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Obstacles Impeding the Regional Integration of the Javakheti Region of Georgia

Jonathan Wheatley

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EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR MINORITY ISSUES (ECMI) Schiffbruecke 12 (Kompagnietor Building) D-24939 Flensburg Germany
(+49-(0)461-14 14 9-0 fax +49-(0)461-14 14 9-19 e-mail: info@ecmi.de internet: http://www.ecmi.de

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Introduction

This working paper is a consolidated and condensed analysis of a longer field report originally carried out as part of ECMI's action-oriented project "Defusing interethnic tension and promoting regional integration – the Javakheti Region of the Republic of Georgia". Both the original field report, and this resulting analysis aim to provide an insightful overview of current the social, economic and political situation in two *rayons* (districts) of Georgia; Akhalkalaki *rayon* and Ninostminda *rayon;* which together combine to form a geographical area better known as the Javakheti Region in southern Georgia. By identifying and providing information about the current problems impeding the regional integration of Javakheti, this working paper will act as a guide for defining priorities and ensuring more informed intervention in the area.

Fieldwork was carried out in both of these *rayons* during the period 7 – 17 March 2004 and is informed by data obtained from a total of forty-three interviews and also five focus group discussions. This fact finding fieldwork was also successful in serving an additional purpose at grass roots level as it identified relevant key and pertinent stakeholders for the new and innovative inter-ethnic "Javakheti Citizens' Forum" which will be initiated by ECMI in September 2004.

Dr. Jonathan Wheatley is a Research Associate at the Free University of Berlin.

III. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Geography and Demographic Balance

The mountainous *rayons* (districts) of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda combine to form the Javakheti Region in southern Georgia. The population of Javakheti is predominantly Armenian in ethnic origin. According to the 1989 USSR census, in Akhalkalaki 91.3% of the population were ethnic Armenian at that time, 4.4% Georgian, 2.5% Russian and 1.8% belonged to other ethnic groups. In Ninotsminda, the corresponding proportions were 89.6% Armenian, 1.2% Georgian, 8.4% Russian, and 0.8% for other groups. However, since that census was conducted the proportion of ethnic Armenians seems to have increased; according to Georgian government statistics on electoral registration, 95.3% of the population of Ninotsminda *rayon* and 93.6% of the population of Akhalkalaki *rayon* are ethnic Armenians[1].

In Akhalkalaki *rayon*, of the sixty-one villages with their own election precincts (i.e. all settlements with a population of approximately a hundred or more) fifty-one are predominantly Armenian, seven (Gogasheni, Apnia, Koteli, Okmi, Azmana, Pteni and Chunchkhi) are predominantly Georgian, two (Baraleti and Murjakheti) are mixed Armenian and Georgian and one (Khospio) is mixed Armenian, Georgian and Greek. In Ninotsminda, all of the thirty one villages with election precincts are predominantly Armenian, except for Gorelovka (mixed Armenian and Russian Dukhobor) and Spasovka (mixed but mainly Ajaran Georgian)[2].

The first major settlement of Armenians in Javakheti region occurred after the war between the Russian and Ottoman empires in 1828-29, when the Russian Empire occupied most of the region. At that time a large number of Ottoman Armenians decided to settle on the territory that was newly occupied by the Russians; mainly they settled in what is now Akhalkalaki *rayon*[3]. A second major wave of Armenian

[1] Oksana Antonenko, *Assessment of the Political Implications of Akhakalaki Base Closure for the Stability in Southern Georgia: EU Response Capacities* (CPN Briefing Study, September 2001), available at www.fewer.org/caucasus/dzhavakheti/cpnjavak901.pdf.

[2] There are (a very few) villages without their own election precincts. An example is Patara Khorenia in Ninotsminda district.

[3] Voitsekh Guretski, "The Question of Javakheti", *Caucasian Regional Studies*, Vol.3, Issue 1 (1998), available at http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/crs/eng/0301-05.htm.

settlers arrived after the forced expulsion of the Armenian population from Ottoman territory in 1915; a large proportion of the population of Akhalkalaki *rayon* and an overwhelming majority of the population of Ninotsminda *rayon* can trace their arrival in Javakheti to this event.

A small number of Muslim Georgians (Meskhetians Turks) also traditionally inhabited the Javakheti region, although the vast majority of them lived in Samtskhe (i.e. Borjomi, Adigeni, Akhaltsikhe and Aspindza *rayons*). According to one source, 7,000 Meskhetian Turks lived in Javakheti in 1918[4]. In 1944 however, all Meskhetian Turks were deported to Central Asia (mainly Uzbekistan) under Stalin's orders and subsequently were not permitted to return.

Another small community in Javakheti are the Dukhobors, ethnic Russians who came to the Javakheti region to escape religious persecution by the Tsarist state. They settled in seven villages in Javakheti: Gorelovka, Orlovka, Spasovka, Yefremovka, Bogdanovka (Ninotsminda), Tambovka and Rodionovka. In 1989, 3,163 Dukhobors lived in Ninotsminda *rayon*[5], although, according to some sources, earlier in the 1980s this figure was as high as 4,500-5,000[6]. However at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, many Dukhobors migrated from the region in response to the perceived anti-Russian feeling that emerged with the Georgian national liberation movement. Today, there are estimated to be only 900-1,000 Dukhobors remaining in Ninotsminda *rayon*, the majority of whom, live in the village of Gorelovka (some 500-600)[7].

In 1989-90, the Georgian government embarked upon an initiative to resettle ethnic Georgians from Ajara (mainly Khulo *rayon*) in Javakheti following a series of landslides in their former home. Several Georgian nationalist groups such as the Merab Kostava Society were at the forefront of this resettlement initiative, purchasing the houses originally inhabited by the exiting Dukhobors. However,

[4] The Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, *Ethnic-Confessional Groups and Challenges to Civic Integration in Georgia: Azeri, Javakheti Armenian and Muslim Meskhetian Communities* (Tbilisi: CIPDD, 2002).
[5] The Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, *Policy Brief: Javakheti in Georgia. Problems, Challenges and Necessary Responses* (July 2000), available at www.fewer.org/caucasus/pbjav800a.pdf.
[6] Interviews with the author.
[7] *Ibid.*.

while a few Ajarans did indeed resettle, for the most part, local Armenians occupied the abandoned Dukhobor homes.

During the Soviet period, Javakheti retained the status of a border zone and as such was subject to special restrictions. It was only possible to enter Javakheti with the special permission of Soviet border guards, who were deployed 78 km from the border with Turkey[8]. As a result, the gradual liberalisation that occurred in the rest of Georgia during the Brezhnev period and subsequently had little impact on Javakheti. Border restrictions were only relaxed shortly before the collapse of the USSR.

Economy and Infrastructure

The climate in Javakheti is extremely harsh. Akhalkalaki is situated at an altitude of approximately 1,700 metres above sea level and Ninotsminda is situated at an altitude of 1,950. Night-time temperatures are known to fall below minus 30 degrees Celsius in winter and snow fall is common as late as April.

Despite its poor climate, the predominant resource of Javakheti remains agriculture, and its agricultural output is shaped by its mountainous terrain and harsh climate. The primary crop grown is potatoes although some producers also grow cabbages, carrots and grain. In 2003, production of these products fell sharply due to a plague of field mice. The ability of a plague of rodents to seriously impact upon a whole harvest offers some indication of the now subsistence nature of agriculture in Javakheti. When the production of potatoes exceeds the needs of domestic consumption, they are sometimes sold in markets outside Javakheti, mainly in Tbilisi and Kutaisi. However, the cultivation of potatoes as a cash crop is unlikely to become a reality in Javakheti due to such imposing obstacles as fluctuating harvests, poor infrastructure and communications which hinder rapid transport of fresh produce, and administrative corruption, in particular demands for bribes by corrupt traffic policemen. There is also some livestock breeding (mainly cattle), but herds are relatively small and localised. Dairy products are mainly used for

[8] The Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, *Ethnic-Confessional Groups and Challenges to Civic Integration in Georgia*.

domestic consumption or are sold in local markets, but are rarely sold outside Javakheti due to a lack of technology for preserving milk or making cheese.

