

Georgia: The Javakheti Region's Integration Challenges

I. OVERVIEW

The mostly Armenian-populated Javakheti region, along the southern border with Armenia and Turkey, has been a potential flashpoint since Georgia's 1991 independence, when a paramilitary group practically ran it, and physical links with the rest of the country were weak. After the 2008 Georgia-Russia war, many outside observers, recalling that there had been violent demonstrations in Javakheti in 2005 and 2006, predicted it would be the next to seek autonomy – or more. But the situation has stabilised. Tbilisi has successfully implemented programs to increase the region's ties to the rest of the country, stopped projects that were seen as discriminatory and reduced the influence of the few remaining radical groups. It should maintain this momentum and take additional steps to guarantee that Javakheti and its 95,000 mainly Armenian speakers feel fully integrated in Georgia and provide an example of respect for minority rights in a region where minorities who feel discriminated against have all too often been attracted to secession, such as in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Lack of knowledge of the state language (Georgian) and poverty encourages migration from the region to Armenia and Russia. A paucity of media reporting on the isolated area helps reinforce feelings of marginalisation. Many Javakheti residents do not feel like full-fledged citizens, so prefer to become involved in the political and cultural life of neighbouring Armenia, whose nationalist groups are quick to argue that they are the victims of ethnic discrimination due to Georgian government policies and to amplify their grievances over poverty, unemployment, education and the lack of formal laws recognising Armenian as a "regional language" in Javakheti. However, the current Yerevan authorities are playing a stabilising role in decreasing tensions and have arrested alleged Javakheti radicals in Armenia.

Georgia was concerned about Moscow's intentions in the region, especially as a major Russian military base – a left-over from the Soviet era – was located there. Some Russian commentators speculated that the Kremlin could use its influence in Javakheti to cause Georgia to renounce its NATO membership aspirations. But the base was closed in 2007, and Moscow lost more of its ability to manipu-

late local grievances the next year, when it committed to Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence. Nevertheless, in Tbilisi fear that Russia could use the region to destabilise Georgia has increased since the war, even though this presently seems highly unlikely.

Although Javakheti poses no immediate threat to Georgia's territorial integrity, Tbilisi needs to continue to increase its focus on the region, so as to build confidence with local leaders and engender a sense of loyalty towards the state. This would help to avoid interpretations that the local aspects of nationwide problems, such as the economy, reflect ethnic discrimination.

To ensure the political stability and sustainable development of Javakheti and improve regional integration, thereby reducing the region's vulnerability to destabilisation, the Georgian government, with the support of international partners, should:

- ❑ provide the public with comprehensive information in Armenian on its policies and facilitate public discussions on issues, such as integration, language and human rights;
- ❑ build the capacities of educated and motivated local officials, further training them in public administration while creating an open and restriction-free environment for local business;
- ❑ provide long-term budgetary resources to make educational projects such as multilingual schools, teacher training, translation of Georgian textbooks into Armenian and Georgian-as-a-second-language courses more systematised and sustainable; do more to attract Georgian language teachers to Javakheti; and give scholarships for higher education to Javakheti Armenians on condition that they return to teach;
- ❑ codify current language and education practices for the minority population in national legislation; honour the spirit of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (ECRML) while working toward its ratification;
- ❑ encourage more private investment, with a view to bringing the Javakheti economy ultimately to the national level; and

- offer to fund local television stations' translations of nationwide programs, including talk shows, and encourage the public broadcaster (TV Channels 1 and 2) and other national television stations to improve coverage of Javakheti.

Nationalist groups and media in Armenia should fully acknowledge that Javakheti's residents are Georgian citizens and refrain from over-politicising sensitive issues by labelling them cases of ethnic discrimination. Many of Javakheti's problems are shared by other isolated regions in Georgia. The donor community and international organisations should continue to work with Tbilisi to further develop democratic institutions, judicial independence, rule of law and free media, with a view to improving stability in Javakheti as in the rest of Georgia.

II. PRE-2006 DEVELOPMENTS

Speculation, often from outside commentators, that Javakheti might become the next Georgian flashpoint have abounded for two decades.¹ The Javakheti area, an unofficial name for part of the Samtskhe-Javakheti administrative unit, comprises two municipalities, Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda, with an official population of 95,280 that is almost entirely ethnic Armenian and has few fluent Georgian-speakers.² The region acquired the reputation of a hotspot due to intermittent ethnic tensions in the early 1990s and again in 2004-2006, the lack of easy road access to Tbilisi until 2008, and its social, economic and political dependence on Armenia and Russia.

Javakheti was always one of Georgia's poorest, most isolated regions, with little industry, a harsh climate and weak infrastructure.³ At the time of the Soviet Union's collapse,

¹ For discussions on conflict scenarios, see Oksana Antonenko, "Assessment of the Potential Implications of Akhalkalaki Base Closure for the Stability in Southern Georgia", Conflict Prevention Network (CPN), September 2001; *Policy Brief: Javakheti in Georgia. Problems, Challenges and Necessary Responses*, Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) and Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER) (Tbilisi, 2000); Andro Barnov "Detailed Review of Samtskhe-Javakheti", Institute for Strategy and Development, 22 January 2009; Alexander Jackson, "The Armenians of Georgia: A New Flashpoint in the Caucasus?", *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, no. 50, 12 October 2009.

² The broader Samtskhe-Javakheti region is composed of six municipalities, in which, according to the 2002 census, 55 per cent of the population is Armenian and 43 per cent Georgian. The Armenian population of other municipalities, according to the same census, is 37 per cent (Akhaltzikhe), 10 per cent (Borjomi), 17 per cent (Aspindza) and 3 per cent (Adigeni).

³ Javakheti was isolated from the central authorities in Tbilisi in Soviet times due to its border with NATO member Turkey. The

mistrust of Tbilisi was so acute that local ethnic Armenians refused to accept regional executive representatives appointed by independent Georgia's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, in 1990-1991, and launched a campaign for autonomy. A local paramilitary organisation, Javakhk, de facto controlled much of the region,⁴ whose 200-year old Russian military base still housed the 62nd military base.⁵

Until the Rose Revolution, Tbilisi ignored the root causes of conflict and sought to defuse tensions by co-opting local leaders with lucrative government positions and other economic incentives. However, when President Mikheil Saakashvili came to power in 2004, ethnic tensions escalated again, as the new administration attempted to integrate Javakheti by promoting strong state institutions and effective law enforcement bodies, closing the Russian military base and promoting Georgian as the state language for public administration and education.

The implementation of these policies, often poorly communicated to the local population, led to violent demonstrations in 2005-2006. Activists demanded autonomy for Javakheti, continued use of Armenian language in local public administration, improved ethnic Armenian representation in state institutions and an end to the settlement of ethnic Georgians.⁶ Tensions also grew with talk of the withdrawal of the Russian base, which had provided employment opportunities, a market for local agricultural products and defence against the perceived Turkish threat.⁷ A few thousands rallied in Akhalkalaki in March 2005 in support of the base.⁸

region was a closed border zone, with strict travel limitations on outsiders. As the border was open with Soviet Armenia, the local population found it easier to travel there than to the rest of Georgia.⁴ Gamsakhurdia's officials were prevented from entering local government offices and forced to accept the Javakhk leader, Samvel Petrosyan, as the regional executive.

⁵ The Russian regional military base, first established at the beginning of the nineteenth century, housed some 3,000 soldiers, an estimated half of whom were from the Javakheti region. Crisis Group interview, local official, Akhalkalaki, January 2011. Nicolas Landru, "Georgia: The Evacuation of the Russian Military Base at Akhalkalaki Comes to a Close", *Caucas*, 30 April 2007.

⁶ In the early 1990s, Georgian authorities started to resettle ethnic Georgian migrants, whose property had been destroyed by landslides in the mountainous regions. The resettlement caused ethnic tensions. For more details, see Tom Trier and Medea Turashvili, "Resettlement of Ecologically Displaced Persons – Solution of a Problem or Creation of a New? Eco-Migration in Georgia 1981-2006", European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) monograph no. 6, August 2007.

⁷ Given that the majority of Javakheti Armenians are descendants of Western Armenians who fled the 1915-1917 violence in Anatolia, they consider Turkey an existential security threat.

⁸ Organisers claimed 4,000 people attended the rally; local officials said 1,500; "Akhalkalaki residents rally against pullout of Russian base", *Civil Georgia*, 13 March 2005.

After the war with Russia in August 2008, observers in and outside the country speculated Javakheti could be used to further destabilise Georgia.⁹ Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused Georgia of “violations in the sphere of ethnic minority rights in the country”, and some analysts interpreted this to mean that Moscow would soon try to foment unrest in Javakheti.¹⁰ The August 2008 war with Russia substantially heightened the sense of insecurity in Georgia, and the feeling that Moscow’s main intent was not only to reverse its European-Atlantic orientation and cause it to adopt a more supportive foreign policy, but also the breakup of the country if that policy remained unchanged.

