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INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN GEORGIA

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The Georgian State and Minority Relations

By Ekaterine Metreveli, Tbilisi

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between the Georgian state and its ethnic minority communities of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli. Specifically, the current issues and challenges hampering social cohesion are considered against the background of existing legacies and preconditions caused by the changing international environment.

Introduction

Over twenty years have passed since Georgia went through the initial shock of sudden, unexpected independence, accompanied with the years of turmoil that, among others issues, resulted in two breakaway regions (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). Recent years have seen the country moving beyond the post-Soviet paradigm and switching from a “survival mode” to a new stage of “modernization”. Despite these developments and transformations, the country is still struggling through the process of state-building, which also implies, in the case of Georgia, nation-building.

The nation-building process of the post-soviet countries is associated with the issues of ethnicity and citizenship. The legacy of Soviet ethnofederalism and, as Rogers Brubaker puts it, the institutionalization of two mutually exclusive categories of territorial and individual codification, still defines the behaviour of the constituent ethnic groups of the Soviet successor states.¹ Georgia, as one of these successor states, has fully experienced the effects of the Soviet nationality policies in having acquired the two breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and two ethnic enclaves of Armenian and Azeri populations, which still are in need of special attention. There are still challenges that must be addressed in order to regulate state minority relations in the country and achieve national unity.

In order for Georgia to succeed in its state building efforts, state strengthening means building a democratic, inclusive state that advocates a national identity rooted in citizenship and unified by common civic ideas. Achieving this ideal is not easy, especially against the background of developments along Russia's borders resulting in Russia promoting a new foreign and security policy doctrine aimed at defending Russian-speaking communities in the post-soviet space and accepting only the limited sovereignty of neighboring states.

1 Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe*. Cambridge University Press, 1996. pp. 26–27.

Preconditions and the Issue of Securitization

After the break-up of the Soviet Union and Georgia's regaining of independence, the country's ethnic minority community decreased from 29.9 to 16.3 percent. (Table 1: Ethnic Composition of Georgia, 1989, 2002). The socio-economic and political instability of the early 1990s prompted both titular as well as minority populations to leave the country. Georgia's historical profile of a multinational country disappeared with its non-ethnic Georgian population comprising only two main minority communities compactly settled in the regions of Kvemo Kartli in case of ethnic Azeris and in Samtskhe-Javakheti respectively for ethnic Armenians. Currently, Azeris are the largest ethnic minority group (284,600 or 6,5 percent) followed by Armenians (248,900 or 5,7 percent). Both of those ethnic groups reside in the regions of Georgia bordering their kin states, Armenia and Azerbaijan representing a challenge for the Georgian authorities in terms of their integration (see the Tables 2 and 3 for the ethnic composition of the mentioned regions).

For most of the 1990's, the Shevardnadze government considered the minority issue through the national security prism² and, as Ghia Nodia argues, followed the policy of “let sleeping dogs lie,”³ meaning that it is better not to touch the minority question at all, as if it does not exist. The securitization of the issue occurred by removing minority-majority discourse from the public sphere, closing the ethnic enclaves for outside interference, including political party activism, employing governance mechanisms based on a bargain with local authorities, turning them into economic-political elites, and transferring responsibility for education to the kin

2 For more on securitization of national minority issue in Georgia see Natalie Sabanadze, “Georgia's ethnic diversity. A Challenge to state-building.” *The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918–2012. The first Georgian republic and its successors*. Edited by Stephen F. Jones. Routledge. 2014, pp. 130–132.

3 Ghia Nodia, “The Poli-ethnicity of Georgia: Fact, Attitude towards the Fact and a Political Strategy”, *One Society, Many Ethnicities: Ethnic Diversity and Civic Integration in Georgia*, Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, Tbilisi, 2003 (in Georgian), p. 72.

states, in many cases resulting in Armenia and Azerbaijan supplying books for ethnic minority schools.