As highlighted above, effective communication links in Javakheti are hampered by poor infrastructure and lack of accessibility. There exist only three road routes that connect Javakheti to the exterior. The most advanced link is the road which connects Akhalkalaki to Akhaltsikhe and which also forms the main transport route to Tbilisi. However, this road, while better than some others, remains in a poor physical state, ensuring that a 94-kilometre car journey from Akhalkalaki to Akhaltsikhe takes approximately two hours and journey times can be extended by a further three-and-a-half hours if the end destination is Tbilisi. Landslides can often barricade off this route, therefore further hindering regular, reliable and dependable access between Akhalkalaki, Akhaltsikhe and Tbilisi.

The most direct route to Tbilisi, however, is the road from Ninotsminda via Tsalka, but the road is in even worse physical condition, ensuring that it is only possible to make this journey by four wheel drive during the summer period. Finally, the road south from Ninotsminda into Armenia is also in a state of poor disrepair and due to its high altitude is often blocked by snow during the winter. As for roads connecting the villages in the region, these are little more than dirt tracks and are very often blocked by snow. Thus many of the villages remain virtually isolated and inaccessible from the outside during the winter. There is one train from Tbilisi to Akhalkalaki via Tsalka every second day (powered by electricity as far as Tsalka and then by diesel), but the journey takes around ten hours and its schedule is often subject to interruptions, particularly in the winter.

Industry in the region has virtually ceased to function. During the Soviet period, Javakheti was a major producer of basalt and pumice stone, which were exported to other parts of the Soviet Union, mainly Russia. There were also local plants that processed agricultural products. Finally, in Ninotsminda there was a large factory that produced knitted goods. Almost all of these industries are now closed as a result of the economic crisis that gripped the region following the collapse of the USSR.

Decline in agricultural and industrial production has continued relentlessly throughout the post-communist period. According to figures provided by the Governor's Office of Samtskhe-Javakheti, between the first half of 1996 and the first half of 2001, industrial and agricultural production fell by 49.7% in the two *rayons* of Javakheti. This compares with a fall of 28.3% in the four *rayons* of Samtskhe. Total production is negligible in Javakheti, even if one compares it with neighbouring Samtskhe. Table 1 shows estimated figures for industrial and agricultural production and population in the six *rayons* of Samtskhe-Javakheti[9].

Given the virtual absence of local production, revenue from trade makes up a disproportionately high share of local income. The main items for trading are food, stone, timber and, in particular, oil products and gas. Much of this trade is of a contraband nature. As highlighted above, the Javakheti region is a border zone, and its role as a trading post is of particular strategic importance. In the aftermath of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, no direct trade existed across the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan and thus all trade between the two countries had to be directed through Georgia. In this sense Javakheti provides a vital trade link, especially in the export of gas from Azerbaijan to Armenia. However, the lack of diversification in the economy has meant that whoever controls the border posts and the trade in gas and oil products automatically becomes a major player in the politics of the region. This has led to power at local level being concentrated in the hands of a few powerful economic groups, about which more will be said in the next section.

Table 1: Industrial and Agricultural Output in Samtskhe-Javakheti, January – July 2001

Rayon	**Population**	**Industrial and Agricultural Output, January - July 2001 (1000s Lari)**	**Industrial and Agricultural Output per capita, January - July 2001 (Lari)**
Adigeni	20,752	32.3	1.56

[9] Figures for industrial and agricultural production were taken from Oksana Antonenko, *Assessment of the Political Implications of Akhakalaki Base Closure for the Stability in Southern Georgia* and are based on figures provided by the governor's office of Samtskhe-Javakheti. Figures for population were taken from the 2002 Census of Georgia, available at http://www.statistics.ge/Main/census/INDEX.HTM.

Akhaltsikhe	46,134	662.6	14.36
Aspindza	13,010	252.5	19.41
Borjomi	32,422	3245.7	100.11
Akhalkalaki	60,975	71.3	1.17
Ninotsminda	34,305	147.2	4.29
Samtskhe	112,318	4153.1	36.98
Javakheti	95,280	218.5	2.29
Samtskhe-Javaketi	207,598	4371.6	21.06

Emigrant remittances form the lifeblood of most rural families in Javakheti, cultivating a continuing dependency on the incomes of family members who have migrated. However this migration from the Javakheti region as a whole, tends not to be a concerted, sustained or long-term phenomena, but rather appears to be temporary or 'seasonal' in nature and fuelled mainly by pressing economic needs. A large proportion of the male working population from Javakhetian villages migrate to Russia every year, mainly to benefit from employment in the construction industry. However, although a significant minority emigrate permanently, most return to Javakheti during the winter period to tend their crops According to once source, in the village of Eshtia in Ninotsminda *rayon* approximately 1,700 individuals out of a population of 4,000 leave the village for seasonal work[10]. Since travel to Russia now requires a visa for Georgian citizens, a large number of offices have opened in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda selling Russian visas.

Finally, another crucial part of the local economy comes from the Russian military base located in Akhalkalaki. The revenue that the base brings in to the local economy is believed to amount to nearly USD 80,000 per month[11]. The impact of the Russian base on the political and economic life of the region will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

[10] Rostom Sarkissian, "Javakhk: Socio-Economic Neglect or Ethnic Unrest", DWA Discussion Paper No.101, *Diplomacy & World Affairs* (April 2002), available at www.oxy.edu/departments/dwa/papers/.
[11] *Ibid.*.

The constant supply of electricity is also a problem, although the situation has improved somewhat recently, following an agreement between the Georgian and Armenian governments in November 2001 whereby Armenia agreed to provide electricity both to Tbilisi and directly to Javakheti. As a result, most residents of the region receive between 12 and 14 hours of electricity per day. In addition, there are also some small hydroelectric power plants which sell electricity to those who can afford to pay higher rates. Often these hydroelectric plants are the property of local power brokers in the region, and the possession of such commercial power reserves reinforces their position as part of the local economic elite[12].

Local Administrative Structures

At *rayon* level and below, the administrative structure in Javakheti is, like in other regions of Georgia, a legacy of the communist period. The first layer of local government consists of locally elected bodies or *sakrebulos* for each of the two major towns (Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda) and for villages or communities (i.e. groups of villages or *temi* in Georgian) in rural areas. Akhalkalaki also has its own directly elected mayor, as do all towns in Georgia with a voting population of more than 5,000. As the voting population in Ninotsminda is less than 5,000, the head of the executive branch in the town is the chairperson of the *sakrebulo*, as specified by law. Since the new local election law came into force in 2001, for *sakrebulo* elections, voters are presented with a list of candidates and the five candidates obtaining the most votes are declared elected. For larger settlements seven or even nine *sakrebulo* members can be elected; for example, the town of Akhalkalaki elects seven members. In Javakheti most *sakrebulos* incorporate several villages, in contrast to most of the rest of Georgia where one *sakrebulo* generally includes only one or two villages (see below).

The role of the *sakrebulo* in Georgia is mainly supervisory: they has the right to amend the local budget, approve long-term development plans and they has the right to evaluate the work of the executive bodies. They also has limited powers to impose and remove local taxes.

[12] For example, one such power plant that supplies electricity to Akhalkalaki is owned by the family of the former gamgebeli of Ninotsminda, Sergo Darbinyan.

Real power, however, rests with the executive branch of local government or *gamgeoba* at the second level of local government, i.e. the *rayon* (district) level. The Soviet-era division of Javakheti into two *rayons* – Akhalkalaki *rayon* and Ninotsminda *rayon* – remains in force today. The head of the *rayon gamgeoba*, known as the *gamgebeli*, is appointed by the President of Georgia from amongst the chairpersons of the town and community/village *sakrebulos*. Prior to the 2001 law, *rayon gamgebelis* were not required to have been elected to a *sakrebulo*. In reality, this new legal stipulation made little difference, as in both of Javakheti's *rayons* the incumbent *gamgebelis* were able to retain their posts during the 2002 local elections by arranging to be elected to local *sakrebulos*.

A third unofficial level of government was introduced by the government of Eduard Shevardnadze in 1994. These are the nine provinces or *mkhare*, which more or less correspond to the historical regions of Georgia and which are administered by an authorised representative or "governor", appointed by the President of Georgia. Originally the governor's post was entirely informal and not defined by law and, although the provinces acquired legal status when a new law on administrative territorial arrangement was passed in February 1997, the competences of the governor remain poorly defined[13]. Despite its historical significance, Javakheti was not designated a province; instead it was incorporated into the province of Samtskhe-Javakheti, which consists of the *rayons* of Akhalkalaki, Ninotsminda, Aspindza, Akhaltsikhe, Adigeni and Borjomi. Thus no administrative-territorial unit corresponds to Javakheti.