As Moscow’s leverage over Georgia decreased after it recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thereby losing its ability to dangle a settlement over those breakaway regions as inducements, many in Georgia feared that it could try to incite instability through Javakheti. Tbilisi might have responded to this perceived threat with heavy-handed tactics, concentrated on an increased security presence and efforts to impose the Georgian language on the region. This report analyses how since the height of tension in Javakheti in 2006,¹¹ the government has addressed grievances by applying a more constructive approach that has helped to reduce Russian and Armenian nationalists’ ability to encourage extremism.

III. JAVAKHETI ISSUES

Javakheti became more stable after the withdrawal of the Russian base in 2007; the implementation of more flexible language and education policies; and a concerted effort to develop links with the rest of the country. It is now better integrated in terms of infrastructure, and socially.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, analysts, Tbilisi, March-April 2011; Archil Abashidze, “Javakheti One Year after the August War”, *Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development [CIPDD] Policy Review*, October 2009.

¹⁰ “It’s important for the Georgian leadership to restore normal relations ... with the peoples living inside Georgia, like the Armenians, Azeris and some others, since the attitude towards them there is far from sunny, and they have the sensation of being oppressed. The Council of Europe, from which experts have visited Georgia on a number of occasions and have registered big enough violations in the sphere of minority rights there, knows all of this perfectly well, but for some politicised reasons it prefers to keep silent over their conclusions”, Lavrov said. “Russia open to normal contacts with Georgia – foreign minister”, Itar Tass via BBC Monitoring, 8 July 2010. Vladimir Socor, “Lavrov hints at fomenting ethnic tensions inside Georgia”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 9 July 2010. Crisis Group interviews, analysts, Tbilisi, March-April 2011.

¹¹ See Crisis Group Europe Report N°178, *Georgia’s Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, 22 November 2006.

However, central government policies are still often met with distrust and issues seen through an ethnic prism. Georgian authorities are frequently suspicious of local actors and wary of potential sources of instability or deliberate destabilisation, making them hesitant to formally decentralise power or seek far-reaching solutions to the root causes of local discontent through a systematic strategy for protecting minority rights.

A. LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND NON-STATE ACTORS

1. Local activism, radical groups and mobilisation

In the early 1990s, two major nationalist groups, Javakhk and Virk (the old Armenian term for “Georgia”), campaigned for regional autonomy, a special local status for the Armenian language, preservation of Armenian culture and history, inclusion of Armenia’s history in the curriculum of Armenian-language schools and an end to so-called local “Georgianisation”. Javakhk’s influence began to diminish as some of its leadership was co-opted by the government, and others split off, most notably David Rstakyan, who established Virk, which, however, never equalled the older group’s popularity or influence.¹²

In early 2005, Vahagn Chakhalyan, a local youth leader, brought young activists together around United Javakhk, which began by protesting the withdrawal of the Russian base.¹³ The rest of its demands were similar to those of Javakhk and Virk. In 2005 and 2006, United Javakhk organised rallies that led to violence and heightened tensions. In December 2005, its protesters seized a customs house on the Armenian border after ethnic Georgians replaced the ethnic Armenian staff. In March 2006, protesters broke into a court building and the local branch of Tbilisi State University.¹⁴ Political autonomy was a demand at many of the rallies. Then-Georgian Defence Minister Irakli Okruashvili (now in exile) responded sharply, declaring the government would not allow separatism and would neutralise political groups promoting “anti-Georgian policies” and protesting closure of the Russian military base.¹⁵

¹² For more details, see Jonathan Wheatley, “Obstacles Impeding the Regional Integration of the Javakheti Region of Georgia”, ECMI working paper no. 22, September 2004.

¹³ For more details see Hedvig Lohm, “Javakheti after the Rose Revolution: Progress and Regress in the Pursuit of National Unity in Georgia”, ECMI working paper no. 38, April 2007.

¹⁴ See Crisis Group Report, *Georgia’s Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, op. cit; Zaal Anjaparidze, “New unrest in Javakheti prompts warning from Yerevan”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 12 October 2005.

¹⁵ Zaal Anjaparidze, “Javakhti region complicates Georgian relations with Armenia”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 24 May 2005.

Since the withdrawal of the Russian base in 2007,¹⁶ these groups have lost most of their influence and now have only a few dozen supporters. "From a political quorum", a prominent Akhalkalaki observer said, "only a political quartet remains, and no one attends their concerts".¹⁷ The decrease in political activism is partially linked to a sense that the central government is doing more; after base closure, many radicals emigrated to Russia, and some of their leaders, most importantly Chakhalyan, were arrested. "Those who remain see and understand that they need to integrate if they see their future here", a local civic activist explained.¹⁸

Regional autonomy is no longer a demand. Local democracy, fair elections, language rights and rule of law are more important, and observers doubt radical groups' ability to channel people's discontent as they did in 2005-2006.¹⁹ Many locals claim there is a heavy security presence. Political activists refrain from organising public gatherings and demonstrations, because, "we do not want tensions here. If we demonstrate, then it will be reported as anti-Georgian, and this will spoil our inter-ethnic relations [between Georgians and Armenians]".²⁰ They prefer to appeal to the Armenian and Russian media to discuss their problems. Georgian officials confirm that law enforcement and security measures have been beefed up in Javakheti as a precautionary measure to head off potential instability.²¹

Yet, the detentions of activists in 2008 and 2009 created anxiety. Chakhalyan was arrested in July 2008, after a large explosion blamed on United Javakhet, and was given a ten-year prison sentence. Some of his backers considered this as an attempt to crush the now virtually defunct organisation and silence detractors. Procedural violations during the trial and the fact that he was mainly charged with offences related to the 2006 rallies, such as organising a riot directed against public order and hooliganism, convinced his sup-

porters that the affair was politically motivated.²² The only charge related to the July 2008 incident was illegal possession of arms.

Another incident that created hot debate in Javakheti and public outrage among nationalists in Armenia was the detention in January 2009 of two civil activists, Grigol Minasyan and Sarkis Hakopjanyan, local activists affiliated with the Armenia-based ultra-nationalist Dashnaktsutjun party. They claimed to represent a Belarusian non-governmental organisation, the Association for Legal Assistance to the Population (ALAP), when they began work in Javakheti, allegedly to undertake an opinion survey that asked provocative questions about separatist movements and paid up to \$800 to an ethnic Armenian interviewer.²³ They were arrested by Georgian authorities for espionage and later released on bail.²⁴ Nationalist groups perceived this as an attempt to intimidate local activists, but Georgian authorities said they were freed after they cooperated with the investigation into what the government considered a clear attempt at destabilisation.²⁵

2. Local administration and control

Tbilisi now exerts full control in Javakheti, and, as in other regions, the central government or people appointed by it decide most local affairs. The regional governor is appointed by the president and is based in Akhaltsikhe, the (ethnic-Georgian majority) administrative centre of Samtskhe-Javakheti. Interior Minister Ivane Merabishvili – who hails from the region – and a close deputy, also from Samtskhe-Javakheti, play a major role in local affairs, relying on ethnic-Armenian clan leaders.

¹⁶ Russia agreed to withdraw its troops from Georgia by the end of 2000 at the 1999 Istanbul summit of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). However, it stalled, and one of the initial main foreign policy aims of the Saakashvili government was the closure of the Russian bases. After more negotiations, Moscow eventually agreed to withdraw from bases in Ajara and Javakheti in 2007. Tbilisi argues that the OSCE commitment also applies to the closure of the military base in Gudauta, Abkhazia, but Russia has reinforced its presence there.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, civil society representative, Akhalkalaki, January 2011.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Javakheti civil activists, Armenian and Georgian analysts, Javakheti, Yerevan, Tbilisi, January-March 2011.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, local political activists, Akhalkalaki, January 2011

²¹ Crisis Group interview, high Georgian official, Tbilisi, March 2011.

²² Crisis Group interviews, Akhalkalaki, Yerevan, January 2011. For the procedural violations, see the "Annual Report, 2nd half of 2008", of the Georgian ombudsman, in Georgian at <http://ombudsman.ge/files/downloads/ge/kixclggyhdexhnxpvdvq.pdf>.

²³ Although a human rights organisation called ALAP existed in Belarus in the late 1990s, it was closed down by a Belarusian court in 2003. Therefore, it is likely that the name of the organisation was simply appropriated by those conducting the survey to provide their activity with a semblance of legitimacy. Jonathan Wheatley, "The Integration of National Minorities in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli Provinces of Georgia: Five Years into the Presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili", ECMI working paper no. 44, September 2009.

²⁴ Molly Corso and Gayane Abrahamyan, "Georgia: Espionage arrests of ethnic Armenians stoke suspicion of Russia", Eurasia Net, 11 February 2011. The activists pled guilty to the espionage charge.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Georgian government official, Tbilisi, March 2011.