This policy resulted in “positive” developments, such as maintaining stability in ethnic enclaves in the turbulent early 1990s, and, especially in the case of Javakheti, neutralizing local paramilitary organizations that had taken power, thus establishing the state’s formal control over the region. On the other hand, this policy excluded the rule of law, did not create space for democratic channels of communication between majority-minority communities, and did not help Georgian citizens develop a common view of the country’s future. In the absence of an institutional framework for popular participation and integration policies, these communities continued to lead their own life and move closer to their kin states. Such an approach further strengthened the existence of different operational spaces established and promoted by the Soviet approach to nationality policies.

Against this background, President Mikheil Saakashvili’s pronounced ethnic minority policy was a drastic change. As a part of his vigorous state building mission, Saakashvili emphasized civic elements and depicted Georgia as a state for all its citizens. He specifically targeted and appealed to minority communities during his public speeches, often in their own languages, emphasizing the need to improve their integration and fighting stereotypes. The rhetoric in practice meant the ratification of the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of Nation Minorities (FCNM) in 2005, taking up and strengthening what had been the OSCE-led initiatives of promoting Georgian language knowledge among minority communities, elaborating a National Integration Strategy and Action Plan (2009–2014), limiting discrimination against minorities by reforming law enforcement agencies, investing in the rehabilitation of road infrastructure considered to be a major contributing factor to isolation, as well as promoting regional projects, namely the Kars–Akhalkalaki–Baku railway aimed at economic integration and the development of the ethnic Armenian minority enclave.

Despite the serious steps aimed at promoting civic identity and decreasing the gap between majority and minority enclaves, the results were not straightforward. The minority communities have definitely come psychologically and physically closer to the mainstream society. For its part, the majority has also acknowledged that ignoring minority issues was hampering the country’s development. But the timeframe and resources allocated for integration strategies have not been sufficient to overcome the patterns existing from the Soviet times and solidified by the practice of the first decade of independence. The policies also lacked a coherent and thor-

ough approach and did not promote minority participation in decision-making.

Currently, majority-minority relations can be characterized as stable and peaceful, although as Natalie Sabanadze puts it, mutual mistrust comes up, depending on changing circumstances.⁴ Those circumstances have encompassed certain state building and rule of law establishment efforts in the ethnic minority enclaves, such as the state’s anti-drug and anti-smuggling activities resulting in the closure of Kvemo Kartli’s Red Bridge and Sada-khlo markets, an important source of income for locals. Protests broke out as a result of anti-corruption activities on the Georgian–Armenian border in Ninotsminda (2005), as well as during the closing of enterprises in Akhlalkalaki accused of tax evasion.⁵ Actions that were widely publicized and aimed at asserting state power provoked controversial responses in minority enclaves and were viewed through ethnic lenses. At a current stage ethnic Armenians began to consider the building of the Kars–Akhalkalaki–Baku railway and the subsequent influx into the region of Turkish and Azeri workers as a threat to their well-being and security. They feared that they would face efforts to limit the economic benefits associated with the railway construction and subsequent operation for ethnic Armenians.

From the side of the majority, the mistrust towards minority communities appeared in relation to the changing international environment. Often minority communities are perceived to favor the former “colonial master,” as Alexander Rondeli puts it,⁶ and support foreign and security policy priorities that differ from those supported by ethnic Georgians.

Contributing to this suspicion is the role Russia and the kin-states play in the post-soviet space: effectively, they seek to leverage ethnic minority groups against the titular nation, thereby hampering state- and nation-building processes. Russia’s recent invasion of Ukraine confirms the emergence of a clearly formulated foreign and security policy doctrine in connection to the post-Soviet space.⁷ Though this approach is not new, this time it has been articulated more clearly, openly and in radical terms. Russia has expanded its role as a kin to the wider

4 Natalie Sabanadze, “Georgia’s ethnic diversity. A Challenge to state-building.” *The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918–2012. The first Georgian republic and its successors*. Edited by Stephen F. Jones. Routledge, 2014, p. 119.

5 For more information, see: Georgia’s Armenian and Azeri minorities. International Crisis Group. Europe Report 178. Tbilisi, 2006.