There have been five governors of Samtskhe-Javakheti since the post was established. The first of these was Valeri Bakradze (1994-95). The second governor, Gigla Baramidze, was by far the longest-serving of the five, as he held his post from 1995 until February 2002. There then followed Temur Mosiashvili (February 2002 – August 2003) and Gela Kvaratskhelia (July – November 2003). Following a period of uncertainty that followed the so-called "Rose Revolution", the former Ambassador to Armenia, Nikoloz Nikolozishvili was appointed governor in February 2004. Despite the area's large ethnic Armenian population, all governors to date have been ethnic Georgians.

[13] See Ghia Nodia (ed.), *Political System in Georgia*, (Tbilisi: Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, 1998) at www.cipdd.org/cipdd_g/pdf/eurob_e.pdf.

As well as the *gamgebeli* all other major executive posts in the *rayons*, such as police chief, prosecutor and head of the Tax Inspectorate, are appointed by the centre in Tbilisi. Within Javakheti itself, however most of these individuals have been ethnic Armenians.

Recent History

As the Georgian national liberation movement gained momentum in the late 1980s, a parallel process was underway in Javakheti, where many members of the local population had contacts with fellow Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, where conflict between Armenians and Azeris had erupted in 1988-89. In 1988 the popular movement "Javakh" emerged as a co-ordination committee of local public organisations. Ostensibly, its aim was to promote Armenian culture, to protect national institutions and to promote the development of the region. Initially its members included Georgians, Russians and Greeks, but increasingly it came to constitute a kind of "popular front" for local Armenians and began advocating greater autonomy for Javakheti. By the early 1990s, the Javakh enjoyed widespread popularity, especially in Akhalkalaki *rayon*.

During Gamsakhurdia's term in office, Javakh dominated political life in the region. In February 1991, in response to perceived ethnic chauvinism on the part of the Gamsakhurdia government, a Provisional Council of Representatives was established in Akhalkalaki *rayon*. The Provisional Council, which was dominated by Javakh, consisted of 64 representatives from each village of Akhalkalaki *rayon* and eight representatives from the town of Akhalkalaki. A twenty-four member Council was formed from the Provisional Council and this body went on to elect a seven-member Presidium (one member of which was an ethnic Georgian). Throughout 1991, Javakh maintained full control of Akakalkalaki *rayon*, and armed formations loyal to the movement prevented Georgian military and paramilitary formations from entering the territory. The popular movement also successfully prevented Gamsakhurdia from imposing his choice of Prefect on the *rayon* of Akhalkalaki; after three successive nominees of Gamsakhurdia were forcefully prevented from entering the local government offices, the Georgian government was forced to accept one of the leaders of Javakh, Samvel Petrosyan, as Prefect

(*gamgebeli*) of the *rayon*. Following Petrosyan's appointment in November 1991, the Council of Representatives was voluntarily disbanded.

It is interesting to note that even in 1991, when tension between Javakh and the Georgian government was at its height, a motion demanding independence for Javakheti was rejected by the Provisional Council. Local Armenians maintain that the establishment of the council was merely a response to events in other part of Georgia and was not a manifestation of separatism[14].

Following Shevardnadze's return to Georgia in March 1992, Javakh's power base gradually began to diminish. Petrosyan retained his post for about a year, but resigned both as *gamgebeli* and as leader of the Javakh movement as internal divisions began to weaken the movement. Despite Javakh's opposition, in 1994 the Georgian government created a de facto Georgian province out of Samtskhe-Javakheti, and the President appointed his own "authorised representative" or governor to the province. Prospects for greater autonomy for Javakheti were further diminished by the negative attitude of Armenia's then President, Levon Ter Petrosyan towards the idea. In late spring 1997, Presidents Shevardnadze and Ter Petrosyan met in Javakheti and the Armenian President made it clear that attempts to destabilise the situation in Javakheti would not be supported by the Armenian government[15].

The establishment of Samtskhe-Javakheti as a province with its own governor represented a serious setback for Javakh. The merger of the mainly Georgian Samtskhe with Javakheti was a clear signal that Tbilisi had no intention of granting any form of autonomy whatsoever to the Armenian population of Javakheti. In addition, the Georgian government adopted a strategy of "divide and rule" with respect to Javakh by offering leading members of the organisation administrative offices in local power structures such as the traffic police or the local pension fund[16]. Javakh then fell apart as other former leaders of the movement emigrated to Russia. Another group of former Javakh activists, led by another of the movement's leaders, David Rstakyan, later established a new political movement called *Virk*, whose goal was to become a political party to lobby for Javakheti's autonomy

[14] Guretski, "The Question of Javakheti".
[15] *Ibid.*.
[16] Interviews with the author.

within Georgia. Although Virk has a significant number of supporters, to date, it has been unable to gain the sort of influence that Javakh once had and is yet to be officially recognised[17].

On the surface Javakheti has maintained stability since Shevardnadze's government was able to defeat the most tenacious of the Georgian paramilitary groups (such as the *Mkhedrioni*) in 1994-95. However there have been certain stirrings of discontent, as a result of a combination of factors, such as the poor economic situation in the region and Tbilisi's desire to remove the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki. Calls for greater autonomy are voiced periodically. In 1997, for example, members of Javakh collected signatures demanding the abolition of the administrative region (i.e. province) of Samtskhe-Javakheti and the establishment of a Javakheti province. Organisers of the petition claim that they were obstructed from collecting signatures by the police[18]. In an incident the following year, an armed group of local residents held up a Georgian army unit that was heading for an army range in Akhalkalaki *rayon*[19]. However, in the end the incident passed off peacefully. Unease at the prospect of the removal of the Russian military base increased in 1999, when Russia provisionally agreed to withdraw all its bases from Georgia at the Istanbul summit of the OSCE. The base is important for the local population both in terms of the economic benefits it provides and because of the perception that it provides military security from neighbouring Turkey (see below).

[17] Interviews with the author; The Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, *Ethnic-Confessional Groups and Challenges to Civic Integration in Georgia: Azeri, Javakheti Armenian and Muslim Meskhetian Communities* (Tbilisi: CIPDD, 2002), especially 29-30. This volume was accessed on the Internet at www.cipdd.org in June 2002.
[18] Guretski, "The Question of Javakheti".
[19] The Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, *Ethnic-Confessional Groups and Challenges to Civic Integration in Georgia*.

III. LOCAL ACTORS 1995-2004

Unlike in Kvemo Kartli, where ethnic Georgians occupy the majority of administrative positions, in Javakheti most power brokers at *rayon* level (e.g. prosecutor, police chief, *gamgebeli*) are ethnic Armenians. As highlighted above, only at provincial level (i.e. in Samtskhe-Javakheti) are most appointees ethnic Georgians.

Officially, executive power in Javakheti rests with the centrally appointed heads of the *rayon* administration (*gamgebelis*). In Ninotsminda *rayon*, the *gamgebeli*, Rafik Arzumanyan, has remained at his post since 1993, while in Akhalkalaki *rayon* there have been no less than six changes of *gamgebeli* since Georgia became an independent republic. This would suggest that power at local level is somewhat more contested in Akhalkalaki than in Ninotsminda *rayon*. The present *gamgebeli* of Akhalkalaki *rayon*, Artur Eremyan, has occupied his post since December 2003.

Since 1995, the deputies elected to parliament from Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda on the first-past the post basis have also wielded a very significant influence. These individuals and their families are believed to have controlled many of the economic resources of the region, especially the trade in oil and gas.

Considerable power also rests with the police chiefs of the two *rayons*. In Ninotsminda, a single person has occupied the post of police chief throughout most of the post-independence period, except for a three-year absence in Moscow during the period 2001-2003, and he was reappointed following the "Rose Revolution". In Akhalkalaki *rayon*, Mkhitar Abajyan became the chief of police in 2000; previously he had been head of the Tax Inspectorate of Akhalkalaki rayon. At the present time, Abajyan in considered by many to be one of the most powerful men in Javakheti.

Reference is often made in the Georgian media and in popular literature to Javakheti's so-called clans. However, it would be a mistake to consider these as clans in the sociological sense of the word as they basically consist of large families with good connections to top officials in Tbilisi and with sufficient economic leverage to win the loyalty of a number of clients at local level. The source of their influence is simply their control of key economic resources – mainly oil and gas –

rather than to any feelings of 'clan loyalty' amongst the population at large. In an economically deprived area such as Javakheti any group that is able to provide basic services to a small proportion of the population and to employ, one or two hundred people is likely to be – in local terms – influential. Thus I will henceforth refer to Javakheti's clans simply as 'economic groups'.

