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**ARMENIAN MINORITY IN GEORGIA:  
DEFUSING INTERETHNIC TENSION**

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# **ARMENIAN MINORITY IN GEORGIA: DEFUSING INTERETHNIC TENSION**

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Natalie Sabanadze

## **Introduction**

July 2000 was the deadline for the withdrawal of two Russian military bases in Vaziani (near Tbilisi) and in Gudauta (Abkhazia). The agreement on Russian military withdrawal was reached at the 1999 OSCE summit in Istanbul, according to which the first two bases would be withdrawn by July 1 of the current year, to be followed by the two remaining bases in Javakheti (Southern Georgia) and Batumi (Western Georgia) in the near future. Russia did not meet the deadline on the Gudauta base, which has become the main source of renewed Georgian-Russian political confrontation over the past few days. However, as the talks on withdrawal intensified, the issue of the Javakheti base also came to the fore. Javakheti is the southernmost region of Georgia where the local population is predominantly Armenian. Similar to Abkhazia, the situation in Javakheti is very sensitive and could be exacerbated by the Russian military withdrawal which is strongly opposed by the local Armenian population. This at first sight benign case of base closure is thus likely to involve broader issues of regional political alliances, competing national interests, minority policies and a potential risk of yet another ethnopolitical confrontation in the region.<sup>1</sup>

Among the most common descriptions of Javakheti found in both journalistic and scholarly literature is that of a "potential zone of conflict", "area waiting to explode" and in the more radical accounts 'the second Nagorno-Karabakh'.<sup>2</sup> Despite many contrary predictions, Javakheti managed to maintain peaceful interethnic relations and to survive in peace and relative stability. However, in order to maintain the fragile

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<sup>1</sup> For more details see the Russian military base at <http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/1999/08/F.RU.990825132236.html>

<sup>2</sup> See Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001, p. 181.

peace and cooperation much has to be done in terms of minority protection and power-sharing structures within Georgia. What follows is a brief discussion of the Armenian minority in Georgia in the context of ongoing regional geopolitical changes, interests and vulnerabilities of the states involved. In addition, Javakheti here is regarded as a zone of ethnopolitical tension which requires serious efforts, and well-developed preventive measures to avoid its deterioration into a zone of conflict.

## **Background**

The region of Javakheti is located in the southern part of Georgia, nested against the borders of Turkey and Armenia. It covers roughly 2589 square kilometers and, according to the 1989 census results, is home to approximately 107, 000 people.<sup>3</sup> The central parts of Javakheti (Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda) are almost entirely Armenian. As one moves towards the west, the population becomes more mixed with approximately 50 per cent Georgians and 50 per cent Armenians. The Armenians of Javakheti came originally from the province of Erzurum in the Ottoman Empire, which was founded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by Turkish tribes and lasted until 1918. They fled the Ottomans and sought refuge within the borders of the Russian Empire, where they enjoyed significant cultural autonomy. The earlier inhabitants of the region were the so-called Meskhetian Turks, who left for the Ottoman Empire with the Russian conquest, and those who remained were deported to Central Asia in 1944.<sup>4</sup>

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Armenian minority in Georgia was also concentrated in Tbilisi and Abkhazia. Tbilisi was once the trading and cultural center of the Armenians, who formed an intrinsic part of the city population and represented the largest ethnic group living in Georgia. In Abkhazia, Armenians even

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<sup>3</sup>Mark Schapiro for the TACIS Project, *Ethnic Minorities in the Caucasus: the Case of Javakheti. A VERTIC Assessment Report on the Javakheti Region of Georgia, with Recommendations, Map, and Economic Supplement*, London: Vertic, 1997, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> There are ongoing negotiations about the possible repatriation of Meskhetian Turks to their historic homeland in Georgia. All the proposals with regard to the repatriation, however, are opposed by both the Georgian and Armenian population in the region. The Georgian government fears that if Turks were resettled in an area of Southern Georgia, predominantly populated by Armenians, the clash between these two groups may become inevitable. For more details on Meskhetian Turks, see Charles Blandy, *The Meskhetians: Turks or Georgians? A People without a Homeland*, Sandhurst: Conflict Studies Research Centre, 1998.