6 Alexander Rondeli, *The Russian–Georgian war and its implications for Georgia’s state-building. The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918–2012. The first Georgian republic and its successors*. Edited by Stephen F. Jones. Routledge, 2014, p. 35.

7 *Ibid.* p. 41

Russian-speaking population of the post-Soviet space through the provision of Russian passports to the citizens of neighboring states.⁸ Against the background of these developments, the existence of Russian and Armenian passports among minority communities of Georgia has especially contributed to the securitization of the ethnic issue and created an unhealthy debate in the nationwide media recently. Provision of Russian passports to the ethnic Armenians of Javakheti, initially associated with the military base, is not a new process. In addition, new amendments to the Armenian citizenship law from 2007 simplified the citizenship regime for ethnic Armenians not born in Armenia, making it possible for ethnic Armenians from Samtskhe-Javakheti to acquire Armenian citizenship in order to commute to Russia easily.

The Armenian and Russian policy of providing passports poses challenges to the Georgian state. The Georgian experience from 2008 and Russia's new foreign and security policy as visible in Ukraine has created a context whereby citizenship regimes could be used against a state's territory. Regardless of the reasons why minorities in the ethnic enclaves acquire new passports, the increase in the number of foreign citizens in Georgia puts its territorial sovereignty under threat.

Current Issues

The preconditions and circumstances discussed here shape the current discourse on the minority question in Georgia and define the challenges impeding minority integration into the Georgian state. The various challenges are interlinked and are all part of a vicious circle that is hard to overcome. Addressing these problems is heavily dependent on minority-majority joint efforts to eliminate distrust and improve group security.

Among the most visible issues hampering minority integration into the social-political life of the country is limited knowledge of the Georgian language, a deficiency that limits minority participation in decision-making and hinders social mobility. Language is a vital basis for ethnic identity in the Caucasus and ethnic Georgians attach considerable significance to it. Despite the ardent determination of Saakashvili's government to push forward state language programs, the resources were inadequate and policies inconsistent. Although overall the attitude towards the state language has changed in a positive way, the level of proficiency achieved in secondary schools is not sufficient for equal opportunities and competition. In addition, minorities frequently do not see how language knowledge would contribute to their well-being in the near future.

Several years ago, researchers linked a poor command of Georgian with limited access to higher education. However, the situation has changed positively following the introducing of the 1+4 program in 2010. This program is a kind of quota system helping minority youth access higher educational establishments in Georgia. As a result of the initiative, the number of young representatives of minority communities entering higher educational institutions has increased. The number of ethnic Azeri students from Kvemo Kartli who have passed nationwide exams has increased from 163 in 2010 to 587 in 2013, while from Samtskhe-Javakheti the figures jumped from 96 in 2010 to 139 in 2013.⁹ Creating a critical mass of minority community representatives graduating from Georgian educational institutions would definitely have a positive effect on the integration efforts.

The information vacuum is another serious issue resulting from the lack of language knowledge. Likewise, the limited activity of Georgian media outlets in the minority enclaves hampers social cohesion and integration. The only Russian language TV channel PIK was closed down after the Georgian Dream coalition came to power, while the translation of the Georgian Public Broadcaster's (GPB) evening news into local languages is not sufficient to make up for other deficiencies. Due to the lack of news from Tbilisi in languages comprehensible for minority communities, the minorities depend on Russian, Azeri and Armenian news sources, which often provide viewpoints differing from the Georgian perspective, thereby increasing the information gap between majority-minority communities. The information vacuum exacerbates the existing poor horizontal linkages between the center and the regions, which is in general weak throughout Georgia due to the country's uneven political development across rural and urban areas and the limited channels of communication.

The lack of good governance practices, which translates into low rates of participation in decision-making and limited political activism, are other issues common for minority enclaves. Minority representatives are not represented at the central level, neither in the public administration, nor in political parties. Mainstream political parties do not appeal to minority issues in their election campaigns; nor have they campaigned in minority enclaves (so far only with a few exceptions), fueling the argument that the regions have been the domain of the party in power.¹⁰ The inclusion of minority community representatives, in most cases local authorities, in

8 Alexandrova Lyudmila, Russia keeps pressing for reunification of "Russian world". April 02. <<http://en.itar-tass.com/opinions/1723>>

9 <<http://www.naec.ge/>>

10 Eka Metreveli and Jonathan Kulick, Social Relations and Governance in Javakheti, Georgia. PDCI, 2009. pp. 20–21.

the governing party lists and their subsequent participation in the parliament is also nominal.