Two primary economic groups have dominated political and economic life in Javakheti since 1995, although other smaller groups also exist and have a certain degree of influence. The two main groups are each headed by powerful individuals of Armenian nationality. Both of these individuals have been members of parliament during the period in question and both have attempted to instil their 'own people' (whether relatives or clients) in the local bureaucracy. By means of their wealth and their capacity to provide (albeit limited) employment opportunities they have the capacity to mobilise a number of people to support them, especially at election time. Moreover, one of these two groups in particular has involved itself in charitable work, particularly (though not exclusively) during elections, by supplying wood and petrol to the villages and by repairing roads, schools, hospitals and water supply systems.

In the light of the new situation that emerged after the events of November 2003, the economic groups began to reposition themselves politically. Generally this repositioning took the form of vying with one another as to who could be most loyal to the new government. Shortly after the Revolution, one of the two dominant groups rallied in Ninotsminda demanding the resignation of the *gamgebeli* of the *rayon*. However, Akhalakaki's police chief intervened and prevented the demonstrators from achieving their goal.

Many local observers believe these so-called clans to be artificial structures created by the government in Tbilisi to "divide and rule" Javakheti. By dividing the political elite, they argue, the central government ensures that no united voice is heard from Javakheti. The 'clan' leaders, they point out, were often on friendly terms during the late communist period and only later became rivals, as a result of conflicting business interests. Indeed it is clear that divisions within the local political and economic elite do not reflect any deep-seated sociological divisions within the population of Javakheti, and that the failure of the political elites to find a

common language reflects their inability to establish a meaningful dialogue with the population as a whole. What we see is a fractious local elite beset by personal rivalry and shifting alliances, easily manipulated by the centre and lacking the will and/or resources to respond to the needs of ordinary people (notwithstanding those sporadic acts of charity that members of this elite undoubtedly carry out for the benefit of the most vulnerable members of the population).

Political Parties

Political parties only exist in a meaningful sense during the pre-election period and the vast majority of the local population do not identify with any political party at all. Generally, the population has voted for the party that represents the government in Tbilisi, not out of any real enthusiasm for the government's policies but through the perception that the government at least provides stability and will not tolerate ethnic tensions or conflict. In addition, the leaders of the local economic groups have often used whatever means at their disposal to ensure that the vote of Javakhetians is effectively "delivered" to their patrons in Tbilisi. Thus, in the 1995 and 1999 elections, most of Javakheti's vote went to the Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG), while in the discredited November 2003 elections the pro-government "For a New Georgia" bloc also dominated. Similarly, in the repeat parliamentary elections of March 2004, the vast majority of votes went to the bloc supporting the new government, "National Movement – Democrats".

Nevertheless, despite this generally one-sided picture, other political parties have also gained the vote of certain sections of the population of Javakheti, either by winning the loyalty of members of the local elite or by promising that they will better represent the interests of Javakhetians than other political parties. These parties included the National Democratic Party and the Union for Democratic Revival in the late 1990s, as well as the New Rights and the United Democrats in the early 2000s. The United Democrats, founded by Zurab Zhvania following his split with former President Eduard Shevardnadze in late 2001, became especially influential as it was supported by the leader of one of the so-called economic groups. Today this party is a party of the new government.

Virk, and its leader David Rstakyan, although officially unrecognised, still undoubtedly enjoy a certain level of public support in Javakheti, especially in Akhalkalaki *rayon*, although it is difficult to estimate how many supporters they have. *Virk* (which is the medieval Armenian name for Georgia) has been attempting to register as a political party since it was set up in 1999, but so far without success. The ground for the central authorities' refusal to register the party is that by law regional and ethnically-based political parties are prohibited.

Generally, therefore, it can be said that political parties in Javakheti have not even entered the earliest stages of institutionalisation and have no roots amongst the population at large.

Power Structures at Village Level

Generally speaking, ethnic Armenian villages are not represented in official power structures. For example, the sixty-one villages with election precincts in Akahalkalaki *rayon* share twenty-one community (*temi*) *sakrebulos*, a ratio of around three to one, which is much higher than in the rest of Georgia. The ratio is even higher for ethnic Armenian villages; the seven Georgian villages share five *sakrebulos* while the remaining sixteen non-urban *sakrebulos* are shared among fifty-four Armenian and mixed villages. In Ninotsminda *rayon* the ratio is similar as thirty-one villages with election precincts share nine *sakrebulos*. This situation makes it problematic for many villagers to connect in any meaningful way to the local authorities, especially given the poor roads and frequent harsh weather conditions that make communication between neighbouring villages problematic. Thus, minor bureaucratic procedures that should be within the competence of the community *sakrebulo* are problematic for many villagers. In addition, many local observers claim that community *sakrebulos* are virtually powerless to solve local problems and are even unable to discharge those limited number of functions that lie within their competence.

Some villages also have their own informal or 'natural' leader. These may be of any age, may come from a variety of social backgrounds and may gain their authority in a variety of different ways. Some were previously directors of collective farms or schools, others obtained a reputation in the Javakh movement (which, according to

some respondents, was a kind of 'school' in which a reputation as a leader could be made), some obtained influence through wealth and philanthropy, while others gained respect by obtaining an education in a major city such as Yerevan. There have been several instances of villages mobilising to protect their interests. For example, on one occasion residents of a village in Ninotsminda *rayon* rallied together in Ninotsminda in order to burn down the houses of two individuals who were suspected of killing a fellow villager. A more "civic-minded" example of collective action at village level was the decision of seven villages from Akahalkalaki *rayon* to establish registered NGOs in order to defend their interests (see below).

However, despite the existence of some "strong" villages with their own "natural leaders" and with a capacity for collective action, many villages have neither of these resources. This state of affairs is exacerbated by the fact that in many villages, the majority of the economically active male population works in Russia either on a permanent basis or on seasonal work (mainly construction). Often a village is left without any respected figure to represent the community and is inhabited by women, children and elderly men who are too busy devoting their energies to their own survival and that of their families to be capable of acting on behalf of the village as a whole.

NGOs and Local Media

Local NGOs remain relatively new and underdeveloped in Javakheti in comparison with neighbouring Samtskhe, although there is some sign of growth in this sector. According to information published by the National Democratic Institute in early 2003, there were eleven registered NGOs in Javakheti including seven in Akhalkalaki *rayon* and four in Ninotsminda *rayon*[20]. However, this information may already be out of date as, according to the Akhalkalaki Business Centre, seven NGOs have already been registered in seven *villages* in Akhalkalaki *rayon* and this figure does not include NGOs from the city of Akhalkalaki[21].

[20] National Democratic Institute for International Affiars, *Guidebook for Local Council Members Elected in 2002* (Tbilisi: National Democratic Institute, 2003)
[21] Interviews with the author.

In Akhalkalaki, it is likely that the two NGOs with the most influence and sway are the Akahlakalaki Business Centre, on the one hand, and the Centre for the Support of Reforms and Democratic Development, on the other. Akhalkalaki Business Centre was created in December 2002 and is funded by the Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF). It aims to improve the socio-economic situation in Javakheti and to promote small and medium-sized businesses. This NGO carries out consultations on business planning and market research and also liases closely with credit organisations such as World Vision and the International Orthodox Christian Charities in providing credit for developing businesses[22]. At the time of writing they were implementing two major projects: the first is an OSGF funded project that aims to promote the development of small and medium-sized businesses in the region and to improve socio-economic conditions, while the second is a project known as "Democratisation of the Educational System and Financial Transparency" and financed by USAID.

The 'Centre for the Support of Reforms and Democratic Development' was founded earlier some time earlier, in 1997. The aim of this NGO is to bring together young people by providing them with information and by involving them in various courses and clubs. The Centre also serves as a resource centre and is home to Akhalkalaki's only Internet café. The director of the Centre has also been attempting to provide translations of Georgian legislation in Russian, so that it may be accessible to the local Armenian population. In 2002, the director used a Tbilisi-based agency to provide translations, but it was costly and somewhat time-consuming. At the time of writing, he was in the process of establishing a 'Centre for Legal Consultation' in Akhalkalaki in collaboration with the Akhalkalaki based NGO, the 'Union of Democrat Meskhs'. This is part of the legal consultation component of the OSCE's Conflict Prevention and Integration Programme for Javakheti (see below) and is aimed at providing knowledge of Georgian legislation to the Armenian population.