President Saakashvili's government has continued its predecessors' strategy of co-opting local leaders,²⁶ including activists involved in the 2005-2006 demonstrations. It also maintains relationships with well-known local "power brokers" or "clans" co-opted in President Eduard Shevardnadze's time,²⁷ often offering jobs to ensure loyalty. A well-known example is that of Semvel Petrosyan, a former Javakheti leader whom Shevardnadze made deputy head of the local traffic police and is now police chief in Akhalkalaki municipality. Enzel Mkoyan, referred to as "The Boss" by locals, became a member of parliament under Shevardnadze in 1999 for the then-ruling Citizen's Union Party, was brought on board by Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) during the 2004 presidential elections, appointed head of its local election headquarters and now is as a UNM parliamentarian.²⁸

The government's co-optive strategy is designed to maintain stability through the clan networks that have run local affairs for decades. The clans, by using their patronage networks and the ethnic card, could pose a threat to regional stability if their power were at stake.²⁹ They also provide a solid electoral base. The head of the district election commission of Ninotsminda during the 2008 and 2010 elections was a relative of Mkoyan.³⁰ Outsiders or newcomers have difficulty entering Javakheti's political elite.³¹ Some thus claim the detention of Chakhalyan was linked to a local power struggle.³² He allegedly had poor relations with the leaders of the established clans and was arrested after a blast near Petrosyan's house.³³

The co-option strategy has created stability in the short and medium term, but the authorities now risk stagnation, as power brokers are usually interested in maintaining the status quo. The government needs to search for alternative partners among more professional classes. It should put more effort into building the capacities of motivated local officials and further training them in public administration.

Meanwhile, security forces are more rigorously ensuring border security and combating smuggling from Armenia.

Corruption and crime have substantially decreased, contributing to the local stability.³⁴ During his visit to the region in November 2010, President Saakashvili praised the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda police chiefs. A local journalist noted: "The fact that he devoted four minutes of his seven-minute speech to praising policemen is indicative of whom he relies on".³⁵ However, some opponents are concerned about the increased presence of security officials, referring to the interior ministry's regional office as a "hub for intelligence gathering" and "a force, based on fear". Opposition figures assert that security officials often resort to interrogations and surveillance.³⁶ The Georgian government says the stepped-up security presence is deliberate and essential to maintain stability and head off provocations.³⁷

Other than monitoring the political situation, security officials are especially watchful of potential incitement of ethnic tensions.³⁸ Large shipments of books and newspapers from Armenia by charity or advocacy groups that portray Armenian versions of history, news events related to Javakheti or are considered as intended to stoke ethnic discord are prohibited entry without prior arrangement.³⁹ According to a local interlocutor, security officials warned residents to abstain from "anti-Georgian and nationalist" statements at the unveiling of a new statue of an Armenian saint, Mesrop Mashtots, in Akhalkalaki in November 2010.⁴⁰

Old issues, such as regional autonomy and the status of the Armenian language, are no longer discussed actively.

²⁶ See Wheatley, "Obstacles Impeding the Regional Integration of the Javakheti", op. cit.

²⁷ For more details, see Lohm, "Javakheti after the Rose Revolution", op. cit.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Ninotsminda, January 2010; Wheatley, "The Integration of National Minorities", op. cit.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Gia Nodia, CIPDD chairman, Tbilisi, March 2011.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Ninotsminda, January 2011. See also Wheatley, "The Integration of National Minorities", op. cit.

³¹ Wheatley, "The Integration of National Minorities", op. cit.

³² Crisis Group interviews, Javakheti, Yerevan, January 2011.

³³ Wheatley, "The Integration of National Minorities", op. cit. Crisis Group interviews, local observers, analysts, Akhalkalaki, Yerevan, Tbilisi, January-February 2011.

³⁴ According to the interior ministry, registered crimes in Samtskhe-Javakheti decreased from 1,003 in 2005 to 636 in 2010. Official Statistics, information and analytical department.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, Akhalkalaki, January 2011.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, local activists, Akhalkalaki, Akhaltsikhe, January 2011. See also, Wheatley, "The Integration of National Minorities", op. cit. The increased security and police presence is not unique to Javakheti. According to a Georgian analyst, security forces are also especially prominent in regions like Kvemo Kartli and Samegrelo, where civil society is not adequately developed. Crisis Group interview, Tbilisi, February 2011.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Georgian government official, Tbilisi, March 2011.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, local activists, Akhalkalaki, Ninotsminda, January 2011.

³⁹ Shipments of Armenian books not regarded as advocating ethnic strife or separatism are permitted entry at the land border if they have been agreed in advance with relevant Georgian authorities or the Georgian embassy in Yerevan. Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Tbilisi, Yerevan, January, March 2011.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, local activist, Akhalkalaki, January 2011; both the idea of erecting the statue and the financial support came from a Javakheti businessmen living in Russia. "Mesropyan Mastitis delis gasman" [The opening ceremony of the statue of Mesropyan Mashtots], *Samkhretis-karibche* (local newspaper), 29 November 2010.

This may be part of a realisation that given the recent hostilities with Russia, they are unrealistic and likely to be perceived negatively by the Georgian authorities. Political activists also say people feel unsafe raising controversial issues, due to fear of the security officials.⁴¹ But the region is also becoming more stable because, gradually, integration is working.

B. CONTENTIOUS ISSUES AND TBILISI'S RESPONSE

1. Socio-economic issues

Javakheti's physical remoteness and dire economic conditions stimulated discontent. Aware of this, the Georgian government made improving access the basis of its integration policy and completed the renovation of a road linking Javakheti to western Georgia in 2008 and a 220km highway to Tbilisi in 2010.⁴² This is meant to contribute to economic integration and local tourism, enable better access to health and education facilities and promote cross-border trade with Armenia and Turkey.⁴³ Secondary roads within the district have also been renovated. A new high-speed link – the Baku (Azerbaijan)-Akhalkalaki-Kars (Turkey) rail project – due to be completed in 2013 will cut the travel time from Tbilisi to the Javakheti region to less than two hours.

Other advances include renovated and better-equipped schools, a new central water system in towns, improvements in electrical distribution systems and a refurbished hospital. Local budgets have increased, making it possible to implement economic development projects.⁴⁴ Installation of natural gas networks began in 2008 in the towns of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda as well as nearby villages.⁴⁵ The government is also investing in three hydropower plants worth some \$17 million on the Paravani River in

the Samtskhe-Javakheti region.⁴⁶ Infrastructure development is having an effect, an activist explained: "As economic problems are being addressed, and people see the government is paying attention to the region, ethnic and political issues become secondary".⁴⁷ Locals say these improvements have earned the current government considerable popularity, as the previous authorities all but ignored Javakheti.⁴⁸

The economy, due to its heavy reliance on uncompetitive agriculture, deteriorated with the global economic crisis and the 2008 war even more than in other parts of Georgia. Samtskhe-Javakheti remains one of the poorest regions of the country. In 2009, GDP in the region fell 11.3 per cent in comparison with 2008, while Georgia as a whole experienced a more modest 5.9 per cent decline.⁴⁹ More than 40 per cent of the population had a daily income of \$2 or less.⁵⁰ The business sector is underdeveloped, and employment opportunities limited. In July 2010, only 2.2 per cent of Georgian businesses were registered in the region.⁵¹ According to unofficial estimates, but 5-10 per cent of people in Akhalkalaki are fully employed, mainly in the public sector. The village population is largely engaged in subsistence farming.⁵² Unemployment and poverty reinforces the perception of discrimination and encourages migration to Russia.

Remittances sent by seasonal labour migrants in Russia are still a major source of income. That an estimated 60 per cent of families have relatives in Russia creates economic but not necessarily political dependence on Russia.⁵³ Many have Armenian passports, described as a "free visa to Russia",⁵⁴ though dual citizenship is illegal in Georgia with-

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, local observers and activists, analysts, Akhalkalaki, Yerevan, Tbilisi, January-February 2011.

⁴² The road was financed by the U.S.-funded "Millennium Challenge Georgia". See <http://www.mcg.ge/?l=1&i=247>.

⁴³ It now takes only two-three hours to get local produce to the capital, Tbilisi, and other major cities; in 2006, transit time would have been some six-seven hours. Local producers now find access easier to the national markets and national companies, and retailers have started to travel to the region to make purchases.

⁴⁴ The budget of the Akhalkalaki municipality has grown from GEL 700,000 (\$421,000) in 2002 to GEL 5.3 million (\$3.3 million) in 2011. The government also funds a new Village Support Program that allocates \$3,000 to \$23,000 depending on the size of the village. Crisis Group interview, Gamgebeli, Akhalkalaki, January 2011.