Also Liz Fuller, "End Home There's No Returning" at <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/5-not.htm>

outnumbered the local Abkhaz population. However, since the collapse of the Soviet regime and the outbreak of the armed conflict in Abkhazia from 1992 to 94, the number of Armenians has declined significantly. They have remained mostly in Javakheti, which, according to some analysts, is "as much 'Armenia' as it is 'Georgia'".<sup>5</sup> The main language spoken and written in Javakheti is Armenian. The schooling is predominantly in Armenian, and among the currencies circulating are Armenian Drams, Russian Roubles, and, to a lesser extent, Georgian Lari. Each family in the region maintains strong ties with Armenia, and the communication between Javakheti and Yerevan seems much more intense than that with Tbilisi.

Georgian central authorities exercise a varied degree of control over the region, with the most limited influence on its predominantly Armenian parts. Lack of financial resources and difficult economic conditions do not allow the government to invest in Javakheti, which is the most backward region in all of Georgia. The population largely survives through small scale farming and trading. The infrastructure, however, seems to be in ruins and requires significant human and financial resources to be restored. The major employer in the region is the Russian military base, where about 70 per cent of the employees are local Armenians. According to the CIPDD report, the cash contribution from the base is roughly equal to or sometimes exceeds the local budget,<sup>6</sup> which makes the impending withdrawal of the base a risky and explosive issue.

Even though Javakheti represents a zone of concern for the Georgian government, many people fear that talking about the possible conflict in the region may actually create a conflict where none exists. The public opinion on the Javakheti issue is roughly divided in three camps. The first considers Javakheti to be no different from the rest of Georgia and deems dangerous singling the region out. The second believes Javakheti has serious ethno-political problems, which could be further aggravated by the possible withdrawal of the Russian military base. And in a third view, Javakheti

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Cornell, *op.cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>6</sup> Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD), "Javakheti in Georgia: Problems, Challenges and Necessary Responses" at <http://www.fewer.org/caucasus>

suffers primarily from the economic underdevelopment and poverty, which may potentially lead to ethnic unrest.<sup>7</sup>

The author believes that it is the combination of the last two views that can help to perceive the situation in Javakheti more accurately. Even though too much emphasis on conflict or discourse of potential conflict may arguably contribute to the creation of conflict, the reverse is not true; i.e. not talking about the problem or ignoring it is unlikely to make the problem go away. In this respect, the author sees Javakheti to be a clear case of ethno-political tension, which may be further complicated by the economic hardship and poverty. The local Armenian nationalists voice demands granting Javakheti an autonomous status within Georgia or – in extreme cases – unification of the region with Armenia. However, these demands have never been officially backed by the Armenian government, which continues to support the territorial integrity of the Georgian state.

### **Armenian-Georgian Relations and Regional Dynamics**

Armenian-Georgian relations have never been simple. The two nations always proclaimed close cooperation and emphasized cultural and religious links, but political interests often led them in two opposing directions. Both from 1918 to 20 and today, energy-dependent Georgia has given priority to its relations with Azerbaijan. This can partly be explained by their mutual interests in the Caspian oil production and transportation, and partly by Georgia's distrust of Armenian intentions in Javakheti.<sup>8</sup>

The first ethnic tensions between Georgians and Armenians emerged, not surprisingly, during the rule of the nationalist Georgian government under the leadership of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who rose to power from 1989 to 1992. Nationalistic attitudes of the Gamsakhurdia government were met with counter-claims of the Armenian nationalists in Javakheti, who started to demand regional autonomy

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See Stephen Jones, "Georgia: The Caucasian Context" at <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/usazerb/123.htm>.

and – in some extreme cases – secession. The Armenian nationalist organisation Javakh is believed to have close ties with the Dashnaktsutun in Armenia and seems to have mobilized nationalist sentiments in Javakheti. Since 1992, Shevardnadze's new regime has tried to pursue more inclusive nationality policies and encourage participation of non-Georgian minorities in the state-building process. These measures, however, need to be expanded in order to assuage the fears of minorities, which, in the words of Stephen Jones, "will remain obstacles to greater Caucasian cooperation".<sup>9</sup>