Through his close contacts with the 'Union of Democrat Meskhs', the director has been attempting to build a network connecting NGOs and political organisations in Javakheti with corresponding organisations in Tbilisi. He has therefore maintained contact with social scientists and with representatives of non-governmental

[22] *Ibid.*.

organisations in Tbilisi, such as the 'South Caucasus Institute of Regional Security' (SCIRS), and the 'Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development' (CIPDD). Following the Rose Revolution, the director of the Centre for the Support of Reforms and Democratic Development in Akhalkalakhi took part in many round table discussion groups in the region and in Tbilisi was present at a meeting organised by CIPDD, which brought together President Mikheil Saakashvili and various representatives of ethnic minorities, both from Samtskhe-Javakheti and from Kvemo Kartli. According to the director, a wide range of issues were discussed, and the new authorities appeared to demonstrate a genuine will to clear up the major problems in the region.

In Ninotsminda the first NGOs were established in 1997 under the initiative of Albertine Smit and Otar Ginosyan as part of a major NGO capacity-building project that was mainly funded and implemented by the UNV (United Nations Volunteers). Smit and Ginosyan were in some sense the pioneers of the NGO sector in Ninotsminda, and as a result of their work, NGO activity was initiated earlier in Ninotsminda than in Akhalkalaki. Nevertheless, the generally low level of NGO activity in Ninotsminda today testifies to problems relating to the sustainability of NGO activity once donor money runs out. One NGO that was established in 1997 and is still working effectively today is the women's NGO "Paros", run by Ginosyan's daughter, Naira Ginosyan. With funds from OSGF, "Paros" has opened a kindergarten and a computer centre in Ninotsminda. They have also carried out training in leadership and democracy, mainly focusing on women in both Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki *rayons*. The training carried out in Ninotsminda (in 2002) was part of the DFID funded Georgia Governance and Civil Society Project (GOCISP) project (see below), while the training in Akahalkalaki (in 2003) was part of a UNV project.

Smit and Ginosyan were also instrumental in the re-opening of the local television station in Ninotsminda, Parvana TV. This project was implemented in 1998 by UNV with funding from the Dutch government and it resulted in Parvana being able to resume broadcasting after a hiatus of several years. Parvana is able to keep local residents informed of the latest developments by drawing on information from other news channels and producing their own news bulletins on the basis of this information. Since 2003 as part of the OSCE's Conflict Prevention and Integration

Programme and with the assistance of the news agency Internews, Parvana has also provided simultaneous translation into Armenian of two Georgian news programmes: the State Channel 1 news programme "Moambe", and Rustavi-2's "Kurieri". As part of the same project, Akhalkalaki's independent television station "ATV-12" has been simultaneously translating precisely the same news programmes for the population of Akhalkalaki. The accessibility of Georgian news is a major issue in Javakheti, given that the majority of the local population do not speak Georgian and therefore have to rely on news from either Moscow or Yerevan to keep them informed. Three Georgian channels are available in Javakheti: State TV, Imedi and Ajara TV. However, the first two of these channels broadcast only in Georgian and the third has not been renowned for either its objectivity or for the high quality of its programmes.

Another local organisation that is worthy of mention is the Ninotsminda-based 'Society of Dukhobors'. Its leaders claim that the Society has existed, in one form or another, since the Dukhobor community arrived in the area in 1841. The main aim of the Society is to protect the cultural identity of the declining Dukhobor community. During the Soviet period the society played a major role in organising all sorts of cultural events in the Dukhobor villages, such as concerts, art exhibitions and dances. Now its scope for action is somewhat more limited, given the high percentage of out-migration and financial restraints. They obtain some financial support from the Russian Embassy and with this they are able to provide some text books to school children and send a few children on cultural trips to Moscow and to religious functions in Tbilisi. The Society has a Council of twenty respected Dukhobor community leaders from the seven Dukhobor settlements (see above)[23].

Turning to the small NGOs and CBOs that have been established in rural areas of Javakheti, at the time of writing at least six registered NGOs and at least twelve unregistered Community Initiative Groups (CIGs) had been established. The six registered NGOs are located in the villages of Khospio, Abuli, Olaverdi, Baraleti, Gogasheni and Apnia in Akhalkalaki *rayon*. All have received grants from the Horizonti Foundation, mainly for small-scale infrastructure projects, such as repairing roads, schools and water supply systems. The "GEA" NGO in Khospio has also received a grant from CHF International. The twelve unregistered CIGs

[23] *Ibid.*.

have been established by Mercy Corps as part of a larger community mobilization program in Eastern Georgia: ten operate at village level and two at *sakrebulo* level. At village level, these CIGs are to be found in the villages of Gokio, Alastani, Varevani and Godolari in Akhalkalaki *rayon*, and Jigrasheni, Didi Gondura, Patara Gondura, Dilip, Mamzara and Kulalisi villages in Ninotsminda *rayon*. At *sakrebulo* level, CIGs have been established in Alastani and Gondura.

Finally several national NGOs have done a considerable amount of work in the region. Probably the most active organisation in this respect is the 'Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development' (CIPDD). CIPDD has been working in Javakheti for several years and their work has concentrated on the following areas: a) research into the social, political and economic situation in the region, b) drafting policy papers for international organisations such as the OSCE and UNDP in order to help them define their priorities, c) monitoring of conflict potential for the High Commission for National Minorities of the OSCE, and d) establishment of round table discussion groups that have brought together politicians, sociologists and NGO representatives from both Javakheti and Tbilisi.

The topics covered in these round table discussions have been diverse in nature. In the early days the emphasis was on NGO capacity building, although subsequently it shifted to topics such as language policy and the relationship between minorities and state policy. Generally, in the early stages, discussions focused on less controversial issues, but as confidence grew it became possible to tackle the more contentious issues, such as the presence of the Russian military base and the possibility of the return of the Meskhetian Turks. CIPDD aimed to invite and include representatives of central government. In fact the then Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee for Civil Integration (later briefly governor of Samtskhe-Javakheti) took part in discussions with key local stakeholders.

The 'South Caucasus Institute of Regional Security' (SCIRS) has also carried out significant work in Javakheti and has been attempting to create a kind of "think tank" in which various interested parties from both Tbilisi and Samtskhe-Javakheti are able to participate. Their aim is to highlight and discuss problems that exist between the outlying regions and the political centre and to attempt to arrive at a formula that is mutually acceptable to all groups. This is part of SCIRS's general

strategy of creating networks of think tanks to assist regulate potential conflicts across the Caucasus region as a whole.

Main Donors and Implementers

Over the last eight years the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) has funded and implemented far more projects in Javakheti than any other international organisation. As well as the NGO capacity building projects described above, UNV has implemented small business capacity building projects, youth activity projects and a cultural exchange project. The majority of UNV's projects have been implemented in Ninotsminda. However, UNV terminated its activities in the region in 2003.

More recently Horizonti's Samtskhe-Javakheti community development programme, funded by the Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF), launched at the end of 2001, has been establishing a framework in which villages can identify and solve their most pressing problems. Unlike some other community development projects which attempt to impose a model 'from above', Horizonti adopted a more grass roots approach by encouraging the initiatives to come from the villages themselves and then provided funds once these initiatives were approved. They first announced their intention to launch the project to all *sakrebulos* in Akhalkalaki and Akhaltsikhe *rayons* and encouraged the *sakrebulo* members to spread the word to fellow villagers. They then held a series of meetings in the villages in which around 8-10 representatives from each village were present in order to explain the terms of the project. Interested villages then selected an initiative group of 7-18 people, who were confirmed at a general meeting of the village, and the initiative group was then encouraged to draft a medium-term (5-7 year) strategic development plan. Each initiative group also drew up a project proposal to solve the most pressing problem of the village, complete with project description, business plan and budget. The maximum budget was set as USD 15,000 for each village. It was as a result of this project that CIGs (later registered as NGOs) were established in Khospio, Abuli, Olaverdi, Baraleti, Gogasheni and Apnia (see above) and were able to carry out the above-mentioned infrastructure projects.