⁴⁵ The government plans to spend \$10 million on gasification projects. Families are expected to make a contribution of GEL 550 (\$325) to access the gas supply. Crisis Group interviews, Ninotsminda, Akhalkalaki, January 2011.

⁴⁶ "Georgia, Turkish Firm Sign Deal on Three HPPs", Civil Georgia, 21 February 2011. For the ongoing government investments, see <http://www.minenergy.gov.ge/index.php?m=305>.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, civil activist, Akhalkalaki, January 2011.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, civil society activists, Javakheti, January 2011.

⁴⁹ The country-wide reduction was 5.9 per cent. "Regional Labour Market Survey in Samtskhe-Javakheti", International Organisation for Migration, 2010. The different degrees of decline could be explained by the fact that more economically viable regions of the country have enjoyed much higher investment over the last few years than Javakheti, which though it has been helped by recent infrastructure improvements, offers relatively few attractive opportunities.

⁵⁰ The situation is similar in Racha, Shida Kartli and Kvemo Kartli regions. "Care Caucasus USPV Survey", Care International, 16 June 2010.

⁵¹ Business Register, National Statistics Office of Georgia, July 2010.

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, Ninotsminda, Akhalkalaki, January 2011.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, local civil society representative, Akhalkalaki, January 2011. "Peace, Security and Stability in Samtskhe-Javakheti: A Community Informed Strategy", SaferWorld, CIPDD, Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), February 2011.

⁵⁴ Armenia and Russia have a visa-free regime.

out explicit permission, and problems may arise if the law is fully implemented.⁵⁵

In 2010, several small businesses were heavily fined for financial violations. The lack of Georgian language skills hampers knowledge of tax laws. A resident commented: "If we want to create jobs, then a businessman should not be afraid of doing business. Fines are too high. On TV, people also see cases of tax-related arrests in Tbilisi and therefore hesitate to enlarge their businesses".⁵⁶ It is critical that the authorities ensure an open and restriction-free environment for local businesses and also invest more in local agriculture.

2. Education and language reforms

Lack of knowledge of the Georgian language remains a major barrier to the integration of Javakheti Armenians. Although the government and donor community have funded programs, command of Georgian is still minimal and even worse in rural areas.⁵⁷ However, the population demonstrates an increased interest in Georgian as a key to better economic opportunities, evidenced by higher attendance at free language courses.⁵⁸

The 2005 Law on General Education gives national minorities the right to general education in their native languages, though it also says Georgian should be the language of national instruction.⁵⁹ Although the law formally requires the state language to be used in public administration, and there were attempts to enforce this during President Saakashvili's first term, a shortage of Georgian speakers and a flexible approach by the government mean that in reality most communication is in Armenian. Since neither pupils nor teachers have sufficient ability to implement the

law, it also continues to be the language of use in many schools.

Georgia likewise has explicitly "minority schools", where the language of instruction is Armenian, Russian or Azeri.⁶⁰ The education and science ministry (MES) began translating Georgian national curricula textbooks into minority languages in 2007, reducing the need for them to be provided by neighbouring states as in the past. It has made significant progress, every year focussing on gradually translating textbooks for different grades and subjects.⁶¹ This will continue until all minority schools have switched to teaching with the translated textbooks. Partly due to lack of money, the supply of such books is not always sufficient, but graduates of the 88 minority schools (84 Armenian and four Russian) in Javakheti, will soon be able to use almost all the same textbooks as their Georgian peers.⁶²

MES also distributes free textbooks, developed in 2005, to teach Georgian as a second language. Georgian language classes in minority schools start in the first grade, with five hours a week. But there are too few qualified language teachers, even through the government finances programs to attract Georgian-speaking teachers to minority regions with relatively high salaries (about \$750 a

⁵⁵ Georgian legislation does not recognise dual citizenship unless granted by special "presidential" decree. Crisis Group interview, civil society representative, Akhalkalaki, January 2011.

⁵⁶ Group interview, local activist, Akhalkalaki, January 2011.

⁵⁷ Town residents and the younger generation have some knowledge of the Georgian language. However, a 2008 survey demonstrated that only 5.1 per cent of the population of Akhalkalaki municipality and 3.8 per cent of Ninotsminda municipality understood Georgian with some degree of fluency, while 47 per cent and 28 per cent respectively had no knowledge. Wheatley, "The Integration of National Minorities", *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, local residents, Tbilisi, April 2011.

⁵⁹ The 1995 Constitution makes Georgian the state language (and Abkhazian the state language in Abkhazia). The Law of Georgia on General Education adopted in 2005 requires (Articles 4, 5 and 58) state-operated schools to teach the following subjects in Georgian by the 2010-2011 academic year: Georgian language, literature, history and geography. This is not occurring in Javakheti. The Law on General Education guarantees national minorities the right to receive general education in their native languages, Article 4(3) and 7(1).

⁶⁰ There are 116 Armenian, 89 Azeri, twelve Russian, and 40 multilingual, including Georgian-Ukrainian, state-funded schools, in addition to 133 mixed schools in which both a minority language and a Georgian language department are available. Language classes are also offered in some Georgian schools in areas settled by minority groups. For instance, in the ethnic Chechen (Kist) Pankisi Gorge, Chechen language classes are available, as are Ossetian language classes in the ethnic Ossetian villages of Areshperani and Pona, in the Kakheti region. "Report on the Implementation of the Action Plan for Tolerance and Civic Integration" (in Georgian), Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reintegration, January-December 2010, www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/2010_Annual_Report_ge.pdf, "Ossetians in Georgia: In the Wake of the 2008 War", ECMI, Working Paper # 45 September 2009".

⁶¹ For instance, it translated books of some subjects for three pilot grades in 2007 (first, seventh and tenth grades) and in 2008 for all subjects for the second, eighth and eleventh grades. For the time being, pupils in the ninth to twelfth grades receive translated history, geography and civic education books. For the 2011-2012 academic year the ministry finalised translation of natural sciences, arts and mathematics textbooks for fourth and tenth graders. Crisis Group interviews, MES representatives, Tbilisi, March 2011; Salome Mekhuzla and Aileen Roche, "National Minorities and Educational Reform in Georgia", ECMI working paper no. 46, September 2009; "Report on Georgia", European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), 28 April 2010.

⁶² According to a 2006 MES decree, academic subjects related to minority issues, such as Armenian and Azeri history, can be included in the curriculum as extra-curricular subjects. However, the government has not provided additional financing or developed curriculum. Mekhuzla and Roche, "National Minorities and Educational Reform", *op. cit.*

month).⁶³ In 2009, seventeen teachers were assigned to instruct in non-Georgian schools of Samtskhe-Javakheti. Indicative of feelings towards newcomers, however, they are sometimes derisively called “missionaries” by locals.

The authorities are exploring multilingual forms of education to improve command of native and state languages.⁶⁴ 40 multilingual schools now exist in Georgia, of which eight are in Javakheti and were initially introduced by the Swiss organisation CIMERA with the financial support of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe's High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM). Since the end of the program in 2008, the MES has administered it, spending around \$59,000 annually for development.⁶⁵

Acute challenges remain. According to an Akhalkalaki teacher, there are only three genuine bilingual teachers in the municipality. Financial resources are insufficient to train enough teachers and purchase materials.⁶⁶ Other observers say a lack of institutional stability in the ministry has affected implementation of policies regarding Georgian-language training, with frequent ministerial changes resulting in new policies and initiatives being adopted, often on a temporary, experimental basis before earlier ones have been finalised.⁶⁷ The authorities should codify national legislation to guarantee a systematic and consistent policy line. They should also invest more in multilingual educa-

tion, teacher training, salaries and teaching materials, and the international donor community should likewise provide support.

The government made access to higher education easier for minorities in 2009 with amendments to the Law on Higher Education. Ethnic Armenian and Azeri students are each allotted a 5 per cent quota of all state university seats, roughly in conformity with their combined representation in the broader population (12 per cent). Unlike ethnic Georgian applicants, who are required to pass four separate exams in Georgian, minority students must pass only one exam in their native language. As of 2010, they can then enrol in a one-year Georgian language preparation program, before starting undergraduate classes in Georgian.⁶⁸ Several state universities already offer Georgian-language courses, and students who obtain state scholarships can, depending on entrance exam results, obtain a tuition waiver for five years.⁶⁹ In 2010, 83 of 89 students from Javakheti who applied to university passed the exam, compared to three in 2007. In 2011 over 200 are expected to try for entrance to Georgian universities.⁷⁰

The authorities should continue to broaden incentives for minority school graduates by offering full scholarships to pursue higher education in philology, the Georgian language, literature and other subjects, with the condition that they return to their native regions and work as teachers after graduation.

