in the central state apparatus. The culture of public-private dialogue is not yet established and the public tends towards the reactive in discussions of important policy issues.

Several national and local elections have been held and no sector of society has been disenfranchised although there have been a few minority representatives on party lists and most parties do not include minority-specific issues in their platforms. Without fail, minority votes go overwhelmingly to the party in power which is seen as an expression of loyalty to the state

– a civic duty. Although MPs from Javakheti do not necessarily advocate for their community's needs, they are, along with other influential local people, the basic providers of employment and goods and so they are not challenged.

Local power structures in Javakheti are embodied in the MPs, *gamgebeli*, *sakrebulo* chairs and chiefs of police. They acquired influence through merging formal and informal sources of power, thereby legitimizing their self-serving official actions. They are the main providers of economic benefits, large and small.

Democratic progress and reducing the population's dependence on a few power brokers will require creating alternative avenues to employment and business development. Donors supporting economic or democratic development should enlarge and diversify their pools of beneficiaries and not return to the usual suspects. This at the same time will contribute to limiting the number of individuals aspiring to get Armenian citizenship.

Education interventions in Javakheti are mainly targeted at Georgian-language instruction. Although language is a key factor in enhancing integration, it is necessary to offer broader civic education programs which inform citizens about good governance and how the political system functions. It is important to continue support of state language knowledge among the population of Javakheti and make those efforts coherent and coordinated.

Continuous support of civil society development is instrumental in such a rural area as Javakheti. Special assistance should be rendered to improve the regional media; capacity-building projects can promote unbiased, independent and dispassionate reporting.

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