Overall, the absence of democratic channels of communication limits minority participation in the state building process and hence contributes to the lack of social cohesion and unity.

Conclusion

The legacies of nationality policies from the soviet and post-soviet periods have influenced the state of affairs of minority enclaves in Georgia and encouraged mutual distrust among the majority and minority communities, contributing to the securitization of the issue, which is becoming especially acute due to the emergence of Russia's aggressive foreign and security policy in the post-soviet space.

Securitization and social cohesion are closely interlinked. In order to decrease the vulnerability of Geor-

gia's ethnic minorities to outside interference, it is important to introduce mechanisms for inclusion of minority interests into the realm of domestic politics and push forward policies aimed at national unity. But, due to the current international context in Georgia's neighborhood, achieving de-securitization of the minority question would be difficult.

In order to achieve social cohesion, Georgia needs to continue the reform process that started during the Saakashvili government, making it more transparent, inclusive and coherent. The lack of good governance practices and the absence of democratic channels of communication coupled with the lack of Georgian language knowledge and the informational vacuum directly contributes to the lack of unity among the majority and minority communities. Effective democracy cannot exist without a shared sense of civic belonging. Georgia still has a long way to go until such awareness is developed.

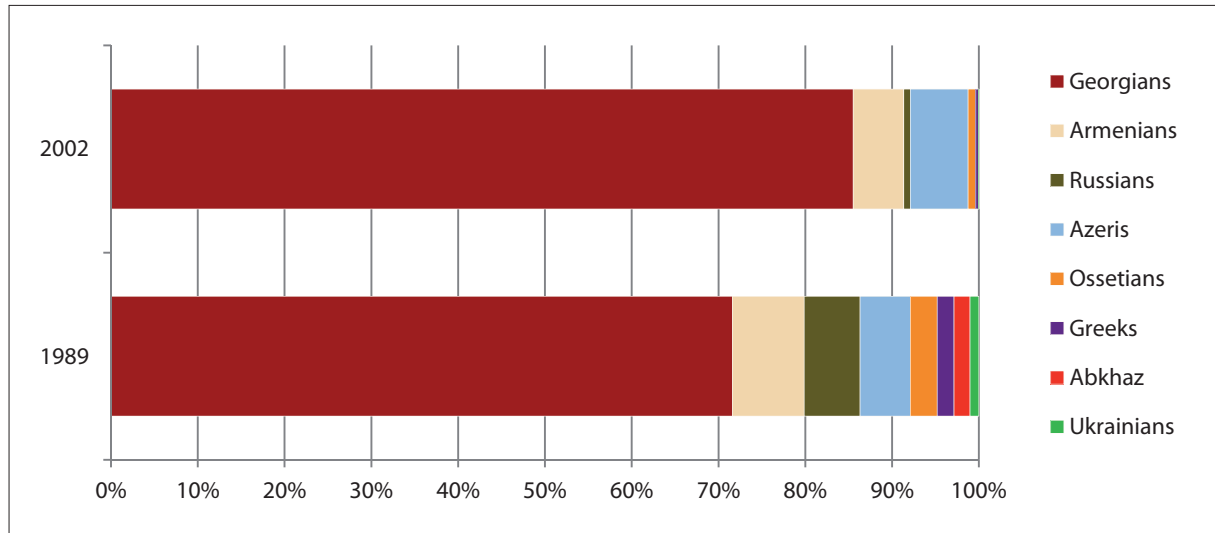
About the Author

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Figure 1: Ethnic Composition of Georgia, 1989, 2002 (%)