Georgians fear the presence of the Russian military base in Javakheti and its close links with the local Armenian population. In addition, Armenians from Javakheti have refused to serve in the Georgian army.<sup>10</sup> According to Svante Cornell's account, there have even been speculations about the creation of an all-Armenian battalion under the auspices of the Russian army. The armament of Javakheti Armenians is another potential problem, which may even intensify with the possible Russian military withdrawal. In the words of Cornell: "...a Russian troops withdrawal, were it to follow the pattern established over the past ten years, would doubtless leave large amounts of armaments in the hands of Javakh. As such Tbilisi is in a way held hostage by the Russian military presence forced to accept its continued existence for fear of the armament of forces hostile to the government -- this is the case in Abkhazia, as well as Javakheti."<sup>11</sup>

The position of the Armenian government with regard to the situation in Javakheti has been cautious and in several instances geared towards restraining the radical demands of the organisation Javakh. Landlocked Armenia is dependent on Georgia for its only supply route. In addition, both Georgian and Armenian governments are occupied with other ethnic problems, but Javakheti continues to be a hidden mine which could be activated should it become necessary. One may argue that the mutual vulnerability of Armenia and Georgia has played a stabilizing role with regard to Javakheti. However, there is always the Russian factor much feared by Georgian authorities, which may disrupt the fragile balance if Russia finds it in its interests. Some Russian

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.3.

<sup>10</sup> Cornell, *op.cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.181.

military analysts have explicitly recommended that the Russian government encourage the annexation of Javakheti by Armenia if Georgia supports NATO efforts to restrict Russia's presence in South Caucasus.<sup>12</sup>

The Russian influence in the Caucasus has been diminishing with the rising Western interests in the oil fields of the region. Caspian oil has become the major source of regional rivalry in the 1990s, leading to the creation of an informal alliance between Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey on the one hand and Armenia, Russia and Iran on the other. The role of Javakheti in this political game, especially the position of Javakheti Armenians, becomes very important, since both the railway connection between Kars and Tbilisi and, more importantly, the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline are scheduled to pass either through Javakheti or very close to it -- two projects that Armenia opposes.

### **Implications for Minority Policy**

Apart from ongoing regional political games and conflicting interests, the situation of the Armenian minority in Georgia is exacerbated by two main factors. One is economic underdevelopment and another the minority policy of the Georgian government and the general role of minorities in the ongoing formation of Georgian statehood and civic institutions. The Armenian population lives in dire economic conditions, which largely reflects not so much the neglect of the Georgian authorities but the economic weakness of Georgia in general. Degrading living conditions and economic hardship may provide legitimacy to the radical nationalist demands of the Armenian minority, which will further undermine the already fragile Georgian statehood. Another legitimating factor may become the shortsighted minority policy of the government, which is repeatedly criticized by the nationalist Armenians in Javakheti and is largely based on the neglect of minority issues.

Even though the Georgian constitution provides for equal treatment of minorities and the legislature has all provisions against discrimination, more work has to be done for the enforcement of those provisions and, more importantly, for the building of the

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<sup>12</sup> *Nezavisimaja Gazeta*, March 27, 1997, also cited in the CIPDD report.



civil society and inclusive understanding of Georgian citizenship. It is easily detectable that the Armenian minority in Javakheti does not have a strong sense of Georgian citizenship, and the mutual support of the Georgian state and its Armenian minority is very limited. Even though Georgians have a strong national identity and the sense of Georgian nationhood has been developed and propagated over the last few centuries, today Georgia has to remodel its ethnic conception of nationhood into a more civic and inclusive one. This requires not only proper legislation, but also consistent governmental efforts to disseminate civic ideals and turn the written laws into practice. This would increase the stake of national minorities in the Georgian state and make them feel as its integral and loyal parts.