To create a merit-based civil service, civil servants have been required since 2006 to pass tests assessing basic knowledge of the state language, the Georgian constitution and relevant legislation. Test results affect promotions, demotions and dismissals. This has increased anxiety and resentment in Javakheti, as many Armenians could not pass and were dismissed. Some local staff were also dismissed, as Georgian was enforced as the state language in many state bodies.⁷¹ In 2007, only eleven of 175 candidates for school directorships passed the Georgian-language exam in Javakheti, eight of whom were ethnic Georgians.⁷² Incumbent directors had to be appointed as acting directors.

⁶³ The average salary in regular public schools across the country is GEL 350 (\$205). Crisis Group interview, MES representatives, Tbilisi, March 2011. The programs “Teach for Georgia” and “Qualified Georgian Language Specialists in Schools of Regions Populated by Ethnic Minorities” are administered by the National Centre for Teachers Professional Development. <http://tpdc.ge/index.php?lang=en>.

⁶⁴ Multilingual education in Georgia's schools starts at an early stage (second or third grade) but initially involves only one subject, sports. Then in grades four, five and six other subjects are introduced (sports, arts, nature). The target is to achieve instruction of 50 per cent of the curriculum in Georgian and 50 per cent in minority languages in higher grades. Teachers and children use both languages in class discussions and writing, but, as noted, only relatively simple subjects are taught in the multilingual program; schools will probably face more challenges with subjects such as history, geography or physics. However, MES hopes that by the time difficult subjects are introduced in the upper classes, children will have sufficient knowledge of the state language to cope with the multilingual instruction. Multilingual schools also offer Georgian language classes for five hours per week.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, MES representatives, Tbilisi, March 2011.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, teachers, NGO representatives, Akhalkalaki, Ninotsminda, January 2011.

⁶⁷ In 2008 and 2009, the ministry had three different ministers. Crisis Group interviews, teachers, Javakheti, January 2011. See also, “Alternative Report to the Georgian State Report Pursuant to Article 25, Paragraph 1, of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities”, Public Movement Multinational Georgia, Tbilisi, 2008.

⁶⁸ “Access of National Minorities to Higher Education in Georgia”, Government of Georgia, non-paper, 2010.

⁶⁹ Tbilisi State University, Ilia State University and the Technical University of Georgia in Tbilisi offer Georgian language courses, as well as Akhaltsikhe State University in Akhaltsikhe and Telavi State University in Telavi, eastern Georgia.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, Gamgebeli, Akhalkalaki, January 2011. Since 2009, student manuals for the admissions examinations are published in Azeri and Armenian.

⁷¹ See Crisis Group Report, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, op. cit.

⁷² Mekhuzla and Roche, “National Minorities and Educational Reform”, op. cit.

However, vigorous enforcement of the legislation has been relaxed, as Tbilisi has become wary of the massive layoffs that would result and the prospect of having to recruit ethnic Georgians from other regions as replacements. Professional testing is no longer carried out for the local staff. According to some estimates, only 10 per cent of the staff of the Akhalkalaki *Gamgeoba* (the local executive office) are competent in Georgian.⁷³ More testing for school directors and acting school directors in early spring 2011, administered by the MES, reportedly showed better results from Javakheti.⁷⁴ It is commendable that public employees are not fired on language grounds, but to improve local capacity, professional testing should take place in minority languages for a transitional period of ten to fifteen years. This would provide opportunity for officials to improve their state-language skills through government-funded programs. Meanwhile, the Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration, where minority officials are trained, should also offer school directors intensive instruction in Georgian.⁷⁵

Local legislative councils (*Sakrebulo*⁷⁶) are presently held in Armenian; that language is used between citizens and local authorities, and requests are accepted in whatever language they are made.⁷⁷ Translation of administrative documents is free; official announcements are printed in Georgian and Armenia. Ballots, lists of voters and relevant information booklets were translated into Armenian

during the 2008 presidential and parliamentary elections and 2010 local elections. Yet, concerns remain that although this flexibility is applied in practice, there are no formal legal guarantees – other than in education – of the right to use Armenian at the local level. The Council of Europe (CoE) Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities recommended that the legislation afford clear guarantees in this respect.⁷⁸

Georgia pledged to sign the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages when it was admitted to the Council of Europe in 1999. That 1992 document outlines a number of steps that the state needs to take to protect and promote regional minority languages. Georgian officials say formal ratification of the charter is under discussion, but they have yet to reach a consensus on the politically sensitive issue. They argue that there are other regional languages in Georgia that have traditionally been oral,⁷⁹ and it is unclear what effect such a law would have on them. In addition, a myriad of constitutional and legislative changes would be needed to achieve formal compliance with the charter.⁸⁰

3. Media

Javakheti Armenians have limited access to information in their native language about Georgia's political and economic situation. Two local TV channels transmit prime-time news broadcasts from the national state-run Russian-language channel, Region TV.⁸¹ An Armenian-language news program is also broadcast daily on a national TV channel and transmitted by local channels in Javakheti.⁸² But the main source of information remains Russian and Armenian TV stations, accessed through relatively low-cost satellite. The authorities should offer to fund local TV stations for the translation of nation-wide programs and talk shows, which would increase awareness of internal developments and political debates in Georgia.

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, Akhalkalaki, January 2011.

⁷⁴ While final results as calculated by the MES are not yet available, representatives of the office of the state minister for reintegration say school directors from Javakheti did better. Crisis Group phone conversation, MES and reintegration ministry, Tbilisi, April 2011. According to some assessments, the tests were also less challenging than in the past. Candidates were previously tested in Georgian writing skills, but this time there were only multiple-choice questions. Crisis Group phone conversation, education researcher, Tbilisi, April 2011.

⁷⁵ The Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration, established in Kutaisi, in western Georgia, in 2005 offers officials, mainly from the minority regions, intensive Georgian-language courses free of charge. The authorities plan to introduce human resource management, financial management, legal studies and proceedings, and English into its curriculum.

⁷⁶ *Sakrebulo*, local legislative bodies, are responsible for approving and amending budgets based on local tax revenues and centrally redistributed funds, administering local state properties and land, carrying out small-scale infrastructure rehabilitation projects, and introducing local taxes and fees. Members are elected under a mixed proportional-majoritarian system. Even though reforms initiated in 2005 redistributed more responsibilities to lower levels, decision-making on regional affairs is still highly centralised.

⁷⁷ Communications with central authorities are accepted only in Georgian. "Opinion on Georgia", Council of Europe (CoE) Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 19 March 2009.

⁷⁸ Ibid. Georgia ratified the Framework Convention in October 2005.

⁷⁹ These are the Megrelian and Svan languages spoken in the western regions of the country. Megrelians and Svans are ethnic Georgians, with distinct languages that are part of the Georgian (Kartvelian) language family.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, government official, Tbilisi, March 2011.

⁸¹ ATV-12 in Akhalkalaki municipality and Parvana TV in Ninotsminda municipality.

⁸² On Channel 1 every day at 7am and on Channel 2 every day at midnight and 7am. This one-hour news program broadcasts items consecutively in Azeri, Armenian, Abkhazian and Ossetian. Channel 1 has country-wide coverage, while Channel 2 does not yet reach Javakheti. In 2008, the Law on Broadcasting was amended to require the public broadcaster to spend 25 per cent of its project budget on programs in minority languages.

Predictably for a region where about 2 per cent of the country's population resides, the national media pays little attention to Javakheti issues except to cover natural disasters, inauguration of infrastructure projects or criminal cases.⁸³ Reports in the print media, however, usually refer to Javakheti as a potential threat to Georgia's security, a tendency that has intensified since the 2008 war.⁸⁴ Lack of knowledge about the region contributes to stereotyping and mistrust of ethnic minorities.

"A Russian Plan", a recent report that aired on the pro-government national Rustavi 2 television channel during a prime-time news program, alleged that the imprisoned Chakhalyan spied for Moscow and was detained with nine Georgian and four Russian citizens for espionage in a November 2010 special operation.⁸⁵ It accused Georgian opposition figures of supporting Chakhalyan and aiding Russia by allegedly fuelling tensions in Javakheti.⁸⁶ Although the Rustavi 2 report claimed that Chakhalyan had been arrested for espionage in 2010, he was formally charged only in connection with weapons possession involving a 2008 explosion, hooliganism and disturbing public order.

However, problematic issues like detentions in Javakheti and the challenges of Georgian-language education are widely reported in Armenia's media. Nationalist groups effectively use online media to highlight contentious issues such as "the alleged misappropriation of Armenian churches by Georgia" as examples of oppression of the Armenian community and culture.⁸⁷ Some nationalist media outlets go so far as to argue that "the situation of the Armenians in Javakheti can be compared with the situation

in Nagorno-Karabakh before 1988. The Georgian authorities are doing their best to clear the region from Armenians".⁸⁸

With increased access to the internet in Javakheti, online media is also becoming popular. However, not knowing Georgian, young people mainly use Armenian and Russian sources.⁸⁹ Javakheti civil society representatives are worried that this exposure will feed inter-ethnic mistrust and tensions.⁹⁰

4. Minority participation and self-government

Georgian authorities have taken steps to ensure minority representation in the social, cultural and political life of the country. With the cooperation of the Civil Integration and Tolerance Council under the president and relevant minority stakeholders, the National Concept for Tolerance and Civic Integration and its five-year Action Plan were approved by a May 2009 government decree.⁹¹ Departments for civil integration and national/ethnic minority issues were established under the office of the state minister of Georgia for reintegration (reintegration ministry), which prepares annual reports on the implementation of the Action Plan. In addition, ministry representatives were appointed in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions,⁹² where regional public defender offices were also set up.⁹³

Of the 75 single mandates in the 150-seat Georgian parliament, two are from Javakheti, both held by ethnic Armenians from the ruling National Movement party. Proportionally, this is roughly in line with Javakheti's population of slightly less than 100,000. Some residents have questioned their deputies' effectiveness, again due to

⁸³ Prior to 2008, Javakheti coverage focused on demonstrations, and the presentation and interpretation were often slanted.

⁸⁴ "Karabaxi afxazetis agiarebas apirebs, rusetshi mcxovrebi somxebi javaxetis avtonomias itxoven" [Karabakh is going to recognise Abkhazia, Armenians living in Russia demand autonomy for Javakheti], *Akhali Taoba* (in Georgian), 9 March 2010; "Javakheti da borchalo afxazetisa da samxret osetis beds gaiziareben" [Javakheti and Borchalo [the old Georgian name for the Kvemo Kartli region] will share the fate of Abkhazia and South Ossetia], *Sakartvelos Respublika* (in Georgian), 25 September 2010.

⁸⁵ Those detained included six Georgian air force pilots and two businessmen. "9 Georgian, 4 Russian citizens among arrested spies", *Civil Georgia*, 5 November 2010.

⁸⁶ Rustavi 2 TV "Kurieri" news program, 9:00 pm, 5 April 2011.

⁸⁷ "Ne stanet Javakhka ... ne budet Armenii" [There will be no Javakhk ... There will be no Armenia], *Golos Armenii* (in Russian), 20 February 2010; "Ousting: MP charges violation of minority rights as Armenian language reduced in Javakhk schools", *ArmeniaNow*, 22 July 2010.

⁸⁸ "Georgian authorities do their best to clear Samtskhe-Javakheti region from Armenians", *PanArmenian*, 4 June 2010.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Javakheti, Yerevan, January 2011.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, local observers, Akhalkalaki, January 2011.

⁹¹ The National Concept for Tolerance and Civic Integration elaborates national strategy and objectives in six main directions: rule of law; education and state language; media and access to information; political integration and civil participation; social and regional integration; culture and preservation of identity. The Action Plan identifies specific activities and programs according to strategic directions of the Concept that must be implemented in the next five years. Both were developed on the basis of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities ratified in 2005.

⁹² "Report on the Implementation of the Action Plan for Tolerance and Civic Integration", Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reintegration, May-December 2009.

⁹³ These policies are in line with previous Crisis Group recommendations to the government. See Crisis Group Report, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, op. cit.

language deficiencies.⁹⁴ The reintegration ministry has translated key legislation and articles into minority languages and distributed them in regions compactly settled by minorities,⁹⁵ but additional money is required to translate all laws.

The Armenian community is well represented in the locally-elected *Sakrebulo* and other state bodies, such as the *Gamgeoba*⁹⁶ and police. 26 of 32 members of the Akhalkalki *Sakrebulo* and nineteen of twenty members of the Ninotsminda *Sakrebulo* are minorities.⁹⁷ Georgian government officials say they are starting a new affirmative action program for non-Georgian speakers to increase their numbers in law enforcement.⁹⁸

Issues of voting-district representation remain problematic, as in many areas of Georgia. *Sakrebulos* are elected under a mixed proportional-majoritarian system. The number of registered voters per single-mandate constituency varies considerably across the country. For instance, the village of Ptena in Javakheti – with 204 voters – elects one representative to the Akhalkalki *Sakrebulo*, the same as Akhalkalki with 7,052.⁹⁹ The Venice Commission, the CoE advisory body on legislative matters, recommended that Georgia make changes in this regard.¹⁰⁰ The voter turnout in the region was high in the 2010 local elections: 73.5 per cent, as compared to 49 per cent nationwide, with almost 80 per cent of the proportional votes obtained by the UNM, which won 30 and eighteen seats in the Akhalkalki and Ninotsminda *Sakrebulos* respectively.¹⁰¹

In practice, local municipalities largely depend on central government decisions, and criticism of centralisation is often heard in Javakheti, as elsewhere. That criticism is tempered, however, by many locals' positive characterisation of the current *Gamgebeli* (chief executive) of the

Akhalkalki municipality as energetic and independent,¹⁰² while the Samtskhe-Javakheti regional governor, appointed by the president to supervise local affairs, is said to be a weaker decision-maker than other governors.¹⁰³ Up to 75 per cent of the Akhalkalki municipality's 2011 budget is a subsidy from the central government, with the remainder from local revenues.¹⁰⁴ According to local officials and interlocutors, greater self-governance will be impossible without more fiscal decentralisation, but the region lacks the resources to sustain the budget by itself.¹⁰⁵

IV. EXTERNAL ACTORS

A. VIEW FROM ARMENIA

Javakheti's population traditionally perceives Armenia as its ally and protector. The Armenian government has generally tried not to inflame tensions in Javakheti,¹⁰⁶ and Tbilisi relied on its support to calm tensions when the region experienced its most serious anti-government rallies in 2005-2006. But the dependence of Javakheti Armenians on Armenia could further contribute to their alienation from the Georgian state.

Groups of Armenian nationalists, including in the diaspora, have kept Javakheti and the grievances of ethnic Armenians on the agenda, at times raising bilateral tensions. They consider Javakheti important to Armenia's national security, as most surrounding countries are populated by either Turkic or Iranian peoples, who are often perceived as hostile. To them it is imperative, therefore, that the region remains populated by ethnic Armenians whose rights are protected.¹⁰⁷

Although Georgia has experienced ethnic conflicts since independence, the August 2008 war intensified its sense of insecurity. The fear that Russia may try to destabilise the country through Javakheti has increased, making the authorities more wary of losing control through decentralisation or allowing Armenian the status of an official lo-

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Javakheti, January 2011.

⁹⁵ "Report on the Implementation of the Action Plan", op. cit., January-December 2010.

⁹⁶ The *Gamgeoba* is a local executive body, responsible for implementing decisions of the *Sakrebulo* and the *Gamgebeli*, the chief local executive. The *Gamgebeli* is elected by the *Sakrebulo* and is accountable to it.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group correspondence with European Centre for Minority Issues, Tbilisi, April 2011.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Georgian government official, Tbilisi, March 2011.

⁹⁹ See Crisis Group Report, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, op. cit.

¹⁰⁰ "Joint Opinion on the Election Code of Georgia as amended through March 2010", Venice Commission, 9 June 2010.

¹⁰¹ The UNM received 84 per cent of proportional votes in Akhalkalki municipality and 30 *Sakrebulo* seats. In Ninotsminda it received 78 per cent and eighteen seats. Crisis Group calculated percentages from information available at www.elections.portal.ge.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interviews, local civil society activists, Javakheti, January 2011.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interviews, civil activists, analysts, Javakheti, Tbilisi, January, March 2011.

¹⁰⁴ In Akhalkalki, about GEL 4 million (\$2.4 million) of the GEL 5.3 million (\$3.3 million) budget is a transfer from the central government. For the 2011 Akhalkalki municipality budget, see (in Georgian), <http://akhalkalki.ge/Akhalkalki/file/Biujeti%202011/2011%20biujeti%20Geo.pdf>.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interviews, local official, civil society representative, Akhalkalki, January 2011.

¹⁰⁶ See Crisis Group Report, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, op. cit.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interviews, analyst, political party representatives, Yerevan, January 2011.

cal language, before the region is more integrated with the rest of the country.