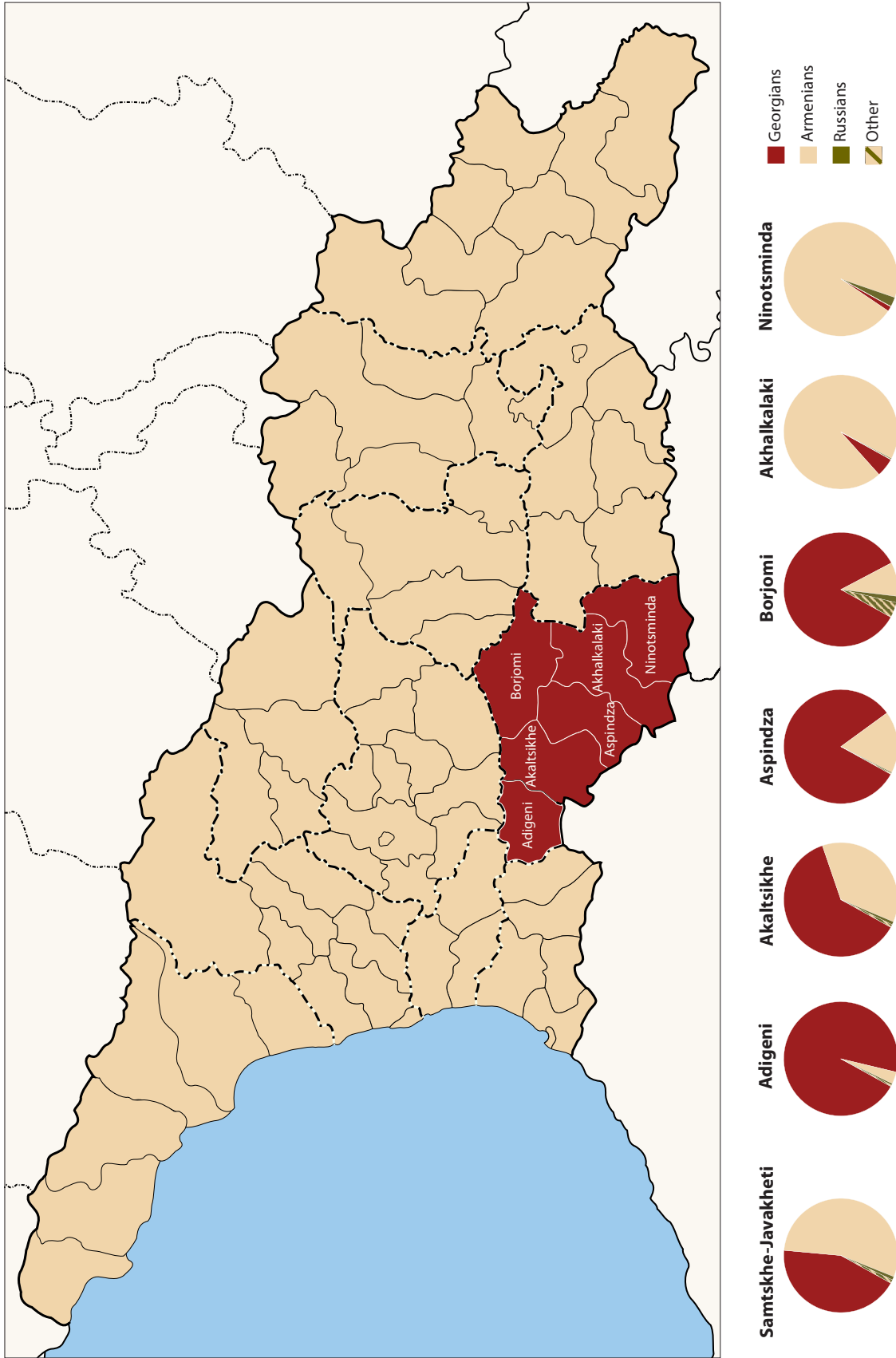
Source: State Department for Statistics of Georgia, "Major Findings of the First General National Population Census of Georgia in 2002", Statistics Booklet, Tbilisi, 2002.