However, if we look a little more closely at the recipient villages, we see that of the six villages, two are predominantly Georgian (Gogasheni and Apnia), two are mixed (Khospio and Baraleti) and two are Armenian (Abuli and Olaverdi). Moreover, if we consider the chairpersons of the NGOs, we see that three are ethnic Georgians, two are Armenians and one is Greek. Thus there would seem to be rather fewer Armenians represented in these organisations than one would expect given their numerical dominance in Javakheti. In addition, out of these six chairpersons, two are members of the relevant community ***sakrebulo*** and another two are relatives of ***sakrebulo*** members. Thus, while the establishment of these NGOs can be rated as a success in terms of the results achieved, difficulties in representing all sections of the population remain.

Since September 2000, Mercy Corps has also been implementing community mobilisation initiatives in Javakheti as part of the USAID-funded East Georgia Community Mobilization Initiative. CIGs have been created and have implemented projects aimed at infrastructure rehabilitation (see the above section on NGOs and media above). Unlike its partner organisation, CARE, which implements similar USAID-funded projects in western Georgia, Mercy Corps operates an informal system in which CIGs very often remain unregistered and therefore more flexible. Mercy Corps operates both at the level of the community ***sakrebulo*** and at village level; in those ***sakrebulos*** that include more than one village, Mercy Corps establishes CIGs at both levels with each level producing its own proposals. The aim is that the two sets of proposals should complement one another. As mentioned above, Mercy Corps has created ten CIGs at village level and two at ***sakrebulo*** level in Javakheti.

In 2003 the UNDP launched its Samtskhe-Javakheti Integrated Development Programme. The project aims "to promote social cohesion among different ethnic and confessional groups, to strengthen the capacity of the local and central governments to respond to community needs and interact with different stakeholders, to improve communication and access to information for the population in the region, to reduce the risk of tensions related to access to productive assets and resources, to improve the socio-economic situation and

reduce the isolation of the region from the rest of Georgia"[24]. The UNDP opened an office in Akhalkalaki in 2003, and (apart from ECMI) is the only international organisation to have an office in Javakheti.

Another project worthy of note is the DFID-funded Georgia Governance and Civil Society Project (GOCISP), which began in 2000 and closed in 2002. GOCISP concentrated on local government capacity-building and, with this end in mind, carried out a series of interactive seminars in different *rayons* of Shida Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti, mainly amongst elected members of local government and local government staff. These seminars focused on a) medium and long-term policy-making, b) helping councillors to understand their roles and responsibilities, and c) assisting them with local constituency building. In Javakheti, the project focused mainly on Ninotsminda rayon.

The OSCE's Conflict Prevention and Integration Programme is a new project, which is ambitious in its scope and incorporates several components. Although the programme began formally in May 2003, one component – Georgian language courses for (ethnic Armenian) civil servants – began in May 2002 and teaching began in October of the same year. In the first year of the project 154 Armenian-speaking civil servants from Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda rayons received training in the Georgian language. Within the framework of the project, Georgian lessons are already being given to first-year students at the Akhalkalaki branch of Tbilisi State University. Another component of the Conflict Prevention and Integration Programme is the "News Re-Broadcasting in the Minority Language Project, Georgia", which involves the simultaneous translation of Georgian news broadcasts and which was outlined above. Finally, the establishment of the Centre for Legal Consultation in Akhalkalaki implemented by the Union of Democrat Meskhs together with the director of the Centre for the Support of Reforms and Democratic Development (see above) is also part of this Programme.

Another international donor organisation that has been operating in Javakheti is the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC). IOCC's activities covered two areas: humanitarian aid and the development of small businesses. In the first area, the organisation provided free school meals to schoolchildren between the ages of

[24] See www.undp.org.ge/Projects/samjav.html.

six and ten. Meanwhile, in the field of business support, IOCC conducted training seminars and offered credit lines to small businesses. At the end of 2003, after the end of a four-year period, IOCC decided to discontinue its representation in Javakheti, although they still work in Akhaltsikhe.

Finally, other international organisations have carried out small projects in Javakheti. For example, the Eurasia Foundation funded the establishment of a consumer rights organisation in Ninotsminda, while Oxfam Georgia and the Dutch Embassy jointly funded a potato-farming project in 1997. In addition, World Vision is currently establishing a program in Samtskhe-Javakheti funded by the European Initiative for Human Rights and Good Governance, and is about to open a community centre in Ninotsminda.

Despite these undoubtedly significant initiatives, however, there remains the perception in both *rayons* that the population of Javakheti has been somewhat neglected by the international community, especially in comparison with Akhaltsikhe. Many point to the fact that very few international donor organisations have their offices in either Akhalkalaki or Ninotsminda as further evidence of this neglect.

Foreign States

The two foreign states that have by far the most influence on social, political and economic developments in Javakaheti are Russia and Armenia. The influence of the former is primarily military and economic, while the influence of the latter is mainly social and cultural. It is worth examining the influence of each in turn.

The 62nd Divisional Russian base that is located in Akhalakaki influences society in Javakheti, in particular Akhalkalaki *raton*, in two ways: economically and psychologically. In the first place, the base provides employment to many inhabitants of Akhalkalaki; estimates vary widely as to the number of jobs the base provides, but the minimum estimate is that around 1,000 local people are employed as military personnel, plus an indefinite number of non-military service personnel. Other estimates put the total number of people employed there as high as 3,000. Most of those employed there live either in Akhalkalaki, close to the base, or in the

neighbouring villages of Diliski or Vachiani[25]. When one considers that the population of Akahalkalaki is around 10,000 and that the population of the two neighbouring villages is no more than two-and-a-half thousand, and if we assume that the average extended family in the region consists of seven or eight members, it would seem reasonable to assume that at least half of families in the city and these two villages are supported by someone who works at the base. Moreover, since rates of pay are relatively high (approximately USD 100 per month for military personnel), employees at the base also provide a market for rural inhabitants to sell their produce. Finally, as Russian military vehicles are not stopped at customs, the base serves as a black market for a variety of goods (particularly cigarettes) that are imported from Russia[26]. Thus, in the words of Oksana Antonenko, "the base in Akhalkalaki has *de facto* fulfilled many of the traditional state functions such as: providing security, employment opportunities, education and social security to the local inhabitants"[27]. In a region in which income-generation is virtually non-existent, its contribution to the local economy is hard to underestimate.

As well as the economic benefits that it provides to local residents, the Russian base also provides psychological reassurance as a guarantee of defence against neighbouring Turkey. As noted above, a large part of the population came originally from eastern Anatolia, whence they were expelled during the First World War, and many still consider themselves to be refugees. In the minds of the population, therefore, Turkey is still seen as a hostile power, especially given its refusal to recognise what they refer to as the Armenian genocide of 1915. Although most neutral observers would perceive fears of a Turkish invasion to be unfounded (particularly given Turkey's desire to join the EU), Javakheti has suffered from an informational vacuum both during the Soviet period, when it was a restricted border zone, and also subsequently, when information was sparse and came mainly from Armenian and Russian sources. Thus, the population have a distorted picture of geopolitical reality and see Turkey as a major threat to their continued existence.

However, despite their generally favourable attitude to the Russian base, the local population does not unconditionally support the Russian presence. Local military

[25] Antonenko, *Assessment of the Political Implications of Akhakalaki Base Closure for the Stability in Southern Georgia.*
[26] Sarkissian, "Javakhk: Socio-Economic Neglect or Ethnic Unrest".
[27] Antonenko, *Assessment of the Political Implications of Akhakalaki Base Closure for the Stability in Southern Georgia.*

personnel who work at the base are required to take Russian citizenship, and as Russian citizens they are always liable to be moved to another base within the Russian Federation. Recently this practice of transferring local staff out of Akhalkalaki appears to have become more frequent, and this has led to a certain degree of resentment. Some respondents even believe that it would eventually be acceptable to withdraw the base once economic opportunities are provided and once either the Georgian state or the international community can provide Javakheti with security from Turkey.

From the geopolitical perspective, Russia feels it needs to maintain the base to maintain its leverage over Georgia and to counter Georgia's desire for ever closer links with the West and NATO. Despite a provisional agreement by Russia to withdraw its forces from all military bases in Georgia that was signed at the Istanbul summit of the OSCE in November 1999, Russia still has not withdrawn its forces from Akhalkalaki and appears to be in no hurry to do so. Some in Georgia fear that Russia may attempt to instigate unrest in Javakheti in order to preserve her military presence there.