1. Yerevan's approach and relations with Tbilisi

Though many Javakheti Armenians still feel more attachment to Yerevan to meet their basic needs such as education and health, Armenia has consistently played a stabilising role in Javakheti, which it considers an internal Georgian issue.¹⁰⁸ The two countries' presidents have a good personal relationship.¹⁰⁹ Armenia supports educational and cultural programs in the region. Its education ministry provides Armenian-language textbooks and trains teachers for Armenian-language schools.¹¹⁰ A Georgian Studies Department that offers Georgian-language courses was recently opened at the Yerevan State Linguistic University. Cultural programs like "Come back home", to which Armenian children from abroad, including Georgia, are invited and hosted by families in Armenia to take culture, language and history classes are typical.¹¹¹

Another important dimension of bilateral relations is economic. With its borders to Azerbaijan and Turkey closed, about 70 per cent of Armenia's foreign commodity circulation is via the Georgian rail system and the ports of Batumi and Poti.¹¹² Russian natural gas also flows in through Georgia.¹¹³ Nationalist detractors often criticise the government for succumbing to Georgian "blackmail" and agreeing to dictated terms,¹¹⁴ but it would be too costly for Armenia to undermine this relationship for Javakheti.¹¹⁵

Successive Armenian governments have shown no inclination to clash with Georgia over Javakheti, and both countries characterise relations as excellent. Reciprocal visits by Presidents Sargsyan and Saakashvili are frequent, as are

those by foreign ministers and lower officials. President Sargsyan summed up his position on Javakheti in 2009:

The logic of our policy toward Javakhet [Javakheti] should rest on the principle of "integration without assimilation". In this case, integration should presume the strengthening of the Armenians in Georgia as dignified and respected citizens of that country. I believe that recognition of Armenian as a regional language [in Javakheti], registration of the Armenian Apostolic Church and steps to protect Armenian monuments in Georgia will only strengthen Armenian-Georgian friendship and enhance the atmosphere of mutual trust. We should take a delicate approach to all of these issues but also be persistent and principled.¹¹⁶

While there was nothing particularly inflammatory in the remarks, the speech signalled a slight difference in nuance from the policy of former President Robert Kocharian, who emphasised strict non-interference in Georgia's internal affairs, especially on political and religious issues.

2. Opposition and nationalist groups' attitudes

Armenia's ultra-nationalist opposition Dashnaksutiun party and some Yerevan-based Javakheti Armenian organisations, well-organised and versed in online media tools, urge a more hardline approach. They criticise the government as not assertive enough in "protecting" Javakheti's Armenians. The Dashnaksutiun party calls for a self-sustainable, autonomous Javakheti within a federal Georgia.¹¹⁷

Other groups taking up the Javakheti cause are the "Patriot Public Organization Javakhet", headed by a native-Javakheti parliamentarian from the "Powerful Fatherland Party" (Hzor Hayreniq), Shirak Torosyan, and the "Coordinating Council for the Defence of Javakhet Armenians", uniting several smaller organisations.¹¹⁸ They complain about discrimination of ethnic Armenians in Georgia and advocate increased educational, social, cultural and political rights. They consider the detention of Chakhalyan political persecution,¹¹⁹ supported his appeal through the Georgian court system and have now brought it to the European Court of Human Rights. Although their support

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, government official, Yerevan, January 2011.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, analysts, Yerevan, Tbilisi, January, March 2011.

¹¹⁰ Books are also provided to other countries with an Armenian diaspora community.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, government official, Yerevan, January 2011.

¹¹² Tatul Hakobyan, "Georgia to remain vital transit route for Armenia", *Armenian Reporter*, 13 November 2009. Crisis Group interview, analyst, Yerevan, January 2011.

¹¹³ Georgia also benefits from the thousands of Armenian tourists who visit its Black Sea coast during the summer. According to Armenian figures, close to 100,000 Armenians travelled to Georgia in 2010. With the improved infrastructure in both countries, trade and cross-border cooperation are likely to increase.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, opposition party and advocacy group representatives, January 2011. "Armenian commentary takes critical look at ties with Georgia", *Golos Armenii*, via BBC Monitoring, 25 June 2009.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, analysts, Yerevan, January 2011.

¹¹⁶ "Armenian Leader on Need of 'Regional Language' in Javakheti", *Civil Georgia*, 4 September 2009.

¹¹⁷ Dashnaksutiun Official Foreign Policy and Strategy, at <http://www.arfd.info/arfd-foreign-policy-strategy/>.

¹¹⁸ The Powerful Homeland Party was established by Armenians from Samtskhe-Javakheti currently residing in Armenia. The Coordinating Council for the Defence of Javakhet Armenians includes such organisations as Javakhet, Yerkir (Land) Union from Armenia and Virk and Javakhet from Javakheti.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Yerkir Union and Javakhet representatives, Yerevan, January 2011.

base is judged to be minimal, they used new-media methods to mobilise a few hundred people in front of the Georgian embassy in Yerevan in 2008 and again during President Saakashvili's 2009 visit. Their web activism includes online articles and petitions and video coverage from Javakheti that mostly attracts youths from there who are studying in Armenia.¹²⁰ They have not held public gatherings in the past several years.

According to an Armenian observer, Sargsyan, unlike Kocharian, who tightly controlled them, has allowed these groups greater freedom.¹²¹ Armenian analysts say this may be nothing more than a calculation to permit relatively marginal groups to let off nationalist steam in a way that poses no threat to relations with Georgia.¹²² Others explain that the interests of the many Samtskhe-Javakheti natives now residing in Armenia cannot be ignored.¹²³ To regain legitimacy, some in the ruling party may also be more inclined to allow limited, low-priority nationalist sentiments to flourish following the violent March 2008 incidents, when the Armenian government used force to disperse an opposition demonstration, resulting in eight deaths and hundreds of injuries.¹²⁴

Georgia naturally perceives the activities of Armenian nationalist groups as harmful to bilateral relations and domestic stability.¹²⁵ Torosyan is banned from entering the country, and the groups are predictably portrayed negatively in Georgia. A recent report of the small independent Georgian online television station ITV¹²⁶ ("Javakheti – a mined region") caused a hostile reaction among some in the Armenian community in Georgia. It started with a YouTube video, showing the "flag" and "anthem" of Javakheti created by Armenian nationalists¹²⁷ and was followed by coverage of their recent petition to the European Com-

mission, UN and CoE accusing Georgian authorities of "toughening" policy towards Armenians in "Javakhk" (the Armenian word for Javakheti) and the alleged "Georgianisation" of Armenian schools.¹²⁸ The video, whether by design or not, attracted viewers' insulting comments towards Armenians.¹²⁹ Armenian community representatives assessed this as hate speech, designed to fuel ethnic discord.¹³⁰

This incident suggests that all stakeholders, including the governments of Georgia and Armenia, advocacy groups, political parties and the media, need to be cautious: sensationalist reporting and controversial political statements risk fomenting instability in Javakheti and souring relations between Georgia and Armenia.

B. GEORGIAN CONCERNS ABOUT MANIPULATION BY MOSCOW

After the base closure, Russian influence in Javakheti diminished and is now largely limited to remittances. Unlike the Javakheti emigrants to Armenia, who established themselves in the local society, the vast majority of Javakheti Armenians in Russia are non-unionised migrant labourers. Russia does not pose a direct threat to Javakheti's stability since it no longer has a physical presence in the region. However, Georgian and Armenian analysts argue that it could still try to raise nationalist sentiments through proxy groups. As an illustration of past unsuccessful Russian attempts to influence the situation in Javakheti, Armenian analysts cite the incident related to the alleged Belarusian NGO "ALAP".¹³¹

The Russian media highlights Javakheti as a possible conflict point. Statements such as "yet another increase of the separatists' sentiments in Samtskhe-Javakheti" are often published or broadcast.¹³² Russian politicians and analysts have said that Russia could resort to force and use regions like Javakheti to undermine Georgia. After the August 2008 war, Mikhail Alexandrov, head of the Caucasus department at the Kremlin-sponsored Institute of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), argued that Moscow

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, analysts, Yerevan, January 2011.

¹²¹ Artyom Tonoyan, "Rising Armenian-Georgian Tensions and the Possibility of a New Ethnic Conflict in the South Caucasus", *Demokratizatsiya*, fall 2010.

¹²² Crisis Group interview, Armenian analyst, Tbilisi, April 2011.

¹²³ Crisis Group interviews, analysts, Yerevan, Tbilisi, January-February 2011.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* For the violent incidents in Armenia, see Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°48, *Armenia: Picking Up the Pieces*, 8 April 2010.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, analysts, Tbilisi, February-March 2011. When asked in Yerevan, President Saakashvili said neither Georgians nor Armenians are interested in activities that damage bilateral relations, and it would be better to prevent such activities altogether. "Georgian leader vows to help ethnic Armenians integrate", *Arminfo via BBC Monitoring*, 25 June 2009.

¹²⁶ This is a relatively unknown, online television station, at www.itv.ge, with some 4,000 weekly visitors as of March 2011.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group also saw the flag and coat of arms of Javakheti in the office of one of the nationalist organisations. In Georgia, municipalities and regions are not authorised to have them, unless they enjoy autonomous status.

¹²⁸ "Armenian bloggers presented petition to protect Vahagn Chakhalyan's rights", *News.am*, 1 March 2011.

¹²⁹ The video was soon removed from the webpage, and comments on its contents are no longer accessible.

¹³⁰ "Assembly of Tbilisi Armenians indicts several Georgian web portals of fuelling national discord", *Media.ge*, 11 March 2011.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interviews, researchers, analysts, Yerevan, Tbilisi, January-February 2011.