Table 1: Ethnic Composition of Georgia, 1989, 2002

Ethnicity	1989	2002	% of the total in 1989	% of the total 2002
Georgians	3787.4	3661.1	70.1	83.7
Armenians	437.2	248.9	8.1	5.7
Russians	341.2	32.6	6.3	0.75
Azeris	307.6	284.8	5.7	6.5
Ossetians	164.1	38.0	3.0	0.87
Greeks	100.3	15.1	1.9	0.35
Abkhaz	95.9	3.5	1.8	0.0008
Ukrainians	52.4	7.0	1.0	0.0016
Total	5400.8	4371.5	100	100

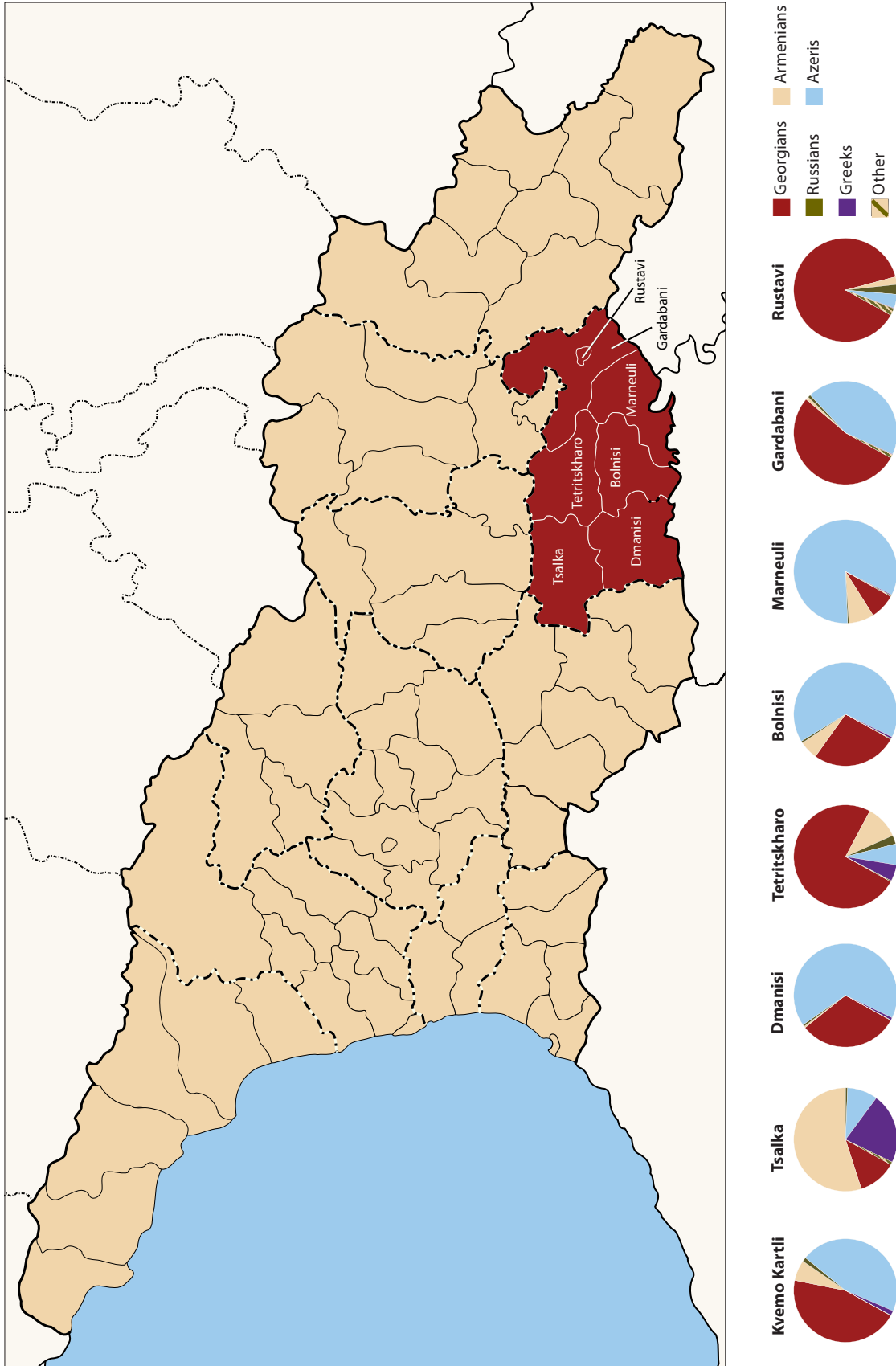
Source: State Department for Statistics of Georgia, "Major Findings of the First General National Population Census of Georgia in 2002", Statistics Booklet, Tbilisi, 2002.

Figure 2: Ethnic Composition of the Samtskhe-Javakheti Region and its Constituent Administrative Districts, 2002



Source: State Department for Statistics of Georgia, "Major Findings of the First General National Population Census of Georgia in 2002", *Statistics Booklet*, Tbilisi, 2002; map: "George Mel", <<http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A4%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BB:GEO-SJ-AD.svg>>

Figure 3: Ethnic Composition of the Kvemo Kartli Region and its Constituent Administrative Districts, 2002



Source: State Department for Statistics of Georgia, "Major Findings of the First General National Population Census of Georgia in 2002", Statistics Booklet, Tbilisi, 2002; map: "George Mel", <<http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A4%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BB:GEO-SJ-AD.svg>>

Table 2: Ethnic Composition of the Samtskhe-Javakheti Region, 2002

	Total	Georgians	Russians	Armenians	Other
Samtskhe-Javakheti	207,598 100%	89,995 43.4%	2,230 1%	113,347 54.6%	2,026 1%
Adigeni	20,752 100%	19,860 95.7%	101 0.5%	698 3.4%	93 0.4%
Aspindza	13,010 100%	10,671 82.0%	34 0.3%	2,273 17.5%	32 0.3%
Akhalkalaki	60,975 100%	3,214 5.3%	157 0.3%	57,516 94.3%	88 0.1%
Akaltsikhe	46,134 100%	28,473 61.7%	410 0.9%	16,879 36.6%	372 0.8%
Borjomi	32,422 100%	27,301 84.2%	585 1.8%	3,124 9.6%	1412 3%
Ninotsminda	34,305 100%	476 1.4%	943 2.7%	32,857 95.8%	29 0.1%

Source: State Department for Statistics of Georgia, "Major Findings of the First General National Population Census of Georgia in 2002", Statistics Booklet, Tbilisi, 2002

Table 3: Ethnic Composition of the Kvemo Kartli Region, 2002

	Total	Georgians	Russians	Armenians	Azeris	Greeks	Other
Kvemo Kartli	497,530 100%	222,450 44.7%	6,464 1.3%	31,777 6.4%	224,606 45.1%	7,415 1.5%	4,818 0.1%
Rustavi	116,384 100%	102,151 87.8%	3,563 3.1%	2,809 2.4%	4,993 4.3%	257 0.2%	2,611 2.2%
Bolnisi	74,301 100%	19,926 26.8%	414 0.6%	4,316 5.8%	49,026 66%	438 0.6%	181 0.2%
Gardabani	114,348 100%	60,832 53.2%	994 0.9%	1,060 0.9%	49,993 43.7%	236 0.2%	1,233 1.1%
Dmanisi	28,034 100%	8,759 31.2%	156 0.6%	147 0.5%	18,716 66.8%	218 0.8%	38 0.1%
Marneuli	118,221 100%	9,503 8%	523 0.4%	9,329 7.9%	98,245 83.1%	296 0.3%	325 0.3%
Tetritskharo	25,354 100%	18,769 74.0%	689 2.7%	2,632 10.4%	1,641 6.5%	1,281 5.1%	342 0.3%
Tsalka	20,888 100%	2,510 12%	125 0.6%	11,484 55%	1,992 9.5%	4,589 22%	188 0.9%

Source: State Department for Statistics of Georgia, "Major Findings of the First General National Population Census of Georgia in 2002", Statistics Booklet, Tbilisi, 2002