Armenia, on the other hand, has attempted to maintain good relations with the Georgian state and has deliberately not encouraged any separatist aspirations in Javakheti. Good relations with Georgia are particularly important for Armenia as Georgia provides the only transit route for Armenian goods to western markets, since the trade route west into Turkey has been blockaded since the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia is thus dependent on Georgia for trade. Georgia also provides access to Armenia's strategic ally, Russia.

Although the Armenian state has made every effort not to inflame tensions in Javakheti, there is one political organisation whose official policy is to incorporate Akhalkalaki *rayon* into Armenia. This is the Dashnaktsutyun party, which, since 2000, has been allied with the Armenian president, Robert Kocharyan. Dashnaktsutyun certainly has links to some political circles in Javakheti, although there is no evidence to suggest that the party is actively and openly promoting a separatist agenda. Despite his alliance with the Dashnaks, it is highly unlikely that the Armenian president would support such a move.

Generally local politicians in Javakheti maintain close links with political circles in Yerevan. In the period immediately following the Rose Revolution in Tbilisi, several of these local power brokers met with their Armenian counterparts in Yerevan in order to work out how to respond. Yerevan has hitherto been able to restrain the more radical elements in Javakheti and this has contributed to continued stability in the region.

The main influence of Armenia on Javakheti is primarily of a cultural nature. Given its isolation from the rest of Georgia, most young intellectuals in Javakheti go to Yerevan to complete their higher education[28]. Moreover, as has been noted above, the local population relies to a large extent on Armenia for their sources of information, as the language barrier prevents them from receiving up-to-date information from Tbilisi. In many ways, therefore, it could be said that Javakheti falls into the Armenian rather than the Georgian cultural space.

The Georgian State

Since 1995, the policy of the Georgian state towards Javakheti can best be classified as one of benign neglect. On the one hand, the Georgian government has made no attempt to intervene in the cultural affairs of local Armenians and token attempts to teach the state language were regarded as more symbolic than real. At the same time, it has attempted to maintain stability and to minimise the appeal of separatism by maintaining a close relationship with the Armenian government and by handpicking its own loyal members from the local Armenian elite to form the administration at *rayon* level. The province of Samtskhe-Javakheti was created in order to further reduce the risk of separation and a Georgian governor with close links to local Armenian economic elites (Gigla Baramidze) was selected to administer the province.

On the other hand, the government made no effort whatsoever to develop Javakheti economically or to integrate it in any meaningful way within the Georgian state. According to critics of the Shevardnadze government, the population of Javakheti was deliberately maintained poor and ignorant so that the votes of the local

[28] Guretski, "The Question of Javakheti".

population could more readily be "delivered" to the governing party. Whether deliberate or not, the policy of simply "leaving Javakheti to its own devices" has caused considerable resentment in the region. According to David Rstakyan, the leader of the political organisation *Virk*, although the Armenian population themselves consider Javakheti to be a part of Georgia, the Georgian side has hitherto seemed to believe that Georgia stops at Akhaltsikhe[29]. The economic "neglect" of the region is even characterised by some local observers as "white genocide" as if it was designed to force the Armenian population to emigrate. While others recognise that other regions of Georgia have experienced similar neglect, they argue that when Georgians from other regions complain about this state of affairs they are at least listened to, while if the Armenian population of Javakheti complain, they are accused by Tbilisi of harbouring separatist sentiments.

The new government that took power in Georgia after the Rose Revolution and Mikheil Saakashvili's election as President of Georgia has yet to elaborate a policy on ethnic minorities in general and on Javakheti in particular. Discussion has so far centred around certain rather vague proposals to reform the administrative-territorial arrangement of the country, but even on this issue no clear policy has as yet been elaborated. Opposition parties also lack any clear policy on ethnic minorities. In part this is due to a lack of information; few political leaders have any in-depth knowledge of matters relating to areas where ethnic minorities are concentrated. The policy vacuum is also part of a wider malaise that is common to many former Soviet republics; having had no experience of policy formulation during the Soviet period, republican elites often react retroactively to events and fail to adopt any long- or even medium-term strategy to overcome the most pressing social and economic problems facing the country.

Another enduring legacy of the Soviet period is that of ethnocentrism. While few political leaders in Georgia today would go so far as to echo Zviad Gamsakhurdia's characterisation of ethnic minorities as 'guests', there is, in the minds of many Georgians, a suspicion that ethnic minorities must necessarily be disloyal. This perception is shared by many members of the political elite, who consider ethnic minorities to be a problem, rather than as vital human capital that could contribute to the future development of the country.

[29] Interviews with the author.

IV. THE VIEW FROM THE LOCAL POPULATION: TOP PRIORITIES

As in every part of the world, opinions in Javakheti diverge; however after hearing the opinions of a large number of respondents to this survey, a set of common priorities reveals itself. For the purposes of this paper it is best to classify these priorities into two broad areas: economic/infrastructural, and political/cultural. The general trend observed, especially amongst those not working directly in state structures, was a perception of total alienation from the Georgian state.

Economic/Infrastructure Priorities

All respondents complain about the dire economic situation in Javakheti and the poor infrastructure. Most expressed regret at the collapse of the Soviet Union, insofar as the breakdown of the Soviet state was associated with the collapse of the local economy, and many looked back with nostalgia towards those days when factories and collective farms worked normally and life was relatively comfortable. The most commonly voiced concern was that of very high levels of unemployment, which force most of the economically active population to migrate to Russia in search of seasonal work. Many respondents therefore emphasised the need to boost local production, especially agricultural production, in order to reverse this trend of outward migration and cited many reasons why this was not possible in the current circumstances.

The most common problem cited for the lack of agricultural development was the lack of modern agricultural machinery, fertilisers and seeds (especially potato seeds). Respondents also cited a more immediate problem and one, which is potentially devastating – the plague of field mice that destroyed much of last year's potato and grain crop. Several expressed the desire that local factories be established to process agricultural products, as virtually all such factories that previously existed have shut down.

Access to land is not such a major problem as most households received between 1 and 1.25 hectares of land during the land privatisation process in the early to mid 1990s. However, there is a problem of land fragmentation as many households have a part of their land plot in the village in which they live and another part several

kilometres away. This is a legacy of the collective farm system during the Soviet period in which several villages would belong to one collective farm. When the collective farms were dismantled and land was redistributed, there was no guarantee that every household would receive land that was close to the place of dwelling. Fragmentation of land, combined with the lack of machinery, seeds and fertilisers cited above, makes it difficult to raise agricultural production above subsistence level.

In relation to local infrastructure, the poor state of the roads was most the commonly cited problem. This makes it difficult for local producers to sell their products to markets outside Javakheti. The absence of a reliable road direct to Tbilisi isolates Javakheti from the rest of the Georgian market and this problem is exacerbated by demands for bribes from the traffic police for those who dare to make the journey. Thus, transporting one's potatoes or cabbages to other parts of Georgia is simply not profitable. In addition, the fact that roads connecting neighbouring villages as well as those connecting the villages with the two main towns are very often closed during the winter period makes it problematic for villagers to gain access to the *rayon* centres either for bureaucratic reasons or (more importantly) to receive medicines.

Other respondents pointed to the dire state of the educational infrastructure. Many schools have not been repaired for at least fifteen years; the roofs of school buildings are often in a degraded state and in some schools glass is even lacking in the windows. The heating of school buildings is therefore a very major problem, given the lack of a central heating system and the harsh climatic conditions in winter. In many villages, children have to bring their own wood to school in order to supply the wood stove, which is usually the only source of heat in school premises.

Another common complaint is the lack of potable water. In many villages, the village is supplied by one water pipe, which arrives at a common collection point in the village centre. Generally, the women of the village then have to carry the water in pails from the distribution points to their homes, which may be a considerable distance away.

Some respondents also cited the lack of electricity as a major problem. However, most agreed that the electricity situation had improved somewhat since the November 2001 agreement between the Georgian and Armenian governments whereby the Armenian government agreed to supply electricity directly to the region (see above).

Inadequate health care is also perceived as a major concern. There is a hospital in Akhalkalaki where most medical procedures can be carried out, including surgery. Although there is a surgical facility at Ninotsmida hospital, there is no anaesthetist working there, and so only emergency operations are carried out in Ninotsminda by fetching an anaesthetist from Akhalkalaki. On one occasion at least, an emergency operation was carried out in Ninostminda without an adequate anaesthetic[30]. The situation is even worse in the villages, especially when the roads are closed. Most villages do not have their own midwife and many women therefore have to give birth at home without the proper medical supervision. There is a district doctor who is able to come to the villages when the roads are open.