¹³² "Yerevan i Tbilisi sgladili sheroxovatosti" [Yerevan and Tbilisi have smoothed the roughness], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 5 October 2010; "Javakhskaia diaspora Rossii: Pribivaem abivavts Samtskhe-Javaxeti natsionalno-kulturnoi avtonomie" [Javakh Diaspora in Russia: Calling for granting Samtkhe-Javakheti the national-cultural autonomy], *Regnum*, 1 October 2010.

should support Georgia's fragmentation into several semi-state entities and regions, such as Adjara, Mengrelia, Javakheti, and Kvemo Kartli – the latter a region populated by ethnic Azeris.¹³³ Aleksandr Dugin, a hard-line but influential Russian commentator and political scientist, threatened that if Georgia did not renounce its aspirations to join NATO, it risked being completely broken up, and only Russia was “the guarantor of the unity of Georgia's remaining territories”.¹³⁴

This rhetoric makes Georgian political elites nervous about Moscow's intentions, especially following its recognition of the “independence” of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. They agree, however, that after the closure of the military base, Russia's influence in Javakheti diminished significantly.¹³⁵ The government is mainly worried about a further deterioration of bilateral relations. “In case Russia decides to ‘finish its business’ in Georgia, Javakheti cannot be an exception. Russia can recruit people who will be using the ethnic card or radical political agenda in the entire country”, a government official explained.¹³⁶ Nationalist groups in Javakheti and Armenia are not themselves seen as threats to stability, as they are considered to be motivated by personal and economic interests and to have marginal political influence.¹³⁷

Overall, Russia has recently refrained from direct meddling in the region. Troops that were relocated from the closed

Akhalkalaki base to the Gyumri base in Armenia, a few kilometres from the border with Georgia, did not intervene during the 2008 war.¹³⁸

V. CONCLUSION

Though speculation that Javakheti could become the next flashpoint in Georgia spiked temporarily around the August 2008 war, developments over the past five years, including considerable spending on infrastructure to end the region's isolation and acquiescence to the use of Armenian in schools and public administration, have contributed to its increasing integration into Georgia. The current government in Tbilisi makes no secret of the fact that separatist movements will not be tolerated in the region and says law enforcement resources have been deployed to head off possible confrontations. The withdrawal of Russian troops also diminished radical aspirations.

Most of the so-called “radicals”, some of whom had been involved in mass demonstrations in 2005-2006, have been co-opted by the authorities, were arrested, or immigrated, mainly to Russia. Accordingly, demands for autonomy or regional status for the Armenian language are now rarely heard. The problems the local population mainly cites are those common to the rest of the country, including jobs, education and regional development. But the region's ongoing cultural, economic and sometimes political reliance on Armenia shows that the Georgian government should continue to and further develop consistent and flexible policies on education, the economy, rule of law and the media through dialogue with Javakheti stakeholders, so as to ensure that no outside forces can again manipulate local politics.

Tbilisi/Yerevan/Brussels, 23 May 2011

¹³³ Mikhail Alexandrov, “Nachalo kontsa Yeltsinskoi epoxi” [The beginning of the end of Yeltsin's era], *APN*, 2 October 2008. Another commentator used the term “De-sovereignisation” to describe how Russia could annihilate Georgia. Boris Borisov, “Desuverenizatsiya Gruzii: Sushestvovanie Gruzii – Roskosh kotoruyu Rossia ne mojet sebe pozvalits” [De-sovereignisation of Georgia: Existence of Georgia – a luxury that Russia can not afford], *APN*, 4 February 2009.

¹³⁴ “Russia to resort to ‘any methods’ to protect its interests in Georgia -analyst”, *Rezonansi*, via BBC Monitoring, 25 June 2009.

¹³⁵ A U.S. embassy cable sent to the State Department in July 2007 by the then-Ambassador John Tefft and originally published by Wikileaks illustrated Georgian concerns over Russian involvement in Javakheti the previous year: “Georgian officials in Tbilisi and Akhalkalaki, as well as local community leaders and political activists, have confirmed that the Russian government has funded radical ethnic-Armenian nationalists in Samtskhe-Javakheti in a bid to destabilise this multi-ethnic, politically fragile region. As the withdrawal moved ahead, disturbances in Akhalkalaki dropped off precipitously, lending credence to Georgian allegations that the tensions were being stoked by elements operating from within the Russian base”. “Leaked U.S. cable alleges Russian support for Armenian ‘extremists’ in Georgia”, RFE/RL Armenian Service, 3 December 2010.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Georgian government official, Tbilisi, March 2011.

¹³⁷ This view is shared by some in the Georgian and Armenia governments, as well as analyst circles. Crisis Group interviews, Tbilisi, Yerevan, January, March 2011.

¹³⁸ Yet, a Georgian official also underlined that Russian troops in Gyumri did not become involved during the August 2008 war due to Yerevan's resistance. Crisis Group interview, government official, January 2011.

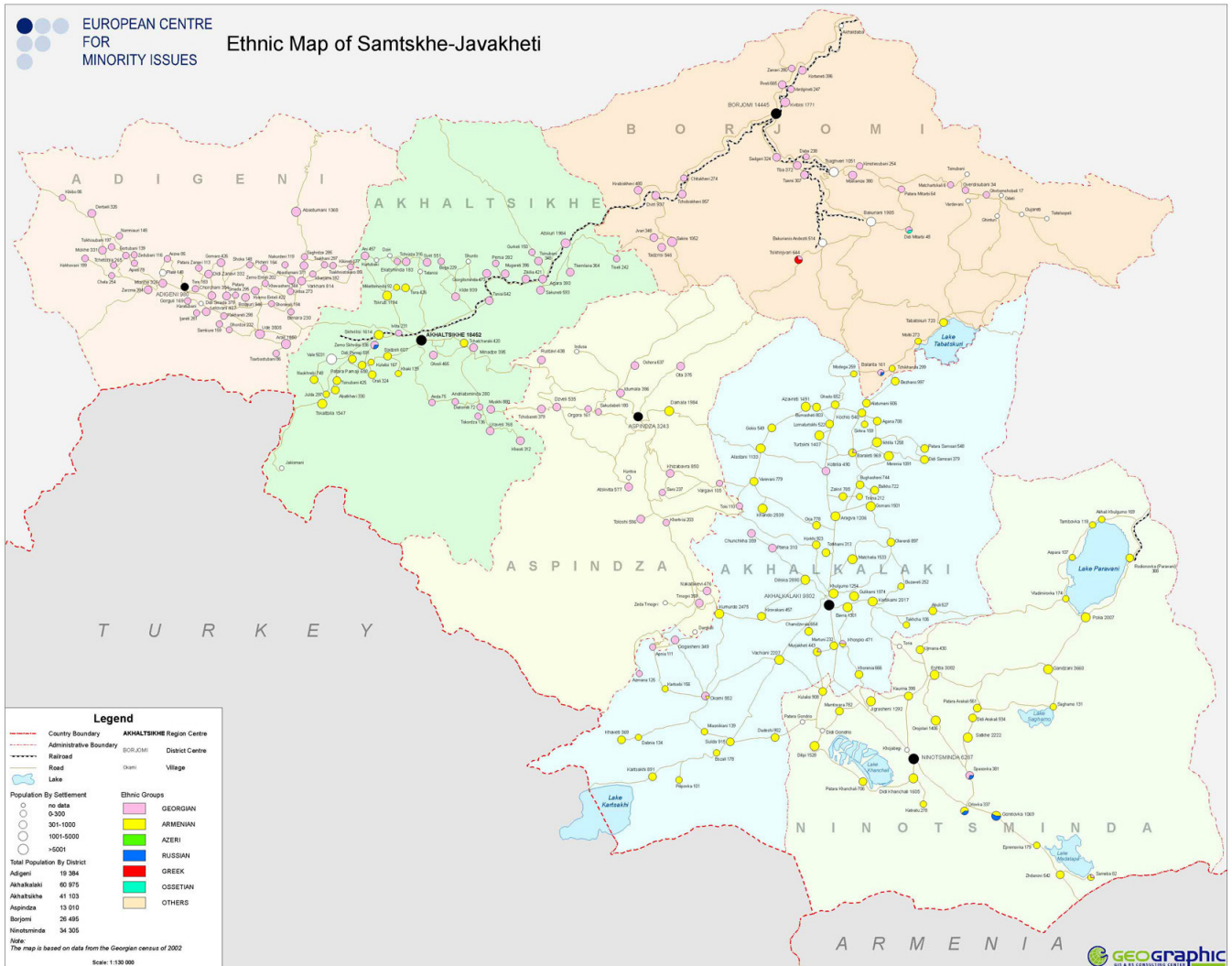
APPENDIX A

MAP OF GEORGIA



APPENDIX B

ETHNIC MAP OF SAMTSKHE- JAVAKHETI



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