Political/Cultural Priorities

All respondents who expressed an opinion on political issues criticised the present form of local government in the region. While no respondents advocated separation from the Georgian state and only a minority advocated full autonomy for Javakheti within Georgia, all supported significant reforms in local self-government, even those who held positions in local power structures. Most believe existing local self-government in Javakheti to be a façade and complained that the existing elected bodies or *sakrebulos* have no real power. Even those who did not advocate full autonomy proposed three major changes to the existing system. First, they believed that the *rayon gamgebeli* should be directly elected and not appointed by the President. Second, they argued that the number of first-tier (i.e. village or community) *sakrebulos* should be increased considerably, so that most, if not all, villages should have their own *sakrebulos*. Finally, most were in favour of either abolishing the governor's office entirely or giving Javakheti *mkhare* status with its own governor, possibly by adding Aspindza *rayon* to the two existing *rayons* of Javakheti.

[30] *Ibid.*.

Opinions differ on the desirability of autonomy for Javakheti. Most of those who hold positions in local state structures and some of those who work for NGOs opposed autonomy for Javakheti on the grounds that it would be financially unsustainable. They pointed out that both Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda *rayons* rely on transfers from the centre, which, while paltry, amount to a considerably greater sum of money than revenues generated from within the region. Some had harsh words for proponents of autonomy, brandishing them as provocateurs who are seeking to exploit the difficult economic circumstances for their own political ambitions.

Those favouring autonomy, on the other hand, argued that as an autonomous region, Javakheti would be able to set its own priorities and develop its own economy. Artificial obstacles that have been erected by a corrupt and over-centralised state are holding hack economic development, in their view. Once autonomy is achieved, they maintain, sufficient local income would be generated to improve the situation. Even "autonomists" viewed Georgia as "our state" (for good or for bad), even though they were harshly critical of Tbilisi's perceived policy of deliberate neglect.

Opinion on the desirability of learning the Georgian language is also divided. Some respondents, particularly those working in local state structures, cited knowledge of Georgian as a top priority, arguing that only with a proper working knowledge of Georgian can ethnic Armenians play a full role as citizens of the state. Others, however, believe that while it is important for young people and for the intelligentsia to know the state language, any attempt to force the ordinary population to learn Georgian would at best be a waste of time and money and would at worst be tantamount to forced assimilation. One respondent, *Virk's* leader David Rstakyan, argued that as Georgia is not a mono-ethnic state, it should not only have one official state language. Instead he proposed a Swiss model in which every "canton" of Georgia (for example, Javakheti) would have its own official language.

Finally, some respondents highlighted their concern at the lack of objective and multilingual information received in Javakheti, especially in terms of Georgian current affairs and Georgian legislation. Several believed it a priority to establish reliable Internet access in Javakheti, which has hitherto been lacking since the main

Georgian Internet providers do not provide access to the region. The only Internet point that exists in Javakheti today is provided by satellite link in Akhalkalaki's Internet café (see above). Several respondents of Ninotsminda particularly lamented the fact that the Internet is not available there.

V. REGIONAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS AND ECMI ACTION

The international community must do its utmost to reverse a growing tide of cynicism amongst the population of Javakheti, who increasingly perceive that international organizations promise much but deliver little. International organisations have had a presence (albeit a token one) in the region for nearly ten years; however, with a few notable exceptions, little evidence can be seen of it. Short-term thinking is a key problem; projects often have a duration of no more than three years, which is an insufficient time period to make a meaningful and lasting impact on the economy of the region. This is especially true after the emphasis moved from humanitarian assistance to development; generally development projects that have a short-term horizon prove difficult to sustain in the long term.

The shift in emphasis away from humanitarian aid is not a wholly positive development. While it is important that communities do not become over-dependent on aid, as long as the government lacks the capacity to provide physical and financial security in the event of unforeseen catastrophes, such as freak weather conditions or plagues of crop-destroying pests, there will remain the need for humanitarian assistance on an ad hoc basis in response to such crises. The recent plague of field mice is a case in point. It would be of great advantage to the poor agricultural communities of Javakheti if international donor organisations could supply free mouse poison to small producers, ideally in a form that does not result in the destruction of the local stork population that feeds on the mice. Even in the most developed countries, local communities are not expected to "fend for themselves" in the event of such unforeseen crises; generally national governments are expected to support them. In cases where national governments are unable to provide such support, international organisations can play an immensely important role in terms of substitution.

So-called community mobilisation has been tried and tested in many parts of the developing world, especially over the last ten years, with mixed results. In the Caucasus, community mobilisation has become a major component of most projects supported by the largest donor organisation in the region, USAID, and is used in projects supported by other donor organisations too. On certain occasions it has contributed positively to the social and economic life of the target community,

while on others the community organisations that have been created have proved unsustainable and the projects cease once donor money is withdrawn. In part, this has been due to a short-term horizon, and in part it has been because community development initiatives have been too project-oriented and have not explored the concept of what a community-based organization (CBO) should be. Instead they (possibly unwittingly) fostered the idea that CBOs were there simply to "do projects" and to spend money. Thus the idea of a CBO as a part of community culture that mobilizes the population, takes care of the socially vulnerable and even organizes cultural events has failed to materialise. The notion that "someone from above should provide" still prevails. The result is that many CBOs simply collapse as soon as donor funding runs out.

In Javakheti under present circumstances, there is a clear need for some kind of NGO or CBO at grass roots level to represent ordinary villagers and to articulate their interests and needs both to local power structures and to donor organizations operating in the region. This need is particularly pressing given the absence of organs of local self-government (i.e. *sakrebulos*) in most villages. Some donor organizations, most notably Horizonti and Mercy Corps, have already begun to establish these types of organizations and ECMI aims at contributing further to these efforts. Their experience and the experience of other organizations that are engaged in community mobilization in the Caucasus region help us to draw some lessons that can be applied to further community mobilization work in Javakheti.

Empowerment of villages through the establishment of village NGOs or CBOs will only be effective if there is some linking mechanism to connect these organizations with local power structures. With this end in mind it may make sense to create some kind of "community union" at *rayon* level, which would bring together representatives of village community organizations with members of community *sakrebulos* and representatives of the *gamgeoba* at *rayon* level. It would be helpful to include the *rayon gamgebeli* in this process as well.

The aim of community mobilisation at village level should not merely be to carry out projects (even though this will be a vital element of what they do); the CBO should become an intrinsic part of the community and come to embody village culture.

ECMI is currently in the process of establishing a project which seeks to promote regional integration of the Javakheti Region and defuse the risks of increased inter-ethnic tension. The aim is to establish a network consisting of civil society actors that will include representatives of most ethnic and religious groups, government officials from within Javakheti and from the governor's office in Akhaltsikhe, as well as representatives of the central authorities in Tbilisi. In this way, the project will seek to improve inter-ethnic relations, broaden the consultative process of decision-making, and increase effective public participation and public awareness of local governance. The project will promote the integration of the region by involving province and state level policy-makers in the network, thereby creating firmer links between regional actors and central levels of authority. In conjunction with the network, the project will enhance the capacity of less advanced regional communities by facilitating community mobilization and providing capacity building, in order to ensure their participation in the consultative process.

ECMI is establishing the dialogue network through the organization of bi-annual plenary assembly conferences and constituent monthly Expert Committee Workshops to address key issues of relevance to stakeholders. The Expert Committees, working to address technical issues of relevance to all communities in Javakheti, will ensure that regional concerns are articulated and will serve as an important link in the communication between the regional level and the provincal and central authorities. Over the coming 1-2 years the new Georgian government plans to elaborate new structures for regional development and integration, and in this process the ECMI network will serve as an important instrument to ensure that the relationship between the centre and the region are strengthened and that local concerns are taken into account when new legislative provisions are drafted. The project will enhance the capacity of the Government of Georgia to acquaint itself with accurate, objective and up-to-date information on the economic and political situation in Javakheti in elaborating a clear and coherent policy towards the region.

The recommendations and support offered by the network, as well as the much needed dialogue in itself, is expected to contribute to a long-term improvement in the regional integration of Javakheti into the Georgian state, by securing a broader

regional participation in the decision-making process and reducing the conflict potential of an eventual closure of the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki.