

**Caucasus Institute  
for Peace, Democracy and Development**

**Ethnic-Confessional Groups and  
Challenges to Civic Integration in  
Georgia**

Azeri, Javakheti Armenian and Muslim Meskhetian  
Communities



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## INTRODUCTION

This publication includes three policy papers on the issues of minority groups and civic integration in Georgia. Georgia is a diverse multiethnic society. According to the last 1989 census, some 30 percent of its population belonged to ethnic groups other than Georgians. Ethnic nationalist rhetoric that characterized the period of struggle for independence in 1989-91 led to considerable tensions. The transition to independence has been marred by two ethnic-territorial wars that ended up in creation of the two self-proclaimed Abkhazian and South Ossetian states that occupy 15% of Georgia's territory, with over 10% of Georgia's population living in these states before the outbreak of hostilities. Currently, these areas are usually mentioned as zones of "frozen conflict", and their existence and general uncertainty about their future constitutes an extremely grave challenge to the Georgian statehood.

However, neither the Abkhaz nor the Ossetes are or have ever been the largest ethnic minorities in Georgia, and even if Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's problems are considered "bracketed" for the time being, Georgia continues to be a largely multiethnic country. Therefore, molding a new civic nation out of this ethnic multiplicity continues to be a paramount task for Georgia, which aspires to join a family of modern and democratic countries. The Soviet heritage is largely a negative factor in this context: The Soviet system of identity registration contributed to embedding ethnic rather than civic identities, while natural opposition to the hypocritical doctrine of "proletarian internationalism" that was associated with the totalitarian Communist regime undermined legitimacy of any Enlightenment-based Universalist ideas. Georgia needs to create a new model of common citizenship in ethnic diversity, something that would not be an easy task for any country.

It may be paradoxical, therefore, that the question: How and on what terms should minority groups integrate into Georgian society, – has hardly ever become a subject of serious public discussion. There may be several reasons for this. One is that, apart from Abkhazian and Ossetian

conflicts, co-existence of different ethnic groups in Georgia has been largely peaceful since independence. Therefore, other more pressing issues, political or economic, attract the lion's share of public attention. One could suspect, however, that there is more to it. After disasters brought about by ethnicity-related conflicts of the early 90s, the natural instinct of most Georgians is to let sleeping dogs lie: ethnicity is considered to be too sensitive and dangerous a subject to raise while the country has too many other problems to face. But this position is hardly productive in the long run: the reality of the insulation of certain minority groups from the civic and political life in the country is obvious, and this cannot fail to lead to problems of some kind, sooner or later.

This publication does not propose any general concept. Rather, it analyzes problems and concerns of three minority groups whose problems may be considered most important in today's Georgia, and provides some policy recommendations for respective solutions. Armenian and Azeri minorities are among the largest ethnic groups in Georgia; the large part of them reside in compact settlements on the border with their respective ethnic homelands. They are also notably non-integrated into the Georgian society; most of them do not speak Georgian and have quite a vague idea as to what goes on in the country of which they are citizens. However peaceful their life may have been so far, this condition alone implies a set of problems for them and constitutes a long-term challenge to the Georgian state. Muslim Meskhetians represent a special case of a minority that is not there: This group was forcefully deported from Georgia in 1944, and it is currently scattered across several countries of the former USSR and Turkey. Many Muslim Meskhetians aspire to come back to Georgia – or at least to have such an option, which they currently do not have. The Meskhetian case may be the most controversial at the moment, as the Georgian state has taken internationally validated obligations to facilitate their return, but a majority of the Georgian public is strongly against such a prospect.

In addition to three policy papers, the publication also includes a report of a qualitative sociological study on problems and concerns of residents of Javakheti.

The aim of this publication is to raise public awareness of minority problems in Georgia, enhance the level of policy discourse in these issues, and foster broader public discussion around the issues and specific policy recommendations presented in papers.

Policy papers are based on the research commissioned by the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) with support from the National Endowment for Democracy (USA). Their authors largely used a series of round table discussions and meetings organized by the CIPDD in 1999-2001. The qualitative sociological study was conducted with support of the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights. David Darchiashvili and Nana Sumbadze wrote chapters on the Armenian community and Muslim Meskhetians respectively. Ghia Nodia wrote a chapter on the Azeri community, based on the report by Guram Svanidze. Marina Elbakidze wrote the report of the qualitative sociological study, that she had conducted herself. Ararat Esoyan and his colleagues from the Akhalkalaki Center for Support of Reforms and Democratic Development helped a lot to organize focus group discussions. Ghia Nodia did overall editing. Janet Roberts did the polishing of the English text.

# **AZERI COMMUNITY OF GEORGIA: PROBLEMS OF INTEGRATION**

## **General remarks**

According to the 1989 census, the Azeri community of Georgia totals about 300 thousand people. Most of them reside in southeastern Georgia, in the Kvemo Kartli province (administrative centre – the town of Rustavi), mainly, in the districts of Marneuli, Gardabani, Dmanisi, and Bolnisi. There are also small Azeri neighborhoods in other regions of eastern Georgia, mainly adjacent to Azerbaijan. Ethnic Azeris also live in the capital, Tbilisi. The majority of Azeri citizens of Georgia are Shiite Muslims, and a small number of them are Sunni Muslims. Agriculture is the basic activity of the community, which traditionally plays an important role in supplying agricultural products to the capital.

In recent years, problems in the Azeri community in Georgia seldom attracted the attention of the Georgian public and mass media, or of the international community. In contrast, the Samtskhe-Javakheti region has regularly made headlines (s. the next chapter). However, occasional ethnical skirmishes between groups of Azeris and Georgian residents occurred in Bolnisi and Marneuli at the initial stage of the Georgian national movement (1989). Although these did not lead to serious bloodshed, the confrontation forced the Azeri population of Bolnisi to leave the town (although the process did not much affect neighboring villages). Radical elements of the Georgian nationalist movement publicly voiced their concern with the high birth rate in the Azeri community, which contrasted sharply with much lower birth rate of the Georgian population. They said the resultant ethno-demographic balance would be unfavourable for Georgia. On the other hand, petitions for the so-called “Borchalo Autonomy” also attracted some public attention. Some activists of the community sent these petitions to the then Soviet leadership in Moscow, demanding a special autonomous status for Azeri ethnic enclaves. Nevertheless, the community abstained from any further activity, and Azeri organizations did not raise any political demands. The



escalation of political struggle in Tbilisi and serious conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region (South Ossetia) diverted public attention from the problems of the Azeri community for quite a long time.

The dynamics of social and political developments in Azeri enclaves of post-Soviet Georgia is almost the same as in other parts of the country. The conflict potential of these enclaves does not differ much from the other regions. Quite the contrary, one rarely hears about any conflicts or protest actions of the Azeri population. There have been several disturbances prompted by brutal treatment of local residents by the police and other law-enforcement agencies. Such violence is not rare in Georgia, drawing constant protests from human rights organizations. Two such cases in 2000-2001 resulted in mass protest actions of the Azeri residents: in one case, a drunken Georgian border guard shot dead an ethnic Azeri citizen of Georgia, while in another case, the police brutally battered four people – three ethnic Azeris and one Greek. The protests apparently developed an ethnic dimension as the border guard and the police were all ethnic Georgians. However, the authorities managed to overcome the turmoil relatively quickly, in both cases.

Due to the poor knowledge of the Georgian language, the majority of the Azeri community is isolated from the public and political processes in Georgia. Ethnic Azeris attend Russian or Azeri secondary schools, which have the Georgian language in their curricula, but the quality of teaching is too low for the Azeri students to really master the language. Moreover, the youths of Azeri villages mostly do not speak Russian either. As few Georgians can speak Azeri, the young generation of the Azeri community has almost no chances to participate in the social and political processes in Georgia, or to find employment outside of Azeri villages.

Researchers point out two main characteristics of the Azeri community of Georgia. Social apathy or weak participation in the public and political life is the first. In Soviet times and in the following period, the main way for ethnic Azeris to participate in the civic life was through the lodging of various complaints to governmental agencies. The political behaviour of ethnic Azeris is notable for a very low level of political activism on the one hand, and yet, unanimous support for the incumbent government, on the other. President Eduard Shevardnadze and the Citizens' Union of Georgia, which was considered the ruling party until recently, have traditionally won an overwhelming majority of the Azeri

vote, while opposition candidates and parties had little chance. After the Citizens' Union fell apart, all six ethnic Azeri members of the Georgian parliament joined the pro-presidential faction, Alliance for New Georgia, which is believed to be linked to Levan Mamaladze, the state commissioner of Kvemo Kartli (informally – “governor” of the province).

The Azeri community is rather closed and secluded – this is its second characteristic. Its inner life and the image “for the outsider” differ greatly. Naturally, this characteristic only reinforces the first. The community usually keeps its problems and worries to itself, avoiding making them public. This trend for seclusion of the community can be vindicated by sociological surveys in Azeri enclaves. Mass opinion polls often proved useless there, as questionnaires revealed no signs of open dissatisfaction or even basic pluralism in expressed opinion. These research surveys produced such results when ethnic Azeris were interviewed by ethnic Georgians. Ethnic Azeri interviewers have usually been able to get better information but, nevertheless, there are enough grounds to assume that respondents preferred to hold back their deepest concerns. When approached by “the outsiders”, particularly those associated with Tbilisi (especially with the government) ethnic Azeris prefer to stress that they live “fine” and have no problems in relations with the Georgian population and authorities. But in conversations with their fellow community members and in their written complaints, ethnic Azeris voice more serious concerns with regard to a number of problems.

The non-governmental sector has been rather weak in Azeri enclaves until recently. Communal organizations, such as *Birlik*, *Geyrat*, and some others were founded long ago. They are focussed mainly on cultural and educational issues. Middle-age and senior intelligentsia play the leading role in these organizations, and they emphasise their political loyalty to the state. Several new NGOs have emerged recently with the help of the Tbilisi-based organization Multinational Georgia. They deal primarily with youth and gender problems. However, they have yet to gain a reputation in the society, and to find adequate forms to voice problems of the Azeri community and ways to solve them.

One should pay special attention to the importance of contacts with neighboring Azerbaijan. Azeri citizens of Georgia maintain close relations with their ethnic homeland and their actions are greatly influenced by Azerbaijan's policy. Almost all large villages of the region with a dominant Azeri population have direct bus communication with Baku

and other major cities of Azerbaijan (buses also regularly run to Turkey). Well-off Azeri residents are eager to purchase satellite aerials to watch Azerbaijani and Turkish TV. The town of Marneuli visually has a distinctively large number of such aerials in comparison with other towns of Georgia. The Azeri community has not developed a clear sense of citizenship since the break-up of the USSR. That is why ethnic Azeris often complain not only to the Georgian authorities but also to the Azerbaijani government about daily social or communal problems. People frequently tell stories that voters looked for Heydar Aliev (the president of Azerbaijan) in ballot-papers during the Georgian presidential elections.

Azerbaijan's influence on the Azeri community may be considered positive as it contributes to the integration of the community into the Georgian society. The strong Azerbaijan-Georgia alliance and friendly relations between the presidents Eduard Shevardnadze and Heydar Aliev are widely publicised. There are lots of posters that demonstrate their togetherness in Azeri enclaves. No doubt, all this encourages loyalty of the Azeri community to the Georgian state. Azeri residents claim that they are advised by Baku to support the Georgian government, learn the Georgian language, and abstain from raising problems that may irritate Georgian society. For instance, when asked to comment on the people's attitude towards the replacement of Azeri topographical names with Georgian ones in the Bolnisi district in the early 90s, one of the dwellers of the Kvemo Bolnisi (Kapanahchi) village answered simple-mindedly that Baku had not instructed them on the issue yet.

In the long run, however, such a situation is hardly acceptable. The Azeri community may serve as an illustration of the phenomenon of "indirect loyalty" – the social, civil, and political activity of the community depends mostly on the relationship between the country of residence and the country of ethnic origin. Although warm relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia provide favorable grounds for successful integration of the Azeri community in the future, its present "indirect loyalty" only underscores that the integration has been rather weak so far. In particular, the Azerbaijan-Georgian friendship is not the only factor accountable for the Azeri community's unanimous support of the incumbent Georgian government. The community hardly participates in civil and political processes, and seems wary of being involved in "internal" Georgian political games. It prefers to underline its loyalty to the country by supporting the powers that be.

It must be mentioned that the impact of the external factors should not be limited only to official guidelines of the Azerbaijani government. The Azerbaijani press often publishes materials with negative information about Georgia and the Georgians. They claim some Georgian territories; label the Kvemo Kartli region as a “historically Turkish area”, and the local Azeri community as “Borchalo Turks”, etc. The above-mentioned incident, when the police severely beat three ethnic Azeris and one Greek in the summer 2001, triggered a surge of anti-Georgian publications in the Azerbaijani press. Given good relations between the two countries, such episodes have rarely attracted the attention of the Georgian society so far, and there is no evidence that they affect the political activity of the Azeri community of Georgia in any way. However, potential risk factors that may be activated by a rise of ethno-nationalistic sentiments either in Azerbaijan or Georgia should not be ignored.

### **Major concerns of the Azeri community of Georgia**

This part of the paper will define main problems that concern the Azeri population. Some of them (poverty, unemployment, social insecurity, etc) are common throughout Georgia. But there are also specific problems of the Azeri community.

A sociologist, Guram Svanidze, carried out a sociological survey in 2001 to examine emigration trends among various ethnic groups of Georgia. Its results permit an outline of the general situation. The survey collected more reliable information because interviews were conducted by ethnic Azeris. With regard to the main reasons for migration, Azeri respondents did not differ from the others. They specified unemployment, deteriorating living standards, and being uncertain about the future as the major factors pushing their emigrating. The inability to satisfy religious needs, cultural and language requirements were ranked by Azeri respondents as the least important factors contributing to the emigration, while bad treatment of the population by the authorities was in the middle of the list, but still had very little weight.

Most importantly, however, ethnic Azeris are less inclined to emigrate than Armenian or Georgian residents. Interestingly, in comparison with Armenian and Georgian counterparts, Azeri respondents gave higher rating to “patriotic feelings” as a discouragement for emigration. Many

of the respondents' answers suggested that they had quite strong affection for Georgia, while emigrants were nostalgic for the country, etc. Even "emigration to the historical homeland" (meaning Azerbaijan) was rated by Azeri respondents among the least important factors. There is no reliable data on the real emigration of ethnic Azeris, but the above-specified results suggest that emigration trends seem stronger among other ethnic groups than in the Azeri community of Georgia.

This gives ground to conclude that, on the whole, the Azeri community of Georgia does not face any dramatic problems and ethnic Azeris themselves do not view their situation as critical in any way.

At the same time, however, the above mentioned survey revealed signs of serious frustrations felt by the Azeri residents of Georgia, which cannot be attributed entirely to social and economic problems. This section will analyse basic problems that concern the Azeri community and are more or less specific to it. The above mentioned survey, with interviews conducted by Guram Svanidze with representatives of the Azeri community, mainly activists of the *Birlik* and *Geyrat* organizations (including several MPs), NGOs, Azeri representatives in the parliamentary human rights committee, and materials of round tables organized by the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development in Tbilisi and Marneuli, have been used to identify these problems. Particularly, the following problems are regarded by the Azeri community as most urgent.

### Personnel policies

As a rule, mostly non-Azeri citizens are assigned to key positions in local government of Azeri-populated areas. Such a practice contributes to the estrangement of the local population from the local government and its isolation from the civic life. It may be partially explained by the fact that few ethnic Azeri residents can speak Georgian. However, in the words of some members of the Azeri community, a part of the Azeri residents of Shida Kartli got a Georgian education but they are also not represented even at the lowest level of the local government there. Few ethnic Azeris are employed in law-enforcement agencies. The problem is not only about government jobs. In a respondent's words, "they will always make you feel your [different] ethnicity". Ethnic Georgians, people say, have an advantage over other ethnic groups in getting employment.

The Azeri are also poorly represented in the central government as well. As mentioned above, there are six ethnic Azeri MPs who take part in a pro-presidential faction but they do not participate actively in legislative activities. The most senior position occupied by an ethnic Azeri in Georgia is the office of deputy minister for Energy.

### Relations with law-enforcement agencies

The above-described incident when police violence triggered mass protest actions indicates that the vindication of the problem is rather urgent. Members of the Azeri community complain that the police demonstrate humiliating attitudes towards ethnic Azeri who view this as ethnic discrimination because most policemen are ethnic Georgians. To transport their agricultural products to the market, peasants have to bribe the traffic police regularly. Since most ethnic Azeris depend on agriculture and sales of agricultural products, such a practice, which is characteristic of the Georgian traffic police in general, is especially painful for the Azeri community.

People also often complain about problems related to passport services and the residence registration procedures in the law-enforcement institutions. Like other Georgian citizens, a lot of ethnic Azeris frequently migrate to other countries for seasonal work. They have to bribe law-enforcement officials regularly to get their passports. The youths who studied abroad for several years encounter problems when applying to restore their residence or citizenship documents – fixing these problems also takes a lot of bribe-giving. It must be mentioned that other citizens of Georgia, regardless of their ethnicity, have similar problems too.

### Problems related to the state border and the customs

Since trade and economic contacts with neighboring Azerbaijan play an important role in the everyday life of the Azeri community, it is greatly interested in free cross-border traffic at the Azerbaijan-Georgia border. Theoretically, the existing visa-free regime must not create any problems, while the government should ensure transparency of the border in places where it separates ethnic enclaves from their ethnic homeland. However, large-scale corruption in customs offices complicates the situation at the border. Cargo-laden trucks have to pay high bribes and spend hours waiting for permission to cross the border. Again, although

this problem is common in Georgia, it is perceived as ethnic discrimination because there are few ethnic Azeris among customs officers.

### Ethnic Azeris in the Georgian army

Ethnic Azeri recruits are in a very hard situation in the army – they are frequently abused and battered. Unfortunately, all Georgian servicemen, regardless of their ethnicity, suffer from widespread violence in the army. But the Georgian army has developed a specific kind of hazing: the servicemen are divided not only into groups of newly enrolled recruits and experienced soldiers, but also on the grounds of regional and ethnic origin. As a result, in some units, ethnic Azeri servicemen are bullied and abused the most. In one of the units, all Azeri servicemen were expelled by their peers.

### The problem of land

The problem of land is crucial for the Azeri community since its economic activity is focussed on land cultivation. Ethnic Azeris complain that the land reform is facing lots of obstacles in the region. Existence of a 21-km-wide frontier zone makes the problem worse as under the Georgian legislation, lands cannot be privatized here. The Azeri residents claim that the zone covers the most arable lands. They suspect that the government created this zone on purpose to prevent Azeri peasants from privatizing land. At present, these lands are owned by unprofitable agricultural farms of the Defence Ministry, which, in the people's words, only nourish corruption. Consequently, large areas of land are used inefficiently, if used at all, while many local peasants have to work as hired hands for landlords who were granted the privilege to utilize part of the military farming lands. Such a situation seriously upsets the Azeri community.

### The problem of the state language

Most of the ethnic Azeris do not speak Georgian, and this factor makes their situation worse. There exist 159 Azerbaijani-language schools in Georgia, and many other Azeris choose to study in Russian language schools. The Georgian language is taught in such schools as one of the subjects, and the quality of teaching Georgian is usually rather low.

While it is very good that pupils (or rather their parents) have an opportunity to choose the language of instruction, yet one of the results is that graduates of such schools barely know any Georgian at all. First of all, this is a general factor that contributes to the estrangement of the Azeri community from the cultural, social, and political life of the country. The Azeri citizens do not speak Georgian, while civil servants do not understand the Azeri language – hence ethnic Azeris have difficulty interacting with governmental bodies. The Azeris are often reproached for not speaking Georgian but they consider it unfair. The community claims that the language problem is very complex and hard to solve, and it will take time for the Georgian language to be adapted in Azeri ethnic enclaves.

Poor knowledge of laws is another factor related to the language problem. People know nothing about new legislative acts issued by the Parliament or executive agencies. Of course, the problem affects the Georgian population too, but language illiteracy places additional obstacles in regard to the knowledge of laws. In the opinion of the Azeri community, such a situation encourages abuse of authority on the part of government officials.

Due to the language problem, the majority of the community is unable to get information about ongoing processes in the country. This factor also explains why the Azeri population is estranged from the society and does not participate actively in the country's civil and political life. Community representatives have requested that the Georgian national TV allocate broadcasting time for programs in the Azeri language.

Ethnic Azeris, at least the elite and urban dwellers, say they would like to learn Georgian. They often criticise the government for not making enough efforts to popularize and teach the Georgian language. Sometimes they view it as the government's deliberate policy to encourage emigration of young Azeris. In the framework of the state language program, teachers of the Georgian language in ethnic enclaves should be paid bonuses, but this measure has not improved the situation so far. Azeri residents say that teachers of the Georgian language should speak Azeri too. They also suggest that Georgian lessons in secondary schools should be extended from three hours to six hours a week. Besides, they say that the Georgian, history, and geography textbooks are too expensive.



## Problems of education

Problems of education are at the centre of public attention throughout Georgia. Teachers complain about low salaries, which are often paid with delays, but this problem is common in the country. The Azeri community has proposed that the Azeri language and culture be taught in the region's Georgian secondary schools, which are attended by Azeri pupils. Azeri schools lack teachers of certain subjects. The publication quality of textbooks published in Georgia is much worse than that of the textbooks supplied by Azerbaijan.

## Gender problems

The situation of women is another problem that concerns the Azeri community, at least its elite. One of the most alarming facts is that young women, even teenage girls (13-15 years of age), are kidnapped for marriage increasingly often. Due to early marriages, girls abandon their schools. That is why the number of boys in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades of secondary schools far exceeds that of girls. On the whole, parents do not encourage their daughters to attend schools. Violence against women in families is widespread.

## Legacies of the recent past

The period of the national movement and of Zviad Gamsakhurdia's nationalistic government, which was marked by ethnic tensions, is still very much alive in the collective memory of the Azeri community. Some painful problems that constitute legacies of that period remain unresolved. As mentioned above, many Azeri families emigrated to Azerbaijan at that time, and some of them were forced to leave. The Azeri émigrés sold their property to local authorities and deposited the money in their accounts in savings banks. Today, neither the money nor the bank accounts are to be found, and few can say what has become of them. The Azeri community is pushing for the restitution of their property. Some respondents proposed to restore the Azeri topographic names abolished in the early 90s.

## The [non-]issue of autonomy

The issue of a special territorial status of Azeri enclaves has not been on the agenda in recent years. During interviews with members of

the Azeri community, respondents reacted even to any questions about plans to establish the “Borchalo Autonomy” in Azeri enclaves (the plans emerged in 1989) with some irritation. Such demands are usually ascribed to unidentified “instigators”.

Some signs suggest, however, that the Azeri community has a certain potential for nationalistic trends. Like everywhere, constructing mythical interpretations of history is the first step towards developing nationalistic programs that include territorial claims. The Azeri-language *Mola Nasredin* magazine recently published such a version of the history of the Borchalo region. This publication and some other press materials got aggressive rebuke and were labeled as offensive to Georgia and the Georgians. Similar versions of the historical past, which potentially may be used to justify political programs, are widespread among the residents.

## Religion

Ethnic Azeris do not consider religious problems among their priorities. There are no grounds to deem that they are being discriminated against, on the grounds of religion. However, the situation has somewhat changed since September 11, 2001. The Georgian government now keeps a closer eye on the activities of Islamic organizations. To the displeasure of the Azeri community, the Georgian government ordered the suspension of construction of 11 mosques for suspicion that some of them might had been financed by foreign fundamentalist organizations. The source of the financing is under review.

## Recommendations

Integration of the ethnic Azeri community into Georgia’s civic, political and economic life should be the major priority of the Georgian policy towards this group. This strategy should not contradict the necessity to maintain guarantees of preservation of the unique character of the Azeri community as it expresses itself in language, cultural heritage, or religion – as much as members of the community wish to preserve it. However, the recent experience suggests that the Azeri community is hardly under any threat of forced or voluntary assimilation, and it is the exclusion – and feeling of being excluded – from different aspects of life

in Georgia, that constitutes a major concern of Georgia's ethnic Azeri citizens.

While the Georgian government may not have a policy of discriminating against its Azeri population, under the circumstances this is not enough: it needs to develop a pro-active policy of their integration, and specific plan of action to pursue this goal.

The following particular areas deserve special efforts on behalf of the Georgian government, international donors and other interested actors:

- ◆ *Language education.* Knowledge of the official language is a necessary, though insufficient condition for civic integration of any minority community, including the Azeri one. Therefore, a set of activities are needed in this direction, including creating methodologies for teaching Georgian as a second language that would take into account the specific demands of the Azeri population; training bi-lingual Georgian-Azeri teachers; expanding the number of classes for Georgian-language training in Russian and Azeri-language schools; attracting Azeri children to Georgian-language schools (of course, on a strictly voluntary basis); creating special scholarships for Azeri young people in Georgia for studying in Georgian universities; and organizing different courses of adult education, and the like.
- ◆ *Flows of information.* Being informed about events in the country is a necessary precondition for participating in them – it therefore constitutes one of the basic political rights. Lack of information also creates conditions for embedding of distorted views about the situation in the country that may express itself in ethnicizing grievances that may be rooted in factors such as inefficiency of social programs of the state, economic underdevelopment, etc. Apart from any efforts to teach Georgian, efforts should be made to inform the population about events in the country in languages that citizens understand at the moment: and in case of the Azeri community, such languages are Azeri and Russian. There is a necessity to encourage production and transmission of TV and radio programming, especially news, in Azeri and Russian languages. Special efforts are required for informing target groups, such as schoolteachers, community leaders, youth leaders and the others, on policy developments in key issues that especially concern the community. In particular, there exists great need for the dissemination of legal information.

- ◆ Personnel policies, especially in the law enforcement. Small numbers of ethnic Azeris in state agencies both on the local and national levels leads to alienation of the Azeri community from the state, making them feel like second-class citizens. This is especially painful with regard to law-enforcement agencies, since it is representative of these state bodies, citizens most often encounter. The state should have special programs for choosing Azeri young people who have a desire and ability to enter public service or law enforcement and create special scholarships and training programs for them.
- ◆ Developing local democracy. Azeri-populated regions have been notable for the low level of civic participation, more blatant violations during elections, etc. While development of local democracy is a hot issue in Georgian politics in general and is widely believed to be one of the crucial requirements of democratic development, in minority areas, such as contact settlements of ethnic Azeri populations, such strengthening of local democracy also constitutes another necessary precondition for overcoming alienation of the Azeri community from the state. It should be noted however, that without a parallel increase of ethnic Azeri participation in centrally-ruled executive branches of power, their greater participation on the local level only may contain certain pitfalls: locally elected bodies consisting mainly of ethnically Azeri populations may find themselves at odds with the central government where minority participation is miniscule.
- ◆ Encouraging human contacts. The closed character of the Azeri community and insufficient contacts with ethnic Georgians, as well as with other regions of Georgia is another reason for Azeri alienation. This is more of an area of NGO activism. So far, minority regions are insufficiently involved in the activities of leading Georgian NGOs, and that is an obvious minus. Since Samtskhe-Javakheti attracts greater attention, Tbilisi-based organizations that are interested in minority issues are more likely to be oriented towards the latter region. The same is true of international donors who largely ignore Kvemo Kartli. All this additionally encourages the trend towards social insulation of the Azeri community. Different forms and formats should be used to involve Azeri representatives, especially the young people, in civic activism in different part of Georgia.

- ◆ Women issues. Issues of women rights are quite topical in the region. There exist stereotypes that Azeri women in Georgia, most of whom live in rural Muslim communities, are quite reconciled to the role of women that is typical for traditional Muslim societies. In reality, however, there are women groups, especially in the urban part of the Azeri population, that hold quite different views, and are quite outspoken in criticizing practices that they consider unacceptable for women. Some Georgian government representatives say they are reluctant about raising women's issues in Azeri communities (such as female circumcision) as they are afraid of being accused of attacking Muslim traditions. This is also predominantly an area of NGO activism. Apart from protecting women's rights, as being a commendable end in itself, more intense contacts between women groups in the Azeri community and a quite developed network of women organizations in Georgia would be another gateway for closer inclusion of the Azeri public into the Georgian civic life.
- ◆ Cultural programs. There exists a Centre of Azerbaijani Culture in Tbilisi that is supported by the Georgian government. There is a plan to open an Azerbaijani theatre. However, the existing centre has mostly a presentational function. It symbolizes recognition of Azerbaijani culture in Georgia by the Georgian government and public, and such a general gesture is appreciated. However, site has not developed into a vibrant community of cultural life of Azeri community in Georgia. Given the scarcity of resources of the Georgian state, it is difficult to expect considerably greater funding from the Georgian state for this center. Still, greater gestures of support and attention by the Georgian government should be given to this or other such centers. Azeri community organizations, in cooperation with Georgian groups, should look for ways to revitalize work of Azeri cultural organizations.
- ◆ Informing the Georgian public about the Azeri community. The Georgian public should learn more about cultures of minority ethnic groups who reside in Georgia, and their place in the history of Georgia. School textbooks of Georgian history should be respectively revised. Other means should be used, such as books, TV programming, and the like. It is important to develop such work in the Georgian army, which is supposed to be an important nation-building institution in Georgia – but has failed to fulfill such a role so far.

# **THE ARMENIAN COMMUNITY OF JAVAKHETI: COLLECTIVE MEMORIES AND CURRENT CONCERNS**

## **General Remarks**

Southern Georgia, – particularly one of its historical-geographic areas, Javakheti, – has recently attracted the attention of the international governmental and non-governmental organizations specializing in security, development and conflict resolution. It can be explained by the difficult political and social-economic situation in the country in general, and by specific problems of this region, in particular. For some reason, the situation in Javakheti, i.e. in two administrative districts of Georgia – Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki – is deemed to be fraught with the potential for conflicts. Such an assumption is vindicated by Armenian, Georgian, and Russian press articles, the conclusion of various seminars or round-table discussions sponsored by foreign foundations and organizations, and academic publications. The potential for conflict in Javakheti stems from the dominance of the Armenian population in this part of Georgia, and the absence of broad social-political consensus in the country on political issues connected with ethnic diversity of Georgia and its internal political and administrative systems. Some classic factors also contribute to fears related to the conflict potential in the region: widespread poverty and social insecurity, high level of corruption and organized crime, large-scale illegal storage and possession of firearms, and the weakness of national security mechanisms.

From time to time, problems of Javakheti spark concern in Tbilisi, as well as in neighboring Armenia. Ankara, Baku, and Moscow keep a close eye on the developments in Javakheti since any conflict here can affect the whole region, at least, because a Russian military base is deployed in the area. A conflict in Javakheti would bring into question prospects of communication or energy projects in the South Caucasus, damaging the interests of Europe, Turkey and the USA, and undermining the regional security. On the other hand, not only domestic and local

actors can activate risk factors in Javakheti. Some external political forces may also play a role in the development of negative scenarios in the region. Contacts between groups frustrated by the current situation in Javakheti and Armenian or Russian military-political circles, as well as some statements or actions of these circles' representatives, indicate that the danger is real.

All the above does not suggest that there exist any serious prospects for conflict in Javakheti at the moment. This part of Georgia has lived peacefully in past years and talks about likely conflicts annoy its politicians and ordinary citizens alike. However, risk factors should not be ignored and it is the government's, as well as the whole society's responsibility to look for ways to ensure stability and consolidation in the region.

## **Facts and trends**

### **Geographic location and history**

Javakheti is a historical-geographical province of southern Georgia, which borders Armenia and Turkey. In the current Georgian administrative structure, Javakheti is made up of two administrative districts – Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki (1,353.8 sq. km. and 1,234.8 sq. km. respectively). Both districts are part of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. Its other four districts (Aspindza, Akhaltsikhe, Adigeni, and Borjomi) are dominated by the Georgian population, although there is also quite a large Armenian community. The region stretches across 6,067.9 square kilometers and its population totals 231,649 inhabitants, according to the 1989 census.

Geographically, Javakheti is a mountainous region – a highland volcanic valley – with notably harsh climatic conditions. For instance, the Ninotsminda district is situated at an altitude of 2,000m and temperature here may drop to -38 degrees Celsius in winter.

Due to its geography and weather, as well as the poor communication system, Javakheti is somewhat isolated from the rest of Georgia. It takes 6-7 hours to drive from Tbilisi to Ninotsminda through Tsalka (170km). The road to Akhaltsikhe is relatively longer, but it takes around the same amount of time and is used more often. The train (diesel-

powered till Tsalka and electricity-powered from Tsalka to Tbilisi) is even slower and runs once in two days.

Javakheti has frequently changed its sovereignty in the course of history. Today's Javakheti is a part of the territory, which was populated by proto-Georgian Meskhi tribes in ancient times and later became known as Meskheti. Afterwards, Meskheti was incorporated into the Iberia (Kartli) Kingdom, which emerged in the 3rd century BC. In a little while, however, a part of this territory was taken over by an Armenian kingdom. Until the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries A.C. Meskheti was a scene of activities and the rivalry of Armenian and Georgian aristocratic families. Byzantium, Iran, and the Muslim world were involved in different stages of this struggle for power and influence. For quite a long period after 9<sup>th</sup> century A.C., Meskheti (together with Javakheti) existed within the Georgian multi-ethnic feudal state (though with the official language and culture) under the Bagrationi dynasty.

Eventual disintegration of the Georgian kingdom into autonomous feudal domains coincided with the emergence of the Ottoman Empire, which conquered southern Georgia in the 16th century and ruled it until the emergence of Russia in the South Caucasus. This period was marked by large-scale islamisation of the local residents. In 1829, Javakheti became a part of the Russian empire, namely of the Akhalkalaki uezd of Tbilisi province. World War I, the Russian revolution, and the short-lived first independent Georgian republic brought a lot of new hopes and ensuing experiences for the Javakheti population. This period ended in the Soviet regime, and thereafter, Javakheti was included in the Soviet Georgian republic. But Akhalkalaki and Bogdanovka (currently Ninotsminda) districts, along with other districts of southern Georgia, were declared a border zone. As a result, the region's ability to communicate with the rest of the country was restricted. One could enter Javakheti only with permission of Soviet border guards, which deployed their posts at a distance of 78 kilometers from the Turkish border.

After the break-up of the USSR, the restrictions were lifted from the border zone. However, the geography and especially the history of Javakheti have made a significant impact on the region's present situation, demography, the local population's historical memory and myths. To understand today's risk factors, one must take these aspects into account.



## Ethnic-demographic pattern

According to the 1989 census, 37,608 inhabitants lived in the Ninotsminda district and 68,800 in the Akhalkalaki district. No data is available on subsequent demographic developments in the region. However, some experts argue that the population has been reduced in recent years. For instance, according to some estimates, some 35,000 people live currently in Ninotsminda. Social and economic problems, which will be described below, urge local residents to emigrate.

In accordance with the same 1989 census, 91.3% of the inhabitants of Akhalkalaki were ethnic Armenians, 4.4% ethnic Georgians, 2.5% ethnic Russians, and 1.8% other ethnic groups. In Ninotsminda, ethnic Armenians constituted 89.6% of the total population, ethnic Georgians 1.2%; ethnic Russians 8.4%, and other ethnic groups 0.8%. When compared with the preceding 1979 census on the one hand, and some independent demographic information of the following years, on the other hand, this data suggests that the share of the Armenian community continues to grow in the region. For instance, according to the statistical service of the Ninotsminda district, ethnic Armenians made up 95.9% of the local population in 2000.

The region's ethnic pattern does not fully match its religious composition. Ethnic Georgians are predominantly Orthodox Christians, but there are also small Roman Catholic and Muslim groups in the Georgian community of Javakheti. The overwhelming majority of ethnic Armenians are Apostolic Christians, but there are also a number of Roman Catholics among them. Most of the Russians identify themselves by religion rather than ethnicity. This is relevant to the religious sect of Russian Dukhobors living in several villages of the Ninotsminda district, Gorelovka being the main village of these.

The above-described demographic structure resulted from centuries-long migration processes. Most of the migration was not voluntary. It was often determined by ethnicity or religion, and frequently had political rather than economic imperatives. It would be quite enough to examine the demographic developments over the last 150-200 years, since just this period has made the strongest impact on the present situation. Lots of Muslims emigrated from Javakheti in the 30s of the past century. They were replaced with thousands of ethnic Armenians who were encouraged by Russia to migrate from Anatolia. Russian rulers considered

them the most loyal ethnic group of the Russian Empire. Several thousand Dukhobors moved to the region from Russia at about the same time. Besides, a Muslim community continued to reside in Javakheti. It included a considerable number of ethnic Georgians who had converted to Islam in the past. According to some sources, Muslim Georgians (or, according to other point of view, Meskhetian Turks – s. the next chapter) totaled some 7,000 in Javakheti in 1918.

Neither the Russian Empire nor its successor Soviet regime had much confidence in the Muslims. Finally they were deported from Georgia in 1944 to the Central Asia. The process affected Samtskhe most of all, as the region was home to the largest community of Muslim Meskhetians (87.6% of the Samtskhe population, according to the 1926 census) but Javakheti was involved as well.

The deported Muslims of Samtskhe were replaced with around 30 thousand ethnic Georgians from Racha and Zemo Imereti regions. But authorities abstained from making similar replacement in Javakheti, and the local Armenian community gradually grew into the dominant ethnic group. Some time later, several hundred Muslim Meskhetians managed to get back to Georgia but none of them settled in Javakheti.

In 1989-90 the government of the Soviet republic of Georgia settled several hundred Muslim Georgians in Javakheti – they were moved from the mountainous regions of Ajaria, which were hit by natural disasters. The Georgian national movement was rapidly expanding in the same period and produced a public initiative for ethnic Georgian colonization of Javakheti. Merab Kostava Foundation (named after one of the leaders of the Georgian national liberation movement who had died in a road accident) set out to purchase houses in Ninotsminda and encouraged ethnic Georgians to settle there. Houses were sold mainly by Dukhobors who began to emigrate to Russia on a large scale. More than 3,000 Dukhobors used to live in Javakheti until 1989. Today their numbers do not exceed several hundreds and most of them live in Gorelovka village.

The Georgian colonization did not yield any serious results. Moreover, many of several dozen colonists encouraged by Merab Kostava Foundation returned to Ajaria. Most of the Dukhobors' former houses were taken over by ethnic Armenians, who were financially supported by the Armenian Church.

Reflecting ethno-political projects of authorities, social or political leaders from various epochs or countries, such processes naturally gave

birth to collective memories and perceptions. Fear and distrust founded on ethnicity have a large share in these perceptions, which still make a tangible effect on the current risk factors of Javakheti.

### The political and administrative structure and relations between the centre and the region

In 1993, even before a new constitution was adopted, the Georgian government began to divide the country into provinces and assign state commissioners to each of them. The office of state commissioner (rtsmunebuli) was established in Samtskhe-Javakheti, namely in Akhaltsikhe, in 1994. Boundaries of the regions were drawn on the basis of historical-ethnographic and economic factors. The political factor also played a role:

- a) in the wake of ethnic conflicts and the civil war, the head of state viewed the institution of state commissioners as a tool to strengthen the central government and his personal control in the country's regions
- b) boundaries of the regions did not match those of ethnic enclaves, while some low-level administrative units or districts were populated almost entirely by ethnic minorities.

By merging ethnic enclaves into larger multi-ethnic administrative bodies, the country's leadership hoped to prevent trends towards ethnic autonomies at the district level.

There is no legislation base for the institution of state commissioners appointed by presidential decrees. The 1995 constitution falls short of defining the administrative structure of the country. It states only that the issue should be addressed by a special law to be adopted after territorial integrity of Georgia is restored (i.e. after problems of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are solved). State commissioners have been mentioned in several laws since 1997 but none of them draws a clear distinction between functions of the state commissioner (governor) and his office on the one hand, and the district administration on the other. At the same time, there are no elective bodies at the regional level.

Personal factors play a significant role in the real power of the state commissioners. Gigla Baramidze was the state commissioner of Samtskhe-Javakheti in 1994-2002. In the early years of his term, he was simulta-

neously Georgia's ambassador to Armenia. Baramidze was quite an important actor not only in the region's administration and management, but also in the local political life, thanks to his personal characteristics and close relations with some influential forces in Tbilisi connected with the president. Several MPs for Samtskhe-Javakheti also seemed to be under Baramidze's influence.

Baramidze was dismissed from office in February 2002 and replaced with Temur Mosiashvili, a former foreign ministry official. It remains to be seen how the change will affect political forces of Javakheti.

Apart from central ministries, which have their branch offices in every region, the regional administration service of the State Chancellery (headed by Badri Khatidze until April 2002) and Alexander Gerasimov, the president's advisor for inter-ethnic relations, also take part in the governance and policy development in the regions. Besides, the parliamentary committee for civil integration (chaired by Gela Kvaratskhelia) and the committee for local self-government and regional policy (chaired by Roman Kusiani) deal with problems of the region. Just these committees are involved in the development of the legislation base for relations between the centre and the regions.

Given post-Soviet political culture, real governance largely depends on building diverse networks between the centre and the region on the basis of private interests. After consolidation of the president Shevardnadze's authority in 1995, networks around these branches of power have produced political and economic elites, which at least visually seemed acting under the president's auspices. But there were diverse interests within these elites based on departmental or local corporate and patron-client relations. The Georgian social discourse referred to this fact as "clan mentality". Problems of introduction of a position of the prime minister, of the local government set-up, and anti-corruption measures became the focus of public debate in 2001 with the ensuing disclosure of rifts within Shevardnadze's team. Today, as the president no longer chairs the "ruling party", Citizens' Union of Georgia, policies and views of the State Chancellery on the one hand, and the parliamentary committees on the other may quite possibly begin to differ. Consequently, the centre's role in the political and administrative life of Javakheti can be even more diversified.

Another factor, Ajaria, must be also considered when defining the political-administrative structure of Javakheti. The Union for Revival of Georgia (URG), the ruling party of the Ajarian autonomy and the lead-

ing opposition force of the national political spectrum, tried to strengthen its positions in Javakheti during the 1998 local elections. At that time the Ajarian leader proposed that Ajaria and Samtskhe-Javakheti be merged into a single administrative unit. The idea rather interested local nationalistic groups, though precedents for such a unity can be found only in feudal times (Samtskhe-Saatabago kingdom in the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup>, and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries). However, no practical steps were made in this direction. The URG failed to gain any considerable leverage in Javakheti.

### Local political actors

Heads of the district administrations (*gamgebeli*) in Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki have been appointed by the president – Rafail Arzumanian and newly assigned Artush Ambartsumian respectively. Elective *sakrebulo* have functioned in the districts since 1998. Similar bodies are at the lowest level of self-government (village, community, and small rural town). Although self-government agencies do not have any real influence due to meager local budgets and an undeveloped legislation base, the office of *sakrebulo* chairman is regarded as quite an attractive position.

The system of village *sakrebulo* in Javakheti is largely shaped by an ethnic pattern. Each of a dozen of Georgian villages of the Akhalkalaki district has its own *sakrebulo*, while more than 60 Armenian villages are grouped under 21 *sakrebulo*.

The so-called “clans” play a prominent role in the local life. Unlike other parts of Georgia and especially the capital, Javakheti clans are based almost entirely on kinship. Their strength derives from their possession of administrative positions and economic leverage. The Raisian clan is traditionally prominent in Akhalkalaki. It has allegedly monopolized the natural gas business in the district. Members of the clan hold offices in local law-enforcement structures. Melik Raisian has been twice elected as a member of the Georgian parliament for Akhalkalaki. Enzel Mkoyan, MP for Ninotsminda, leads another influential clan of Javakheti. He controls the local petrol business. The Arzumanian family also has substantial leverage in Ninotsminda. Unlike Akhalkalaki where replacements of *gamgebeli* are frequent, Arzumanian has been *gamgebeli* of Ninotsminda for several last years. According to some sources, a lot of his relatives and friends hold offices in various state services at the Armenian-Georgian border. The regional policy of the central government

has been traditionally engaged in balancing and satisfying clans' interests. Some people alleged that the Raisian clan is seeking support of the parliamentary faction of the Citizens' Union of Georgia, while the "governor" of Samtskhe-Javakheti countered it with favoring Mkoyan and the Akhalkalaki gamebeli Ambartsumian.

Among all registered political parties of the country, the Citizens' Union of Georgia has maintained the strongest influence in the region, as it is represented by the local self-governments of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda. Some members of the sakrebulo run elections as representatives of other parties. In reality, however, during the last local and parliamentary elections candidates from Javakheti knew little about programs of central political parties and did not bother to find out whether these unknown programs comply with much more familiar interests and problems of local leaders or clans. Affiliation to national parties was often only a tool to enter politics legally. The Georgian legislation bans political parties and organizations created on ethnic or territorial principles. That is why most of the Javakheti politicians, who are isolated and estranged from common problems and values of the country, competed in local elections under the umbrella of Tbilisi-based national parties. "In reality we are all of Javahk", one of the candidates to a local sakrebulo told us in an interview. He used membership of one of the Tbilisi parties only as a cover.

The above-mentioned Javahk emerged in 1988-89 as a coordination committee of local public organizations. In the beginning, its officially announced objective was protection of Armenian culture in Javakheti. This goal was stated in official registration papers of the organization endorsed by the local council of Akhalkalaki. In the course of time, however, Javahk gradually adopted functions of a local "popular front" or a coordinator of nationalistic forces. Actually, it countered Georgian nationalism with an Armenian analogue. In 1992-94, when there was no functional central power in Georgia, paramilitary Armenian nationalist groups controlled the situation in Akhalkalaki. In the mid-90s, the Javahk and its activists opposed creation of the Samtskhe-Javakheti administrative province and demanded autonomy for Javakheti.

Some time later trends towards ethnic autonomy of Javakheti abated due to the more cautious policy of Tbilisi and the coordination with the Armenian government. As a result, Javahk, which has never been recognized by Tbilisi as a legitimate entity, gradually lost its importance on

the local political scene. However, one of its members claimed in 1998 that Javahk could be reborn like a phoenix in due course. At present some Javahk activists hold administrative offices or run private businesses, while others founded a new regional party Virk. To comply with the requirements of the above-mentioned legislation, the Virk announced a decision in 2001 to transform into a nation-wide Georgian party Zari. So far the plan has not been approved by Tbilisi, which views it as a political initiative of the Armenian community of Javakheti – hence it does not comply with the same law on political parties. However, Javahk has been registered as a non-governmental organization.

The number of noisy rallies or mass actions by informal political groups has reduced nowadays. Local clans and administrations connected with them, which now lead local processes, do not identify themselves with such groups. Leaders of Virk/Zari are relatively marginalized. It cannot be ruled out, however, that under certain conditions they or other, less known people will play a more serious role. Just such a group raised arms in 1998 and blocked a unit of the Georgian defence ministry, which was heading towards an army range in the Akhalkalaki district.

A non-governmental sector emerged in Javakheti late in the 90s. Like other Georgian regions, local NGOs focused on promotion of democracy and values of the civil society, and relied on sponsorship of foreign foundations and missions. It is hard to access the present influence of the sector. In the course of time, however, it may gradually contribute to the development and consolidation of what the region has lacked so far – civil and democratic policies. This is a long-term objective of the international or western missions that support regional NGOs. But there are also some signs that some NGOs may be seeking support of influential clans or leaders.

### Foreign actors

The Russian military base is Russia's main tool to exert its influence in Javakheti. In accordance with the November 1999 joint Russian-Georgian statement made during the OSCE summit in Istanbul, Georgia and Russia should have agreed on the terms and conditions of the deployment of the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki by the end of 2000. However, the legitimacy of the base (as well as Gudauta and Batumi bases) has been rather weak even before: the October 1995 agreement

on Russian military bases in Georgia was never ratified. The Georgian foreign minister and the Russian vice-premier held talks on the issue throughout 2001 but to no effect. Russia keeps insisting on a 14-year deployment, while Georgia says that three years are quite enough. Meanwhile, Javakheti-based Russian military affect local processes implicitly or explicitly: most of the local ethnic Armenians are against withdrawal of the base for security or economic reasons. According to some sources, the command of the base is actively involved in inter-clan relations in Javakheti.

Armenian political circles are interested in the situation of the Armenian community of Javakheti and their attitudes have impact on the developments in southern Georgia. Armenia is one of the major cultural and economic partners for the Javakheti population. Among Armenian political parties, the Dashnaktsutyun Party has been traditionally most active in Javakheti. Its program probably has certain irredentist approaches towards the region. The party has allegedly maintained links with the Javahk and its successor organizations for years.

On the whole, political activity of the Javakheti population, particularly of the Armenian community, has been traditionally centered in the Akhalkalaki district rather than in Ninotsminda. First of all, Akhalkalaki is the only town of Javakheti in the social-cultural meaning of this word. At the same time, power is more consolidated and authoritarian in Ninotsminda, while there are apparently several centers in Akhalkalaki vying for power.

## Economy and the social-cultural sphere

Javakheti is a traditional agricultural area and farming is the basic source of income there. Local peasants have been focused on potato and livestock farming for decades. Agricultural products were processed at local enterprises. Ninotsminda alone used to produce 26,000 tons of milk and 18,000 tons of potatoes 12 years ago. Mining industry was also well developed in Javakheti, processing basalt, perlit, and pumice-stone.

Most of the enterprises have ceased to operate by now and the agricultural output dropped dramatically. Land privatization was carried out in Javakheti later than in some other parts of Georgia. The region lacks equipment and fuel to cultivate lands. At the same time, former Soviet collective farms and Soviet successor cooperative agricultural



enterprises continue to outweigh private farms. According to the district administration, although only 25% of the Ninotsminda lands belong to such enterprises, they pay a huge bulk of local agricultural taxes. The fact indicates their potential. In reality, incomes and the fate of these enterprises depend entirely on their leadership and patrons.

With agriculture being in decline, a lot of local residents look for incomes in small trade, smuggling, or seasonal work in Russia. Oil products, foods, stone and timber are the main items to trade and smuggle. The Ergneti market (South Ossetia) is a significant source of smuggling.

In terms of salary and employment opportunities, the Russian military base is a prominent object in the Akhalkalaki district. To begin with, Akhalkalaki dwellers often use facilities of the base to export/import goods to/from Russia (for instance, under umbrella of military columns). Besides, about 70% of the 2-3 thousand servicemen of the base are local residents, according to some estimates. The base pays for daily services, though only partly and with delays. On the whole, incomes that Akhalkalaki residents get in the base are almost equal to the local budget.

Some people claim that the living standards of Javakheti are almost the same as in most of the other parts of Georgia, and are even higher than in Guria and Imereti regions. At the same time, severe climate conditions and isolation add more problems to the local social and economic sectors. Unemployment is rather high (30-40% by some estimates).

Several positive economic developments have taken place in the region in recent years. The Armenian and Georgian governments signed an agreement to build an electric transmission line between the two countries. The line was completed in 2000. The power supply from Armenia to the Ninotsminda district has improved. The number of local consumers who pay their electricity bills increased from 20% to 50-60%. The Ninotsminda-Akhalkalaki road has been repaired and a Kartsakhi checkpoint at the Georgian-Turkish border is under construction. However, the general economic situation of the region, as well as that of the whole country, remains poor.

Little progress has been achieved in the cultural and social sectors. Medical facilities (hospitals) operate in the districts. The Social Investment Fund financed by the World Bank helped to repair four local schools. Pensions and wages are paid relatively regularly in Ninotsminda. A Tbilisi-based commercial university "Gaenati", Yerevan and Moscow

universities have their branch offices in Javakheti. An International Organization of Christian Churches offers low-interest loans for the development of the region's agriculture. Now and again local businessmen carry out various charitable programs. Several attempts have been made in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda to establish private TV companies there.

## **Risk factors and public attitudes**

On the basis of the above-described situation, one can identify the following major risk factors that generate the conflict potential of Javakheti. They may be activated if the general political or economic situation deteriorates. Inter-ethnic and ethnic-confessional relations, as well as administrative management and economic relations, provide favorable grounds for this.

- ◆ *Ethnic self-identification and respective political awareness.* Speaking about the conflict potential of Javakheti, people usually mean a possibility of ethnic confrontation between the local Armenian community and the Georgian majority. The dominance of ethnic nationalism over civic identity creates necessary preconditions for such a conflict. According to some sociological surveys, a majority of the country's population, particularly ethnic Armenians and Georgians, identify themselves by ethnicity rather than by citizenship or anything else. Similar attitudes exist in the political elite. For instance, the Georgian president suggested that Soviet-style ethnicity identification should be restored in birth certificates (it is currently abolished). Ethnic sentiments may provoke conflicts if they are politicized, i.e. when ethno-nationalistic political programs are created. Such programs are usually connected with politicized interpretations of history. Discords between ethno-political interpretations of history have triggered a lot of conflicts in the Caucasus (like many other regions in the world). Javakheti is a subject of opposite interpretations of history too. Most of the Georgians consider Javakheti as a historical Georgian land and even as one of the cradles of the Georgian ethno-genesis, while the Armenians, including the Armenian community of Javakheti, perceive it as a historical motherland of the Armenian nation.

- ◆ Ethnic self-identification is traditionally intertwined with *religion*. The case of the Bughdasheni village (Akhalkalaki district) is the latest illustration of this: remnants of an ancient church (Georgians claim it to be a Georgian one) have been reconstructed there into a new Armenian church. A quarrel broke out between visiting Georgian worshippers and Armenian residents of Ninotsminda in June 2000. Construction of a new Georgian church in Akhalkalaki also triggered a lot of commotion.
- ◆ *Prospects of the repatriation of Muslim Meskhetians*. The Armenian minority and the Georgian majority of Samtskhe-Javakheti are both flatly against repatriation of Muslim Meskhetians. So a large-scale repatriation can easily activate this risk factor.
- ◆ *The state language problems*. A great deal of the Javakheti population does not speak Georgian. This factor contributes to the isolation and estrangement of the region from the rest of the country. A majority of the civil servants of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda also does not speak Georgian. Under the current legislation Georgian is the only language to use in administration offices and civil services. However, the president has decreed to except Javakheti from this rule. But official documentation and correspondence delivered to the region from Tbilisi is entirely in Georgian, while the region lacks resources for adequate translation. As a result, citizens' rights are not protected efficiently, while administrations are poorly informed. The language barrier seriously hampers legal service for citizens.
- ◆ *Infrastructure*. Deteriorating roads contribute to the region's isolation.
- ◆ *Illegal storage and possession of firearms by the population*. This is hitherto latent but potentially a very dangerous factor. It manifested itself in early 90s and in 1998.
- ◆ *Information vacuum*. Broadcasts of the Georgian national TV are frequently interrupted, while some parts of the region cannot receive them at all. The Armenian and Russian TV fill the vacuum, promoting views and attitudes that are essentially different from those of the Georgian government. Local TV companies have failed to arrange news programs so far, partly due to the current legislation, which requires that most of the local TV programs be in Georgian

- this is a problem in Javakheti. Local newspapers are published once or twice a month.
- ◆ Undeveloped governance and the deficit of democracy. Neither the legislation nor the experience of governance is favorable for good governance; i.e. they do not help form a democratic, transparent and efficient government. Boundaries of the state commissioners' authority remain vague. The district-level self-government does not match democratic standards. All these factors only deepen estrangement between the government and the people.
- ◆ Corruption and nepotism. Like any other part of Georgia, Javakheti is seriously plagued with corruption. It disturbs ordinary citizens every day, whether they settle matters with the traffic police or apply to the passport services. Privatization of state property and appointments to important positions are also affected by corruption. People's poor knowledge of the legislation and the Georgian language makes the problem worse.
- ◆ Unemployment. It contributes to social tension, and growing corruption and crime. Lots of citizens depend on contraband trade and powerful smugglers.
- ◆ Social problems. They are reflected in traditional arrears of pension and salary, a general decline of education and public health care, and widespread popular discontent. There is a serious trend towards turning people's frustration into an ethnic confrontation (see below).
- ◆ The Russian military base. Deployment of the base impedes integration of Javakheti into Georgia for the following reasons:
  - Armenian nationalistic groups view the base as an ally for their plans to achieve autonomy (or, presumably, even secession)
  - Tbilisi is completely unable to control either purely military or economic aspects of the operations of the base.
  - There is some evidence that illegal weapons have been frequently smuggled out of the base and scattered across the region. The Russian rouble has outstripped the Georgian national currency in local markets just because employees of the base are paid in rubles.
- ◆ The role of Armenia. Despite generally good relations between Armenia and Georgia, the two countries disagree on a number of key

issues. This disagreement is reflected in attitudes of the Javakheti population. Not long ago the Armenian foreign minister expressed concern over the growing Georgian-Turkish military cooperation. Earlier, Armenian officials had claimed that the Georgian-Turkish initiative to build the Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi railroad was not the best option for the regional transport development. The Armenian community of the USA is apparently opposing the idea of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, a small section of which is supposed to pass through Javakheti. At a PACE (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe) session in September 2001, an Armenian representative raised the issue of ethnic discrimination in Georgia.

### *Popular attitudes\**

Apart from objective problems, people's subjective attitudes are also very important. Opinion polls suggest that the local population is worried more about social and economic problems, which equally concern the rest of the country's citizens, rather than about ethno-political ones, which may lead to confrontation with the whole Georgian society. There are some problems, however, which are viewed by local residents in the light of ethnic discrimination.

Economic hardships, misbehavior of the regional bureaucracy, flaws of the education system and other problems are often regarded as deliberate discrimination of the Armenian community by the Georgian government. Residents of Javakheti are especially frustrated by the fact that ethnic Georgians prevail in the Samtskhe-Javakheti regional administration; teachers of the Georgian language are paid bonuses in Javakheti in contrast to teachers of other subjects; a Kutaisi-based company rather than a local one has been contracted to repair local roads; electricity from Armenia is supplied to Akhalkalaki through Akhaltsikhe, not directly. It is often alleged that the Georgian government abstains from solving local social and economic problems on purpose to encourage emigration of ethnic Armenians from the region. For a part of the Armenian community the local self-government structure displays another sign of ethnic discrimination: while several Armenian villages have to share one common sakrebulo, each Georgian village has its own..

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\* See more on this in *The Social, Economic, And Political Situation In Javakheti: People's Concerns* (pp. 66-100 of this publication).

Most of the local ethnic Armenians disapprove of developing a transport corridor between Georgia and Turkey for fear that it may increase Turkish influence in the region. As for the Russian military base, the Armenian community is rigorously opposing any plans to disband it for economic (the base is a source of incomes) and security (the base is considered a guarantee against both the Turkish “threat” and Tbilisi’s “assimilation policy”) reasons.

On the other hand, publications in the Georgian media, and interviews with local residents and dwellers of Tbilisi reveal a lack of trust towards the Armenian community of Javakheti. People feel uneasy that history textbooks used by Armenian secondary schools of Javakheti give tendentious accounts of past events, and that Russia has enough leverage to instigate mass anti-Georgian actions in the region. The above-described ethnic preferences of the Georgian population fuel such concerns and, at the same time, stem from them.

## **Prospects and recommendations**

At present there are only risk factors, not threats, in Javakheti and this is a major ground for optimism about the region. This distinction is based on the assumption that a threat is readiness and an articulated intention of a serious political actor to challenge interests of its adversary. No such plans or actions have been carried out in Javakheti so far. Only marginal or undisclosed groups have favored and supported such intentions to date. When intentions are concealed, one may assume that they are either inexpedient or untimely or their supporters are too weak.

Nevertheless, less optimistic scenarios should not be ignored as they can unfold against the background of the above-mentioned risk factors and concerns. Particularly, there are pessimistic and status quo scenarios.

The pessimistic scenario is based on the presumption that the main variable – the situation in the region and the country in general – may worsen. The following developments may take place: opposing views on regional issues by Georgia on one hand, and Russia and Armenia on the other hand, may trigger a conflict. The Armenian government adopts irredentist approaches, while Russia decides to regain its influence in Georgia by any means. One or both of these actors may attempt to radicalize and activate nationalistic groups of Javakheti. As a result, the Georgian government will face an imminent conflict.

On the other hand, the financial, economic, and power supply crisis will lead to growing internal tensions in Georgia. In particular, two ideological concepts will confront each other – the pro-western democratic idea will be challenged by the ethno-nationalistic movement, which will revive the slogan “Georgia for the Georgians”. Given widespread popular discontent with the government’s “pro-western” policy, the latter wins. In response, ethno-nationalistic groups will intensify their activities, raising chances for an armed conflict.

No matter how serious the confrontation becomes, its mid-term effects will cause casualties and a flow of refugees and IDPs, and deplete the social and economic situation. All international communication or energy projects will be suspended in Georgia. Ultimately, the Georgian sovereignty will be seriously undermined.

Under the status-quo scenario, the regional and domestic policy and tendencies will persist. In this case, the above-specified risk factors remain unchanged in the mid-term perspective. Armenia and Georgia will keep friendly relations, though with a tint of mutual suspicions, while mutual accusations will continue in the Russian-Georgian relations. Stability in the country will be as usual guaranteed by balancing interests of various clans. Such a situation will hardly contribute to the sustainable development of the region and the country. Some particular projects may be implemented in Georgia, but without serious reforms, they are unlikely to benefit the grass roots. The region may become even more isolated from the rest of Georgia since the Russian language will gradually lose its role as a means of communication between the Armenian and Georgian communities in the next generation.. As a result, estrangement between the local population and the Georgian state, a basis for all the above-described risk factors, will grow.

To rule out the negative scenarios and neutralize the risk factors, the Georgian government and the active part of the society should undertake certain steps. External support and the international community’s interest in regional stability are significant positive factors. However, it is up to Georgia to use it properly. Efforts of the Georgian government and the society should be based on three basic principles.

- ◆ consolidation of the territorial integrity of the Georgian state
- ◆ social, economic, and political development of the region
- ◆ protection of human rights, civil and political liberties.

These efforts can be specified in detail as follows.

- ◆ The ruling elite has repeatedly declared its adherence to democracy. Now it must make real steps to materialize the democratic choice. The central government must be reformed in order to pave the way for the rule of law, and “good governance”. The national security and the law-enforcement systems should be transformed in accordance with the principles of “humane security”. Otherwise, corruption will persist, while the government will lack efficiency and legitimacy.
- ◆ The regional and local governments should be democratized along with improving the central governance. It would be useful to introduce elements of self-government at the regional level in kind of regional councils. The ban on regional political parties does not make sense. Its abolition will be a step towards confidence building. At the same time, the development of the region’s public sector must get maximum support.
- ◆ It seems reasonable to grant the Armenian community cultural autonomy, i.e. a formal right for independent policy in the fields of culture and education. A non-territorial Armenian board with respective rights in these fields may be set up in Javakheti. The Georgian ministries for education and culture should ensure that education programs of the Armenian secondary and high schools are not in contradiction with the country’s general education program.
- ◆ Given Georgia’s complicated and largely unique ethno-political situation, one should seriously look into the possibility of introducing an ethnic quota on positions in the regional self-government and central governmental agencies. At the same time, Georgia should abstain from joining the frame convention on ethnic minorities and the European charter of regional and ethnic languages until civil consciousness matures in the country, and its central government becomes more efficient. Today ethnic thinking prevails over the general perception of national citizenship and these documents may hamper proliferation of the Georgian language in Javakheti and integration of the local Armenian community into Georgian society. It does not mean, however, that the Armenian language would be restricted in any way. Quite the contrary, the current practice of using Armenian



in administration and education must be guaranteed by legislation. But the Georgian language must be used more widely in the region.

- ◆ To defend the status of the Georgian language, the government and NGOs should join their efforts and ensure international assistance. The government must allocate much more funding to this end. It would be helpful to establish special colleges in Akhalkalaki, Akhaltsikhe, and Tbilisi for Armenian youth to learn the Georgian language, along with other subjects, through intense teaching programs. As a result, they will have equal career opportunities with their Georgian counterparts.
- ◆ An Armenian studies department should be opened in Tbilisi State University. It will help popularize the Armenian culture and facilitate integration of the Javakheti youth into the Tbilisi society.
- ◆ It would be also useful to create joint Armenian-Georgian working groups to prepare recommendations on the withdrawal terms for the Russian military base and alternative income sources for the local residents, who are currently employed there.
- ◆ It is vitally important to carry out extensive communication development programs and to repair/expand roads in the region.
- ◆ The Armenian community's loyalty to the Georgian state may be strengthened by creating an Armenian unit in the Georgian army. It does not necessarily mean that the unit will be deployed in Javakheti permanently, but Armenian officers must have unrestricted promotion prospects.
- ◆ History textbooks should be revised in order to balance currently opposite Armenian and Georgian views on the history of Javakheti, Armenia, Georgia, and the whole region.
- ◆ The riskiest point of this process is a radical fight against traditional kinship relations and influential clans. They will partly lose their negative potential, provided the rule of law and optimal devolution of power are achieved in the region, and in Georgia, in general.
- ◆ The above-specified internal political and social measures should be accompanied with a constant dialogue between Armenia and Georgia, at a bilateral level, and in the framework of international organizations. Georgia should clearly define its foreign policy priorities and take a principled stance in their implementation.

# MUSLIM POPULATION OF SOUTHERN GEORGIA: CHALLENGES OF REPATRIATION\*

## General historical background

On early morning of November 15, 1944, an endless row of Studebecker cars, especially purchased for this reason, appeared on the roads of Meskheta, the southern province of Georgia (also known as Samtskhe-Javakheti). Local people were summoned to village centers, and all Muslims were given two hours' notice to collect their valuables, take provisions for 3 days and get into their cars. 92,307 persons from five administrative *rayons* (districts) of southern Georgia: Adigeni, Akhaltsikhe, Aspindza, Akhalkalaki and Bogdanovka (now Ninotsminda), as well as from the autonomous republic of Ajaria, were thus deported to Central Asia (deportation from Ajaria took place on the 25-26th of November). 457 people died on the way. The number of deportees slightly increased later as soldiers started to return to Meskheta from the World War II. In place of the Muslims, some 30,000 Christian Georgians were then forcefully resettled from its other districts (Zemo Imereti, Racha).

This was part of Stalin's policy of forcibly resettling so-called „unreliable peoples“, those considered to be potential collaborators with the Nazis and their allies, to Asian sectors of the Soviet Union's territories. Local Muslims were accused of close ties with Turkey, an ally of Nazi Germany, and conspiracy against the Soviet Union. The deportation supposedly constituted a preventive security measure in event of war and was intended to strengthen the USSR border with Turkey.

Many years have passed and the issue of all other peoples who shared the fate of Meskheta population is more or less clear by now: either they have returned to their homes or have found some other solution. The prospects for Muslim Meskheta, however, who are scat-

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\* Apart from other research conducted by the author, results of her study supported by the Open Society Institute, International Fellowship Program were used in this report.

tered across different parts of the former Soviet Union and Turkey, continues to be uncertain.

The July 31, 1944 Decree no. 6279cc of the USSR State Committee of Defense referred to people subject to deportation as Turks, Kurds and Khemshils, but the former group constituted an overwhelming majority. Ethnic origin, however, continues to be a point of contention among both historians and activists. There are strong arguments to believe that most of those referred to as Turks were probably of Georgian origin but had been Islamicised and Turkicised by the Ottoman Empire, from the second half of the 16th century, after it incorporated Meskhети, which had been ruled by Georgian princes. The 1870 census still registered 20,855 Sunni Georgians in Akhaltsikhe district. Local Muslims called themselves *Yerli* – natives, while other Turks tended to call them *Gurcu oglu* (offspring of Georgians) or *Gurcu donme* (turned from Georgian) According to another opinion, Muslim Meskhetians are descendants of Turkic tribes in the first place. In Turkish historical and political discourse, this people are addressed as *Ahiska* (Akhaltsikhe) Turks. Currently, the majority of them consider themselves Turks; many cannot point to any ethnic identity; a small minority feels Georgian.

After eastern Georgia became part of Russia in 1801, the Empire made several attempts to extend its rule to Samtskhe-Javakheti. In 1828, the Russian Army, which included its new Georgian subjects, won the battle at Akhaltsikhe, the main town and the strategic fortress of the province, and subjected this region to the Russian throne. To the surprise of Georgians, however, who considered this to be reunification with a historically Georgian province, the Russians opposed the tendency of the local population to return to Georgian culture. Instead, it expelled part of the local Muslim population to the southern territories controlled by the Ottoman Empire. The ousted population was quickly supplanted by some 35,000 Armenian refugees from Erzurum. This policy of ethnic resettlement was obviously aimed at inhabiting the strategic southern border region with more loyal and reliable subjects. However, the majority of the Samtskhe-Javakheti population continued to be Muslim and considered „unreliable“ due to its links to Turkey.

The brief period of Georgian independence in 1918-21 underscored marginality of Meskhetian Muslim population within the context of emerging Georgian statehood. In several border conflicts between the

new Georgia and the Ottoman Empire in its last period of decline, a large portion of the local Muslims sided with the latter. Stories of atrocities, allegedly perpetrated by the Muslims against Christian Georgians and Armenians, constitute a crucial part of the collective memories of the local residents. These accounts are highly relevant to understanding their current attitudes towards repatriation of the deported people.

Soviet Russia further pursued the policy of its Tsarist predecessor though by adding some new touches. While the Tsarist empire divided its subjects mainly into religious categories, the Soviet introduced identity registration along ethnic lines. It was decided to attach to the majority of Meskhetian Muslims the label of “Azeris”. Thus, religious marginalization of the local Muslims was appended by an ethnic classification, or rather reformulated into ethnic terms. The marker of “Turks” was first assigned to this people in the 1944 decree and was intended to justify the deportation, as it was alleged involvement in anti-Soviet conspiracy with Turkey that constituted the formal ground for resettlement. .

### The life in deportation and current conditions of Meskhetians.

53,163 people from Meskheta were resettled to Uzbekistan, 28,598 – to Kazakhstan, and 10,546 – to Kyrgyzstan. The first years were especially hard for deportees. 7.5% of them died in that period. The deaths outnumbered births by 11.5 times. In the fifties, the situation improved, and the deportees succeeded in arranging their lives in the new land. Many purchased houses and, through hard work in the fields, actually achieved higher levels of affluence than the majority of the local population.

April 28, 1956 marked the beginning of a new era in the life of the deported peoples. The USSR Supreme Soviet decree no.135/142 lifted some restrictions for deportees, although it did not allow them to return to places of original habitation. Another Supreme Soviet decree of October 31, 1957 allowed deportees from Georgia to resettle to Azerbaijan. This decree refers to part of deportees as “Azeris” rather than Turks as had been the case in 1944. On January 9, 1974, all legislative acts restricting the return of Meskhetians to the places from which they had been deported were declared invalid.

This action of invalidation did not imply an opportunity for actual return. Free movement of people within the USSR was restricted for all its citizens through the institution of *propiska* (residence registration). In the case of Meskhetians, a special border status of the whole province from which they had been deported constituted a very serious additional impediment. Nobody could even travel to this region, which after World War II constituted a border area between the Soviet Union and NATO, without procuring a special pass from the authorities. Therefore, large resettlements of people were only possible with direct support of the government. While the Soviet state did organize return of some peoples to their homes who were deported during World War II (such as Chechens or Ingush), in other cases (Meskhetians, Crimean Tartars, and Volga Germans), it resisted such return. Since 1956, representatives of these peoples have organized themselves in movements for return and have petitioned the government on numerous occasions, but the resettlement of a small portion of the deportees to Azerbaijan was the most the Meskhetian community could achieve. While the authorities opposed repatriation, some Georgian dissidents and intellectuals had been sympathetic to their cause and in the 1970s and 80s, actively lobbied for their return. As a result of their efforts, several hundred Meskhetian families did return to Georgia, though none of them were allowed to go back to their home area: they were settled in other parts of Georgia.

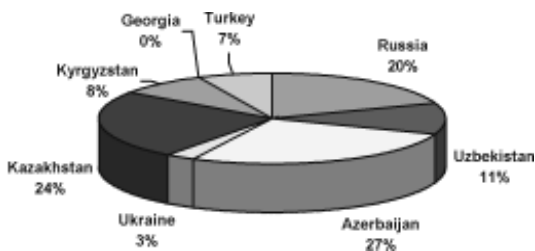
The liberalization of the Soviet regime and its following demise did not ease the condition of Muslim Meskhetians, but actually turned some of them into forced migrants once again. On June 3 of 1989, a violent conflict started in Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan that led to eviction of the Meskhetian community from their homes by the local Uzbeks. Before these events, 109,000 deported Meskhetians had resided in Uzbekistan. During June 3-12, 1989, 112 persons were killed; 1,032 were injured; and 856 houses were burned or destroyed. The riots took place in 15 districts of Fergana. 17,000 Meskhetians were evacuated by the Soviet Army troops. The clash repeated, although on a smaller scale, in February and March of 1990. This time 2,000 persons were evacuated; 4 persons were killed and 46 houses were burnt.

But the Muslims still could not return to Georgia as the situation had dramatically changed in the meantime. After the April 9, 1989 massacre against pro-independence demonstrators by the Soviet troops, nationalist slogans dominated public discourse, and internal ethnic ten-

sions started to increase. The prospect of spontaneous resettlement of thousands of people who called themselves “Turks” was considered a recipe for creation of a new source of ethnic tensions and as another ploy by the Soviet authorities to undermine the Georgian movement to independence. As a result, leaders of the Georgian national independence movement, such as Akaki Bakradze and Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who had previously supported the Meskhetian cause, reversed their position and actively opposed resettlement to Georgia of people who had fled Fergana Valley massacres or any other Meskhetians, and called for at least postponing the issue until after the Georgian independence. Since this time, sharp opposition to the return of Meskhetians has turned into a steady trend of Georgian public opinion, while only a handful of people continue to actively support the repatriation. Moreover, in a situation of anti-Meskhetian paranoia, some of the Meskhetians who had already resettled to Georgia were evicted from their houses.

As the Soviet authorities were reluctant to take the blame for another ethnic conflict, they decided that people fleeing from Uzbekistan should be resettled “to the agricultural regions of *nechernozemie* (non-black soil) of the Russian Federation, the region that suffered from “deficiency of labor”. Those who were not evacuated but who fled individually, arrived in Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine. Many Meskhetians seemed to perceive their relocation as a temporary move before finding a better and more durable solution. As reported by the local authorities in Russia, 60% refused to go to work in kolkhozs and sovkhozs (collective and state farms) referring to the temporary character of their stay. However, the tension between the local communities and new arrivals in Russia soon expressed itself .

Many Meskhetians found shelter in different parts of the USSR where many of them still remain. Part of them managed to go to Turkey. There is no exact data on the number of Meskhetians in different locations. A census has not been carried out in some countries of the former Soviet Union since 1989. The situation is further complicated by the fact that deportees and their descendants are registered under different nationalities, e.g. Turks, Azeris, Uzbeks, Kazakh and even ‘Caucasians’. The total number of Meskhetians, however, can be roughly estimated at about 300,000. Estimation of their distribution in different countries is given in the graph:



## Legal status of Muslim Meskhetians

Today, the legal status of Meskhetian population differs from one country to another and even between the regions of the same country. They find themselves in the worst condition in the southern parts of Russia, namely in Krasnodar Krai, where deported Meskhetians are openly denied civil rights. According to Russian legislation, all Soviet citizens who had resided in the territory of Russia, as of 1992, have the right to claim Russian citizenship. However, in practice Meskhetians are often refused this right. Majority of them are not able to get passports, and older people cannot restore theirs in the event of loss. Some managed to get passports at the site of their previous residence in Uzbekistan. Others accepted the offer to serve in the army in exchange for passports, but found themselves deceived: the local authorities would not satisfy the request of the army to issue them passports. Lack of passports and residence permits complicates their lives in numerous ways: they cannot register their marriages, hence their children carry their mothers' rather than fathers' family names; they can neither register, purchase or sell property such as houses or cars; nor can they obtain driver's licenses; they are not allowed to make contracts of employment for longer than 2 month periods, and they have problems in qualifying for university education. Pensioners cannot get pensions in Krasnodar, so they have to travel to Uzbekistan to collect their moneys. Meskhetians can only get temporary residence permits, which permit employment and studies, but the permits are issued for no more than a six-month period. Procuring such permits is a costly and strenuous procedure.

Both legal and economic conditions are much better for deported Meskhetians in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. In Uzbekistan, they constitute a more urban, entrepreneurial and relatively affluent part of the

population. The Uzbek government wants to maintain Meskhetians for economic reasons. Therefore, contrary to their kin in Russia, those who want to leave the country are those who face difficulties. Bureaucratic and financial barriers are built against renouncing Uzbek citizenship, which is a necessary condition for obtaining citizenship of another country (such as Georgia).

About one third of the total population of deported Meskhetians, or about 100,000 people, reside in Azerbaijan. They mostly live in rural areas. From 55,000 to 70,000 hold Azeri citizenship; among these, up to 40,000 are registered as ethnic “Azeris” and 30,000 as “Turks”. Many still hold Soviet passports. As in Uzbekistan, their problem is renouncing Azerbaijani citizenship as Azerbaijan has the policy of retaining and assimilating its Meskhetian population.

Roughly 10,000 Meskhetians who have settled in southern parts of Ukraine after the Fergana events have acquired Ukrainian citizenship.

Lack of possession of citizenship in their country of residence is not always the result of a state policy. In some cases, it is explained by the lack of need for citizenship in that country and for economic reasons – villagers may not really need passports, as obtaining one entails costs. Some young men do not seek citizenship as they want to avoid army service.

In 1992, the Turkish Parliament adopted a law, which stipulated that 500 families of Muslim Meskhetians would be allowed to resettle in the town of Iğdir. Point 6 of the law stated that Meskhetians whom Turkey decides to admit would get double citizenship, irrespective of the country in which they consequently decide to reside. During 1993-1994, Turkey received only 179 families or 750 persons. In the following years, the country changed its policy towards Meskhetians and ceased to support their immigration. About 12,000 people who immigrated until 1997 have a status of “national refugees” under the Law on Settlement No 2510 which refers to “people of Turkish ethnic descent and Turkish culture”. Those falling into this category are entitled to migrate to Turkey, settle there and eventually receive citizenship. This status gives them access to work, education and healthcare. The permit has to be renewed every two years. Holders of the permit could theoretically acquire Turkish citizenship in 2 years, but, in reality, the process takes much longer. Presently, according to information from the Turkish embassy in Tbilisi, 25,229 Meskhetians live in the country.



643 deported Meskhetians and their family members reside in Georgia. Some 400 among them are adults. 389 or 97.2% have Georgian citizenship and only 11 are stateless.

From the end of 1993, the repatriates were granted the status of refugees, which entailed a monthly allowance of 14 GEL (about 10 USD), and free transportation in town on state owned vehicles and free use of the underground. However, in 1998, following the enactment of a new law on refugees, Meskhetians were denied such a status and respective benefits. In this law, the “refugee” was then defined as a person not having Georgian citizenship, for whom Georgia was not a country of origin.

Georgia’s accession to the Council of Europe (CoE) was supposed to stimulate creation of a new firm legal ground for solving the Meskhetian issue. The final decision of the CoE Council of Ministers to admit Georgia to the CoE on April 29, 1999 was linked to a number of obligations that Georgia took. One of such provisions stipulated that Georgia would “adopt, within 2 years after its accession, a legal framework permitting repatriation and integration, including the right to Georgian nationality, for the Meskhetian people deported by the Soviet regime; would consult the Council of Europe about this legal framework before its adoption; would begin the process of repatriation and integration within three years after its accession and would complete the process of repatriation of the Meskhetian population within twelve years after its accession”.

Two versions of draft laws were prepared in Georgia and presented before parliamentary committees, one prepared by the then head of repatriation service Guram Mamulia and the other by Georgia’s Young Lawyers’ Association (GYLA). In early 2001, following hearings in the Parliamentary Committee of Civic Integration and in the National Security Council, the draft of GYLA “On Repatriation of persons deported from Georgia in 1940s by the Soviet Regime” was taken as a foundation. In March 2001, an official Georgian delegation traveled to Strasbourg to discuss the draft with CoE experts. The office of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, who had funded the GYLA work on the draft, also took active part in the consultations. After certain alterations, the draft was handed to the Ministry of Justice for final revisions and submission to Parliament.

The draft law prepared by GYLA stipulates for a two-phase procedure for acquiring citizenship. A deported person or his/her descendant should present to a representative of Georgian government in the country of his/

her residence documents proving the fact of deportation and get approval for obtaining the status of repatriation. Then he/she can arrive in Georgia and seek citizenship after a year. During this period, repatriates are supposed to decide whether they have adapted to the local conditions and are ready to apply for Georgian citizenship. Authors of the draft consider that the Georgian government should sign agreements with governments of all the countries where the deported population currently reside. The law does not provide for legal rehabilitation of the deportees on the ground that the crime of deportation was committed by another state – the Soviet Union, and Georgia cannot take responsibility for it.

The latter point was criticized by some groups defending interests of Meskhetians, as they insist on the necessity of rehabilitation and unconditionally granting Georgian citizenship without any waiting periods. Similar objections were raised by some international experts: they demanded that any legislation pertaining to the Muslim Meskhetians should not provide for the latter lesser status than one stipulated by the 1997 Georgian law *Concerning the Social Protection of Repressed Persons and Acknowledgement of Those as the Victims of Political Repression*. The latter law expressly excluded deported Meskhetians on the ground that special legislation would take care of their issues.

Other criticisms of the draft issued by the experts refer to the presence of technicalities that would seriously complicate implementation of the law. Difficulty, if not impossibility of obtaining documented proof of a person's or his ancestors' deportation, required by the draft can easily be envisaged. Another big problem refers to a possibility should the Georgian government deny to the claimant the status of a repatriate, after initial endorsement by Georgian representation in the country of residence, or deny him/her the citizenship a year later. In this case, a repatriate who first sells his property at the place of residence, cuts off his social ties and arrives in Georgia to encounter refusal, finds himself in a legal vacuum and dire economic circumstances. Therefore, the deportee should have firm guarantees for obtaining Georgian citizenship *before* moving there. The draft also allows for a possibility of non-statelessness for some period of time, which may create a set of problems for repatriates.

There are a number of other issues in the existing draft that needs improvement. The main problem, however, is lack of progress with regard to the issue in the last period. According to Georgia's obligations following the accession to the CoE, enactment of the law was expected

by April 2001. However, at the beginning of 2002, the draft was still in the Ministry of Justice and no firm deadline for its enactment was defined. Extreme complexity of the issue, unpopularity of the repatriation among the Georgian public, as well as bitter political infighting in the Georgian parliament that led to fragmentation of the erstwhile parliamentary majority are among the reasons. However, this also means that the fate of Muslim Meskhetians continues to be uncertain, and no clear prospect of its resolution is in sight. .

## **Main actors' positions and attitudes**

### **Muslim Meskhetians and their organizations**

As Muslim Meskhetians are scattered across countries and regions, so their problems and priorities differ. There is no single organization or movement that would represent their interests. On a number of crucial issues their attitudes are quite different and as the time passes, these differences tend to increase rather than disappear.

The major dividing issues are the exact definition of the homeland and, respectively, the target area of repatriation, as well as ethnic identity. With regard to the former, different groups of Meskhetians advocate three different options: the desirable place of residence may be Turkey, any place in Georgia or only Meskheta (Samtskhe-Javakheti). Naturally, there is also the fourth option of staying where they are. As for ethnic identity, as previously stated, the majority of deportees consider themselves Turks; a small number perceive themselves as Georgians and a considerable portion cannot point to any definite ethnic identity. Some researchers note an unstable or situational character of ethnic identity among Meskhetians: while being Muslims and having come from Meskheta constitutes their relatively hard core identity awareness, ethnic designation may change according to circumstances and political expediency. In the documents of deported Meskhetians' organizations dated back to the early sixties, more Meskhetians tended to refer to themselves as Georgians. Later on the "Turkic orientation" prevailed.

Deported Meskhetians began to organize themselves around demands of repatriation after the 1956 decree lifted some restrictions for special settlers. Organized movement for rehabilitation and repatriation made their

first steps in February 1964 when the Temporary Organizational Committee for Liberation (VOKO) was founded. In 1990, VOKO evolved into Vatan (*Fatherland* in Turkish) which was registered in 1991. Vatan aims at the recognition that 1944 deportation was unjust, and at unconditional repatriation to Meskheta. Its program rests on the assumption that Meskhetians have distinct Turkish cultural identity. It wants Georgian legislation to recognize and to protect their cultural heritage, to grant Meskhetians special cultural rights, such as the right to receive at least part of their education in their native tongue. Vatan defines this as a claim to cultural rather than political autonomy. The head office of Vatan is situated in Moscow. It has branches in Krasnodar, the Russian Federation and in Azerbaijan. Vatan is the only association that is recognized by Russian authorities as representing the deported Meskhetians, and it has more supporters than any other Meskhetian organization. However, it still cannot speak for all deportees. Most Meskhetians are not aware of its existence. Being preoccupied with pushing for repatriation, Vatan is not effective in dealing with problems that deported Meskhetians face at their current places of residence,

Another non-government organization Khsna (*Salvation* in Georgian) founded in Kabardino-Balkaria was registered in 1992. It rests on the assumption that deported Meskhetians are turkicized Georgians. Khsna has representatives in Krasnodar Krai of the Russian Federation. It calls for repatriation to the whole territory of Georgia rather than necessarily to Samtskhe-Javakheti. However, its following is rather small.

Several organizations of deported Meskhetians operate in Georgia: Latifshah Baratashvili Foundation – Meskheta; Halil Gozalishvili International Association of Muslim Georgians *Gurjistan*, The International Union of the Young deported Meskhetians – Meskheta. They tend towards Georgian self-identification, try to promote the Meskhetian case in Georgia, and try to help a small Meskhetian community already there.

Umid (*Hope* in Turkish) was created in 1994. It operates only in Krymsk district in Russia. The organization considers the deported population as ethnic Turkish and promotes emigration to Turkey.

Several organizations are based in the Central Asia. In Uzbekistan, Meskhetians are united in Tashkent Meskhetian Turks' Cultural Center. The two organizations operating in Kyrgyzstan are the Association of Turks Residing in Kyrgyzstan and International Federation of Ahiska Turks of CIC countries. Both promote resettlement to Turkey.

Turkey houses thirteen associations of Meskhetians. Most of them are run by Turkish citizens who are descendants of natives of the province, who had arrived in the country before 1944 and hence did not experience deportation. Most operate in Bursa, are well organized and provide considerable assistance to new arrivals. An organization of Meskhetian youth who were granted state scholarships (Turkey annually invites one hundred Meskhetians from different countries of ex-Soviet Union to study at Universities) publishes a quarterly journal *Ahiska* in Istanbul.

The aspirations of rank and file Meskhetians as well as the numbers of those who actually want to change their present place of residence are unknown. While many claim that they want to return, such a claim may imply wanting to have such an option rather than denote actual readiness to leave home and start a new life. Attitudes towards repatriation vary according to a country of residence, life conditions, economic status and age. Those more affluent and living in places where they do not experience discrimination or pressure, naturally express less readiness to come to Georgia. The elderly, who personally experienced deportation, still cherish the idea of return. Many of them speak of their Georgian origin; some can still speak Georgian. Younger people feel at home where they are and the major motive for resettlement would be a possibility of improving economic conditions.

The fear of the repetition of Fergana persists and is a push factor for considering repatriation. However, the Meskhetians also acknowledge associated hazards. To start the life anew in a place unknown for most deportees, in a country that faces severe economic difficulties and has a high rate of economically motivated emigration, whose language they cannot speak, and whose quasi-official religion they do not share, is not necessarily the most attractive prospect.

## The Georgian state

Georgian authorities routinely acknowledge that forcible deportation of Muslim Meskhetians has been an unjustifiable act of cruelty. However, it is usually added that the Georgian state or society cannot be held responsible for the deeds of the Soviet regime. Georgia never had much voice in the decisions taken by the Communist party leadership in Moscow. This was especially true during Stalinist rule, but even in a

relatively relaxed post-Stalin regime Georgia still had to follow instructions from Moscow. Moreover, while the Soviet government made overtly liberal decisions that seemed to lift restrictions for the Meskhetians, these were often accompanied by secret instructions that ran contrary to the ostensibly official policy. For instance, according to minutes of the October 26, 1972 meeting of the Politburo of Central Committee of the Soviet Communist party, it was recommended to strongly encourage the deported population to remain permanently at their present places of residence while the published law had already lifted all legal restrictions for their return.

However, the fact of the matter is that the Soviet Georgian authorities were far from welcoming repatriation either. The first Muslim Meskhetians appeared in Georgia in 1969, but soon were forced by the local authorities to leave. In the period between 1982 and 1989, 1972 Meskhetians moved to Georgia, but most left the country due to insecurity, the unsupportive or even hostile attitude of local authorities, isolation from their kin, and economic hardships.

No steps to encourage repatriation were taken under the leadership of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first democratically elected president of independent Georgia.

Since 1993, the government began to take some steps for assisting the repatriation process. Small groups of Meskhetian students were admitted from the CIS countries. The government provided a hostel for them, an adaptation center and an opportunity to study in Georgia. The Meskhetians studied language and history at the adaptation center and attended preparatory courses for universities. Upon completion, they continued their studies in universities or in vocational schools. The scheme is still operating. Currently Meskhetians study not only in Tbilisi, but also in the Akhaltsikhe branch of Tbilisi State University.

In 1994, the Repatriation Service was established under the Ministry of Refugees and Settlement to provide assistance to repatriates and coordinate efforts for further repatriation. It was headed by Guram Mamulia, an active champion of the repatriation cause. In 1999, the State Commission on the Repatriation and Rehabilitation of the Population Deported from Southern Georgia was established.

Despite this small scale progress, the Georgian government – as discussed above – is still dragging its feet in creating a comprehensive framework for solving the repatriation issue. The main problem is the extreme

unpopularity of repatriation with the Georgian public. While international obligations, a wish to comply – or to appear to be complying – with general liberal values, and pressure from human rights organizations prevent the Georgian government from openly contesting the right of the deported population to return, almost no party or politician who cares for popular supports wants to be perceived as an active champion of repatriation. Conversely, some political capital may be gained from publicly resisting it. This is especially true of politicians from Samtskhe-Javakheti, for whom strong anti-repatriation stance is an absolute must.

It would be unfair to ascribe passive or active opposition of Georgian politicians to the repatriation only to populist considerations. There are a number of very serious reasons why the process of repatriation should be handled with care. Major arguments against repatriation will be considered in the following section.

### Georgian public opinion

The attitude of the Georgian public towards the idea of repatriation can be described as predominantly negative. This attitude is reflected in publications, TV discussions, and various meetings as well as in public opinion surveys. In the province of Samtskhe-Javakheti, it is overwhelmingly negative. There is small difference between attitudes of Georgian and Armenian communities, though Armenians tend to be even more negative than Georgians.

Results of the study carried out in April, 1999 by the National Center for Population Studies pointed out that 46.4% of a surveyed population in Tbilisi thinks that repatriation should not take place; 44% supported return only of those who considered themselves Georgians; and only 6.6% agreed that all deportees had a right to return. According to the summer 2000 survey of the Centre for Geopolitical and Regional Studies, 56.4% of those polled considered a knowledge of Georgian and/or the Georgian self-identity as necessary prerequisites for repatriation. Especially forbidding is the attitude of Samtskhe-Javakheti residents. Muslim representatives visiting the region are often met with hostility and are not even allowed by the local population and authorities.

Attitudes may be widely divided into three categories. Many people are radically opposed to the idea of repatriation and even deny the very right of the deportees to return. More moderate people admit that the

idea of repatriation is justified as a matter of principle, but under the difficult circumstances that Georgia faces, repatriation en masse, especially the return of all the repatriates to the same area from which they have left, is unacceptable. Therefore, repatriation should take place, if at all, only gradually and under the strict control of the government. It is only a handful of people who advocate repatriation without any conditions attached. The existing official draft law (prepared by GYLA) may be considered to mainly reflect the second attitude in its more liberal version, while the one submitted by the Repatriation Service is based on the third approach.

Both the opponents and supporters agree that public opinion is mainly against repatriation. That's why opponents often call for a referendum on the repatriation issue – confident that they would win. The supporters, on the other hand, mainly appeal to human rights values, in general, and Georgia's international obligations, in particular. Therefore, in the last years, the issue has been largely redefined by the opponents as “the Council of Europe vs. national interests of Georgia”. There have been statements that if the CoE insists on repatriation, Georgia should quit membership in this organization. Such a change of attitude is notable, as joining CoE in 1999 had been widely popular and welcomed by all political forces.

The ethnic identity of the deportees plays an important role. It has to be noted, that opponents of the repatriation tend to describe the potential repatriates almost exclusively as “Turks”, while the supporters tend to stress their Georgian origin. Some groups that champion repatriation do so mainly on the ground that deportees are really Georgians, even if Turkicized, although there are others – a relatively small number – who think that the ethnic affiliation of the deported population cannot be the decisive factor as far as injustice was done to them and they should be able to return if they so wish.

Major fears and concerns that rest in the core of the popular opposition to the repatriation, exists in ethnic, political, legal and economic spheres. They are the following:

- ◆ Fear of Turkization of the region and potential secessionist trends. People fear that after the repatriation, the demographic balance changes dramatically and the whole province will become predominantly Turkish and Muslim. Opponents tend to exaggerate numbers of deportees



(sometimes even the figure of one million is mentioned) and stress that Muslims have considerably higher birth rates than Christian Georgians or Armenians. In this scenario, people whom they consider Turks are expected to outnumber everybody else in the province of Samtskhe-Javakheti, demand autonomous status and eventually claim union with Turkey. Statements of some Muslim Meskhetian organizations that corroborate such claims are widely circulated in the media and among the population. The precedents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where ethnically based autonomy was used as a platform for launching secessionist claims also strengthen such fears.

- ◆ Fear of ethnic tensions. People fear that the return of Turks will lead to communal tensions. Moreover, some people say that they would resist repatriation with arms, if it occurs. Stories of bloodshed and atrocities inflicted by the Muslims on Christian Georgians and Armenians during the 1918-21 independence and afterwards are widely discussed and multiplied by the media and politicians. A record of conflict between Turks and Armenians, and the general Armenian perception of historical victimization by Turkey, is an additional factor in these fears.
- ◆ Comparisons with other historical injustices. It is a widely used argument in the discourse on the Meskhetian problems that the country cannot afford arrival of new repatriates while it has to take care of up to 300,000 IDPs from conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Why does the international community insist on the return of Turks, is frequently asked, while no progress is achieved with regard to the return of refugees to those regions? Representatives of the Armenian community, on the other hand, appeal to earlier expulsions of their kind from Anatolia. Let the Turks account for earlier injustices first, is the request, and only thereafter can they claim the right to return to Samtskhe-Javakheti.
- ◆ Property issues. Those inhabitants of Meskheti, who had been forcibly brought from different parts of Georgia and settled in the houses of deportees in 1944, fear that repatriates will reclaim their land and property. In general, recent land privatization has led to numerous disputes and tension notwithstanding the ethnicity of local residents, and they fear that appearance of the Meskhetians considerably aggravates these problems.

- ◆ Economic hardships. The general economic situation in Georgia is another argument that is routinely mentioned to justify Georgia's inability to accommodate a large number of repatriates. According to the recent World Bank Report, about a half of the population lives below the official poverty line. Due to an underdeveloped economy, poor administration of state finances and corruption, the Georgian state routinely fails to meet its social obligations even though they have been considerably cut. The above-mentioned IDP community continues to be a considerable financial burden. Repatriation will be an additional burden on the state that already fails to perform its other obligations.

Despite all this, in Samtskhe-Javakheti as well as in other parts of Georgia there are cases of a positive attitude of the population towards the repatriates, and there are examples of successful adaptation of those repatriates who arrived earlier. The students of Akhaltsikhe branch of Tbilisi State University are well integrated into the community. The family of Beridze is very satisfied with their social ties in the village of Mugureti, in the Akhaltsikhe region. The Meskhetian community in Nasakirali, in West Georgia feels at home and has close ties with neighbors. The survey of the Centre of Geopolitical and Regional Studies demonstrates that those local Georgians who have been in contact with repatriates are more likely to develop a positive attitude towards them and the repatriation issue as a whole. A majority of local respondents pointed out that having actually met Meskhetians improved their attitude towards them.

### International organizations

Since 1996, international organizations stepped up their efforts for finding a sustainable solution for the problem. UNCHR, IOM (International Organization for Migration) and OSCE held a regional conference on the problems of refugees, displaced people and other forms of involuntary displacement in the CIS countries, and outlined the following principles for the solution:

- ◆ the need for voluntary and orderly return; assistance in integration in the historical homeland
- ◆ provision of full objective information on the situation in the country
- ◆ increase of local population's level of acceptance and understanding of the integrative process

- ◆ the importance of not upsetting status quo and ensuring people's safety in places of resettlement.

In September 1998, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) in cooperation with the UNCHR and the Forced Migrations Project of the Open Society Institute (OSI) organized a meeting in the Hague. Representatives of Russian, Georgian and Azerbaijani governments and of the Meskhetian organization Vatan participated. The meeting emphasized the importance of full political rehabilitation of the deported Meskhetians and respect for their human rights, the necessity of following 1996 CIS conference principles, the need for getting international organizations involved, for regulating the legal status of deportees, decreasing cases of statelessness, developing programs for greater ethnic tolerance at their places of present and future residence, and providing all the necessary information that Meskhetians need in order to make informed decisions.

This was followed by the March 1999 Vienna meeting. The scope of participants was enlarged by representatives of the Ukraine, Turkey, the USA and the Council of Europe. The meeting did not result in any specific plan of action. In the chairman's declaration, the meeting underlined the need for joint efforts for finding acceptable solutions for all the concerned parties and an opportunity to express their positions.

The CoE, OSCE and UNHCR may be considered the most active among international organizations involved in the issue. CoE provides regular consultations for drafting the law of repatriation. The office of the OSCE HCNM currently monitors the general situation in Samtskhe-Javakheti and prepares a donor conference for the development of the region. UNHCR funded the study of repatriated Meskhetians and also provided assistance for drafting the law.

Open Society Georgia Foundation funded a number of projects: in 1999, the National Center for the Study of Population received funding for the study of problems of a deported population; in 2000, the Union for Humane Society studied the ethno-social context of reintegration of deported Meskhetians. Two projects were implemented by Meskheta – the International Union of Young Meskhetians.

United States Information Agency (USIA) funded the publication of the book *The Legal State of Meskhetian Repatriates in Georgia* by Marat Baratashvili of the Union of Georgian Repatriates. Two projects

were funded by the US Embassy, one in 1999 targeted at the integration of repatriates, implemented by the Union of Georgian Repatriates and the second, in 2001, for the publication of 5 issues of *My Homeland – Georgia* newspaper by the Mamulishvili Association.

At the moment, various international organizations represented in Tbilisi have a more or less common attitude towards their involvement in the issue: They are waiting for the legislation on repatriation, and only after its enactment, are they ready to consider their involvement. Such an approach, logical as it is, has its drawbacks, as there are fewer chances to make any progress on preparatory work necessary for the repatriation.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Repatriation is a moral imperative for the Georgian state and society. It should be thoroughly planned to avoid conflict and to avoid inflicting new hardships on people, some of whom have already experienced the horrors of deportation twice. At the same time, repatriation should not turn against the interests of the local Georgians who survive in dire economic conditions and have almost no access to social benefits. It should not undermine the interests and security of the Georgian state. Any preparations for repatriation should take all of this into account.

Enacting a good law on repatriation is the most urgent and important issue. There are several requirements that a “good” law should meet: it should outline mechanisms that will promote successful integration of returnees with the local population and reduce the potential of conflict; it should also be feasible so as to be implemented, that is, it should be realistic; it should avoid pitfalls such as throwing repatriates into a legal vacuum in any stage of the process, or in encouraging repatriation for transitory solutions, such as getting citizenship only to obtain legal status, to enable further emigration, or to obtain property in order to sell it. It should spell out clearly such issues as possibilities for property restitution, the rights and obligations of the status of a repatriate (if such special status is envisaged by the law), as well as provide for the rights of those who fail to meet conditions for citizenship within a given period. It has to define documented proof of belonging to the deported group without creating insurmountable bureaucratic obstacles for the re-

patriates; it should outline mechanisms warranting the transparency of the repatriation process; and reasonable requirements for citizenship should be formulated.

Apart from the law, the government needs a set of policies for successful implementation of the repatriation process. Among other things, such policies should be based on a careful study of attitudes, concerns and fears of the deported population on the one hand, and of the local population, on the other.

The repatriation process should rest on the guiding principles outlined by the 1996 CIS conference, the Conclusions of the Hague meeting and other expert recommendations. They can be summarized as the following:

- ◆ *The need of voluntary and orderly return, regulation of the status of Meskhetians in the countries of their present residence.* As it has already been outlined, the legal status as well as the conditions of Meskhetians and the level of their integration varies considerably in countries of their present residence. The repatriation may be regarded as truly voluntary in the event it is not induced by the conditions at the present place of residence and is not aimed at avoidance. Therefore, efforts should be directed towards regulating and improving legal status and living conditions of Meskhetians. This requires interstate cooperation as well as use of the leverage of international organizations.
- ◆ *Accessibility of reliable information on the situation in the country.* For many, especially elderly Meskhetians, the will to return is based on a mythologized image of their homeland that hardly corresponds to reality. The Georgian government has to provide Meskhetians at places of their current residence with reliable information on the economic, social and political situation in the country. This should include detailed data on the chances of assistance that can be obtained (e.g. housing and payment schemes, availability of land plots, employment and education opportunities, etc.) as well as obligations to be fulfilled by the repatriates (such as service in the army). The repatriates should have access to information on requirements and procedures for obtaining citizenship.
- ◆ *Assistance in integration.* Collective memories of deported Meskhetians abound in images of oppression and abuse. They have been subjected to manipulation by different countries and powers. This may account

for their traditional alienation from local inhabitants in different areas of residence and their strong internal community ties as witnessed by a number of observers. Therefore, integration of repatriates in new locations will require a specified effort. Opportunities for contact and the command of the Georgian language are two obvious factors facilitating integration. Repatriated Meskhetians acknowledge the importance of these factors by expressing preference in living next to the local population. Unlike most other countries where Meskhetians now live, Georgia is rather small, and Meskhetians may not necessarily need compact settlements to retain kinship and social ties among themselves. But promoting the establishment of cultural centers for Muslim Meskhetians is desirable. Opportunities for studying Georgian, as well as learning about Georgian culture and making contacts with Georgians, should be provided even before the repatriation starts.

Upon arrival, repatriates should be able to continue to study the language at adaptation centers, where they can also learn about culture, history and the customs of the country, their own rights and obligations, and where they can master communication skills. Akhaltsikhe branch of Tbilisi State University has a successful experience in this regard and can be used as a model for a regional integration center. It is highly advisable for planners of repatriation to get acquainted with the international experience of functioning integration centers.

Special schemes, like seed loans should be introduced to ease the adaptation to new economic surroundings. Repatriates have to get consultations and legal advice concerning the possibilities for their economic activities.

- ◆ *Increase acceptance and understanding of the integrative process by the local population.* Constructing a favorable framework for the contact between the local population and repatriates is crucial since first contacts may provoke conflict rather than lead to cooperation. The image of returnee as a competitor for resources can be transformed through channeling assistance to the local community in general, rather than only to returnees. People should feel benefits of living next to repatriates.

The repatriation process is to be gradual to give population time and chance to evaluate its results. People should be informed about the

plans of repatriation as well as its stages of implementation. Through TV broadcasts, films, newspaper articles, books and exhibitions, the true story of the Meskheti and its inhabitants, and the history and the present context of Georgians living in diaspora in Azerbaijan, Turkey and Iran needs to be told. Personal stories of ordeals the deportees underwent after 1944 should be conveyed to local residents.

- ◆ *Do not upset status quo in places of resettlement and ensue people's safety.* An early warning system is highly desirable to monitor the relations of repatriates with the local population, especially in Meskheti. The current population of Meskheti constitutes a diverse and sensitive group. It consists of such groups as indigenous Christian Meskhetians, Armenians resettled by the Russian empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Georgians, who have been forcibly resettled in houses of deported populations from different parts of the country. All of these groups have their own memories and grounds for mistrusting the repatriates. More recently, IDPs from Abkhazia (who reside in Samtskhe-Javakheti, as well as in other environments), have been added, bringing their own concerns, to this mix. The potential for secessionist trends developing among the repatriates cannot be ruled out as well.

In short, the case of the Meskhetian return seems to be especially complex. This complexity is often used as a pretext for procrastination, and currently such a tendency to postpone the issue indefinitely is a major source of concern. But it would be counterproductive to propose simplistic solutions that would not take into account all the risks and pitfalls.

# **THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL SITUATION IN JAVAKHETI: PEOPLE'S CONCERNS**

The report of the sociological survey

## **Introduction**

### Objectives and the character of the survey

The Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development carried out a qualitative sociological survey, using the focus-group methodology in Akhalkalaki (the Samtskhe-Javakheti province) in July 2001 in the framework of the project "Civil Integration and Consolidation of Stability by Means of Developing Civil Society: Javakheti Region of Georgia". The main objective of the survey was to identify social, economic and political problems of the region and to ascertain the local population's concerns.

Akhalkalaki and some neighboring villages were selected as the object of the survey for a number of reasons. Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki districts constitute Javakheti, a historical province of Georgia, which itself is part of the Samtskhe-Javakheti administrative region. Akhalkalaki is the largest of these two districts, and the social and political activity of its population is traditionally higher. That is why Akhalkalaki, not Ninotsminda, was selected for the survey. On the whole, what sets Javakheti apart is that the overwhelming majority of the local population (about 95%) are ethnic Armenians, who, for the most part, do not speak Georgian. In addition to bad roads and a harsh climate, this aspect accounts for a certain isolation of Javakheti from the rest of Georgia. The Georgian national media usually views the region in a negative context, namely in light of potential ethnic tensions and the activities of Armenian nationalist groups. Some western publications also create a similar image of the region. The opposite extreme is created mainly by local and central governmental circles: they say the same social and economic problems concern residents of Javakheti and other parts of the country, and only a handful of marginalized instigators try to raise ethnic problems.



In recent years, various international organizations have been increasingly interested in the problems of Samtskhe-Javakheti due to the aforementioned specifics of the region, its location at the crossroads of interests of several countries (Armenia, Russia, Turkey), and two significant events which are directly connected with the region and are currently under active debate: expected withdrawal of the Russian military base of Akhalkalaki and likely repatriation of Muslim Meskhetians (more popular term is “Meskhetian Turks”) deported in 1944.

Naturally, as these developments are going on in the background, it is very important to obtain reliable information about the attitudes of the region’s population towards basic local problems. To get such information, we opted for the methodology of a qualitative survey. This method does not guarantee that the collected materials will be fully representative. It cannot show exactly what percentage of the population shares either one or the other position. But, on the other hand, it can provide more detailed and rich data and quite an adequate account of the positions and the attitudes of examined groups of the society.

Six focus-group discussions were carried out in the framework of the survey with 48 respondents in total. The composition of the focus groups:

- youth – 2 groups
- residents of rural areas – 1
- ethnic Georgians – 1
- mixed representation – 2

Most of the respondents in the youth groups were graduates of Armenia’s universities. The gender structure of the focus groups was: 26 women and 22 men. Ages of the respondents ranged from 18 to 75 years. Russian was the working language of the focus groups as it is the basic language of communication of the local population. A small part of the Georgian respondents also spoke Russian quite well and preferred this language. One or two respondents in every focus group, except the Georgian, did not speak Russian and preferred to speak in Armenian (mostly aged respondents and rural residents). The focus-group discussions were videotaped.

## General impressions

A majority of the respondents actively participated in the discussions and seemed interested in almost every topic. One or two respondents in

each focus group, except the Georgian one, were passive. They joined the discussion only when personally encouraged by the moderator. At the beginning of each discussion, after becoming acquainted with each other, respondents were asked an open question to specify current problems of the region. As a rule, they began with economic and social problems. In one of the mixed groups, respondents suggested that the discussion should avoid political issues and focus on such problems as employment, education, local industry, etc (more detailed information see below). The list of the problems at issue was almost the same in every group. However, groups with a particular social profile tended to look into problems that were specific for this group. For instance, the youth analyzed the situation in the context of youth problems, rural residents with respect to village problems, etc. Older respondents were concerned with their Soviet-time deposits in savings banks, but the youth had little interest in their problem.

Women and men participated in the discussion to almost the same degree, though in some groups, men were more active and took most of the discussion time.

As a rule, respondents were not afraid to take a critical stance on the problems. On the contrary, they generally seemed eager to take strong stands. Young respondents were even more aggressive and outspoken on some issues than their older counterparts.

At the beginning of each discussion, after the moderator announced the organizers and objectives of the survey, respondents asked to explain in greater detail which institution would study the results and whether they would get any assistance as a result. Besides, they were interested in the likely directions of such assistance – whether it would be delivered directly to the region or through central governmental structures. In their opinion, they should not cherish much hope if the government is involved, as government officials would most likely embezzle any investment.

All groups, except the Georgian one, viewed various problems in the ethnic context as well.

### Major findings of the survey

The survey vindicated the general assumption that social and economic problems are those that cause the greatest concern for the Javakheti

population. This makes local attitudes similar to those in other parts of Georgia. Major worries include economic decline and the high unemployment rate, the inability of the state to fulfil its social obligations, widespread corruption, the continuous shortage of power supplies and problems of public health care and education. People are extremely skeptical about the innovations, such as privatization and democratic institutions in political governance, which were brought about by political and economic reforms of the last decade. This is logical as none of these can be associated with any improvements in people's everyday life. In the people's opinion, privatization is nothing but misappropriation of public property by particular individuals, which resulted in the final collapse of the domestic industry rather than in its revival. Elections are viewed not as an opportunity for people to send defenders of their interests to the government, but as deception of the voters by those willing to use elections as a tool to achieve their personal or group interests. Attitudes towards the government and state institutions – at the central and local levels – are rather negative and sometimes even aggressive. Unfortunately, regarding all these aspects, it is hard to distinguish positions of the Javakheti population from approaches of the residents of other Georgian regions.

Some problems are peculiar for Javakheti due to economic and geographic features of the region. Climate and geographical conditions never allowed Javakheti to become an economically advanced region and economically motivated seasonal or permanent migration (mainly to Russia) was also characteristic of its population in Soviet times. Given the economic downturn of the last decade, this tendency has only strengthened. But such migration processes intensified throughout Georgia as well. Due to a lengthy and harsh winter, the heating problem is especially urgent for the region.

At the same time, the survey revealed rather alarming tendencies, which are specific for the region and linked to its ethnic demography. Most of the local residents felt certain that their economic hardships were caused not only by general problems of the country and its state institutions, but stemmed from the government's deliberate discriminatory policies against ethnic minorities. Many respondents believed that the government intentionally created problems for the local Armenian community in order to push them to emigrate. While it was not usually said in those terms, the government was accused of harboring plans to carry

out ethnic cleansing by especially sophisticated means. As mentioned above, the technique of the survey does not permit finding out exactly how widespread such views are in the region. It seems obvious, however, that they are quite popular.

The estrangement between the Armenian community and the Georgian state and society can be illustrated by the profound opposition of the local ethnic Armenians to the expected withdrawal of the Russian military base from Akhalkalaki. At first glance, the main reason for such a stance seems economic, but there is also a political reason below the surface. Apart from the fear of Turkey, this reason implies a serious lack of confidence in the Georgian state. It seems that the Armenian community of Javakheti feels strongly that Russia is the major guarantee of their security, and the Georgian political leadership will have to take this into account.

The Armenian community is very sensitive about the state language problem. On the one hand, most local ethnic Armenians acknowledge, in general, that they need to speak Georgian; on the other hand, any strict demand for them to speak Georgian causes resentment, and is qualified as ethnic discrimination. The survey revealed a need for an efficient and well-developed state program to promote the Georgian language in the region. Too aggressive measures may result in a backlash, while, in case of the right approach, the region will welcome programs of teaching the state language as they match objective requirements of the local population.

The youth proved quite an important group of the survey. They have been brought up in the new environment and do not hesitate to express their opinions in a more straightforward way than older generations that are socialized under the Soviet regime. Respectively, the youth display stronger estrangement from the state and sometimes certain aggression towards it.

The fact that respondents tended to dramatize and ethnicize some problems might be in part explained by their desire to attract attention and highlight their significance. Therefore, it seems unlikely that resentment of the respondents is strong enough that the situation may be undermined by an internal impulse. On the other hand, however, one cannot rule out that political actors interested in instability may emerge. If so, there exist some favorable grounds for political mobilization around nationalist slogans targeted against the alleged discriminatory policies of the Georgian government.

Exaggerated expectations for the state is another specific element of popular attitudes. In this respect, there is not much difference between the youth and Communist-grown socialized groups of older people. Skep-

tical and belligerent postures towards the current government are accompanied by the belief that the government has sole responsibility for tackling almost every problem faced by the people. The society apparently fails to comprehend its own potential. Indifference towards ongoing events may be linked to the same aspect. Hopes are not high, and when pressed by the moderator to specify their aspirations, respondents actually seemed only eager to request something from the government.

Below, the report will outline respondents' concerns in greater detail topic by topic.

## **The economic situation**

### **The general background**

When evaluating the economic situation in general, all six groups displayed similar positions. All of them started to identify the problems with the economic situation. The economic and social situation was assessed as extremely hard. Problems specified by the respondents may be summarized as follows: harsh climate conditions, unemployment, stagnant industry, deteriorated and looted enterprises and farms, long overdue pensions and salaries, high taxes, etc. All groups placed emphasis on youth problems and a high level of migration, which is conditioned by the above-described factors. They also pointed to unemployment as the most urgent problem that must be addressed promptly. Reducing unemployment may help resolve other problems. That is why a majority of the respondents suggested that the Georgian government, international organizations and foundations and NGOs should begin to improve the situation in the region by tackling economic problems. Particularly, new jobs must be created first of all, i. e. local enterprises should be restored and upgraded. In the respondents' opinion, there are enough human and natural resources in the region to achieve the goal. The authorities must show goodwill and woo investments.

*“Employment is the most urgent problem of Georgia in general and Javakheti in particular. If someone wants to help us, we do not need their money. Let them restore factories and enterprises. It does not matter if salaries are small. The main point is to have jobs and guaranteed wages. The main point is that when getting up in the*

*morning, people must know that they have to go to work and feel sure that they will be paid their wages at the end of every month” (Group V, No. 1, Male, 65 years old).*

Respondents emphasized that a lot of agricultural and industrial enterprises used to operate in the region in former times, but all of them have fallen into decay by now. They mainly blamed the government for such a situation as it did nothing to maintain the enterprises and even contributed to these deteriorating processes by carrying out illegal privatization and other unlawful actions.

## Unemployment

As mentioned above, respondents specified unemployment as the most urgent problem of the region, especially with regard to the youth. From this viewpoint, this factor contributes not only to economic hardships, but also to social inferiority. The unemployed are unable to fulfil themselves and lose their skills. Unemployment encourages deviant behaviour of youth, such as frequent scuffles, gambling, drug-taking, stealing, etc.

Except for the Georgian group, a significant majority of respondents in all groups said that such a situation stemmed from the Georgian government’s deliberate anti-minority policy, i. e. the government intentionally created conditions to force local ethnic Armenians to emigrate. Young respondents expressed this opinion more definitely, but part of the older respondents shared it too.

*“This is a white genocide. They place us in such conditions that we will have to leave” (Group III, No. 2, female, 27 years old)*

## Migration

Respondents viewed migration mainly in the light of unemployment and economic problems. While older respondents stressed economic grounds of migration, young people said that apart from economic problems, migration was also encouraged by lack of information, and opportunities for development and for cultural life for the youth. People migrate mainly to Armenia and Russia – they prefer to seek education in the former and jobs in the latter. It was emphasized that migration has substantially increased in the last decade. Local ethnic Armenians have always migrated to Russia for seasonal work (mainly as skilled workers),

but the scale of the process has greatly expanded by now since there are actually no jobs in the region. There has been a sharp rise in the long-term and permanent migration in recent years due to the introduction of the visa regime with Russia.

Most respondents claimed that about one third of the local population has emigrated from the region. However, nobody was able to specify the number of temporary and permanent migrants.

According to young respondents, a good number of their contemporaries are ready to make every effort to emigrate for good. Some respondents estimated their number at 50-60% of the local youth.

*“If they had money and somewhere to go, all of the local youths would leave the region. It is just that not all of them have such an opportunity” (Group II, No. 5, male, 21 years old).*

While a lot of respondents shared this opinion, there was another opinion as well: some emphasized that most young people were often driven out by a desire to get a university education, while after graduation, many of them were ready to get back to their homeland.

There is a real danger, it was underlined, that the entire Armenian community might emigrate. If so, only the government will be to blame as it did nothing to solve the problem and maybe even intentionally created intolerable living conditions for the community.

*“Three out of every ten migrants never return. They emigrate together with their families and relatives. There will be no population here soon. What they wanted to do by force, at gunpoint, is now happening by itself. I would never leave this place even if I lived 300 years” (Group V, No. 1, male, 65 years old).*

Reasons of migration identified by all six groups can be summarized as follows:

- ◆ unemployment
- ◆ economic hardships
- ◆ the visa regime with Russia
- ◆ poor knowledge of the state language
- ◆ the government’s negligence or deliberate anti-Armenian policy
- ◆ the information and cultural vacuum

## The visa regime with Russia

All groups unequivocally denounced the visa regime with Russia both from economic and political viewpoints. Part of the respondents said the visa regime led to the expansion of long-term and permanent migration. A visa costs too much and, therefore, those who used to migrate for short periods of time are now migrating either for a longer time or for good.

*“The [Russian] visa costs 100-150 dollars. They migrate twice a year and it is too expensive to pay for the visa twice. That is why they prefer to migrate once but for a long time or maybe forever”.*

Another negative economic effect of the visa regime is that prices for imports from Russia soared.

*“The visa regime hit the market because the high cost of the visa resulted in high market prices” (Group II, No. 7, female, 18 years old).*

From a political perspective, respondents gave priority to friendly relations with Russia and, therefore, they almost unanimously required that the visa regime with Russia be abolished. They (especially the youth group) again blamed the Georgian government as its support to Chechnya invoked [quite deservedly] Russia’s anger and led to the Russian response – the visa regime. But the visa regime harmed only ordinary citizens, not governmental officials. Respondents also suspected that ethnic discrimination might have been a motive for such a policy of the Georgian government: it did nothing to avoid the visa regime in order to create more problems for the Armenian community of Georgia in order to urge them to emigrate.

## Wages and pensions

All groups considered the issue of wages and pensions as the main problem, but older respondents discussed the theme more emotionally. Respondents specified exactly how much salary the state owed to them in every month of each year. They supposed that long overdue wages might never be paid to them.

All respondents were deeply resentful of the amount of the monthly pension – 14 GEL – as nobody can subsist on this sum. They also felt rather angry that while governmental structures demanded them to pay



taxes honestly, the government failed to pay pensions on time. Older respondents recalled Soviet times and said that life was better at that time, than nowadays, as there were no problems with pensions and salaries in the USSR.

*“I have a pension of 14 GEL and I did not get it for several months every year. In 1998, I was not paid for six months, in 1999 also for six months, in 2000 for three months. I do not know what I will get this year” (Group V, no. 8, female, 61 years old)*

*“I have not been paid my salary for 30 months altogether since 1997. I have been neither dismissed nor paid. They do not dismiss me because if so, they will have to pay off the entire arrears of my salary” (Group III, No. 8, male, 28 years old)*

## Deposits in savings banks

In light of the above-described problems, respondents (mainly in mixed and rural groups; the youth group seemed less interested in the issue) actively discussed the issue of their Soviet-time deposits in savings banks, which were devalued by the inflation in the early 90s. Most respondents were concerned with their own or their parents' savings.

Left alone, the government decided that depositors could draw only part of their money out of bank accounts (every 1000 Soviet Rubles are converted into 10 GEL); people have to bribe bank personnel to get the cash.

*“They pay us 10 GEL for every 1000 Rubles, though when we made our deposits 1000 Rubles valued more than 1000 dollars” (Group I, No. 6, male, 41 years old)*

Respondents also complained that the money was available only in the Akhhaltsikhe bank. This is rather inconvenient for the residents of the Akhalkalaki district.

*“They make us visit the bank day after day. We have to spend so much money on travel that it's not worth the effort to seek these 10 GEL” (Group I, No. 3, male, 37 years old)*

Respondents also suspected that governmental officials might have used large-scale fraud to misappropriate their savings.

## Power supply

All groups spoke about the power supply problems in a similar manner.

*“It is already the 21st century but we still use kerosene lamps. The power supply problem has remained unresolved for the whole last decade” (Group I, No. 3, male, 37 years old)*

The power supply problem was viewed in the context of daily communal, industrial, and informational problems. The youth and Georgian (which also was made up of many young respondents) groups linked the problem to the information vacuum.

The fact that electricity is really generated but not supplied to consumers makes the problem worse to perceive. Respondents were aware that the Georgian and Armenian governments reached an agreement last year to supply electricity from Armenia to the region. New transmission lines were built. Power supplies were stable during one week at the New Year holiday and then it was cut off, even though people paid their electricity bills on time. Some respondents believed that supplies of electricity from Armenia did not match interests of the owners of local small hydroelectric power plants because the imported electricity was cheaper than theirs.

Respondents of one of the mixed groups alleged that Georgian electricity was exported to Turkey, ignoring interests of the Georgian citizens, since it is a rather lucrative business.

Most respondents laid the blame on the regional administration, which did not allow the Akhalkalaki district to sign a contract directly with Armenia, bypassing Akhaltsikhe. Electricity is supplied to the district via Akhaltsikhe, and money for electricity bills are also transferred first to Akhaltsikhe, not to Armenia. Respondents suspected that the money might have not been transferred to Armenia at all.

*“The local hydroelectric plants also play a role, but the regional administration is the main problem. If Akhaltsikhe did not interfere, the problem of power supply would be solved easier. Money for electricity bills is transferred to Akhaltsikhe and vanishes afterwards” (Group I, No. 8, male, 39 years old)*

*“There is a switch in Akhaltsikhe. They can cut off electricity at any time and don’t care about problems of the Akhalkalaki popula-*

*tion at all. It's not right that we get Armenian electricity from Akhaltsikhe” (Group V, No. 7, male, 33 years old)*

## Heating

Winter is long and very cold in Javakheti. The heating problem has always been urgent here, but in recent years, it has become even more critical. All groups highlighted this problem.

Due to financial or technical reasons, heating fuel (wood, coal, natural gas) is hard to obtain. Coal is not supplied to the region, and the government does not seem to care about it. Private businesses are also unwilling or unable to arrange such supplies for some reasons. Prices for wood have soared recently due to the ban on logging of forests, according to the respondents. Rumors say German and Turkish companies have purchased forests in the Borjomi Gorge and, therefore, people are no longer allowed to fell trees there.

*“We used to bring wood from Bakuriani. But we have been told that we have no right to do it any longer. Turkey and Germany are exporting the timber and there will be no wood soon. Last year wood cost 100 dollars, now it costs 350 dollars” (Group VI, No. 7, male, 32 years old)*

In the respondents' opinion, the government should arrange supplies of cheap coal or other fuel to the region. The Akhaltsikhe railroad can be used to this end.

## Environmental problems

Discussion of the problem revealed opposite concerns as well. A good number of the respondents, though not in every group, raised the issue of illegal logging of forests as an environmental problem. The Georgian group debated the issue most actively. However, the lack of heating fuel is not the only factor to explain the large-scale logging. Respondents emphasized that corrupt local officials were involved in the illegal timber trafficking.

## Public health care

All groups examined serious problems of the health care system. Respondents underlined that medical facilities no longer offered free treatment.

As a result, citizens with low incomes actually cannot afford medical care. Another problem is the quality of medical services. Although these services are now payable, they lack material-technical resources and fail to meet sanitary-hygienic standards. There is also no heating and power in medical facilities. The ambulance service does not operate in the district. The only operational ambulance belongs to the Russian military base, but poor telephone communications makes it unavailable for the local residents. Under such circumstances, respondents remarked, people can rely only on Heaven.

*“Women are required to bring diesel fuel to be admitted to maternity hospitals for birth-giving. And there are mice in the hospitals” (Group 1, No. 4, female, 62 years old)*

*“They do not have even iodine. You must bring one by yourself. Any kind of treatment is payable. There are mice and cats around the hospital. Physicians are hard to find in case of necessity, few of them are available during office hours” (Group 2, No. 4, female, 39 years old)*

In the respondents' opinion, medical treatment must be provided free-of-charge or at a significant discount to the destitute families, the disabled, and senior citizens.

## Industry and agriculture

Respondents of all the groups expressed grave concern with the dramatic decline of the local industries. In their opinion, it was one of the main reasons for almost every economic or social problem. In all groups, respondents described what kind of enterprises used to function in the district in former times, how many workers were employed there, the high quality of their production, etc. They censured improper and unwise privatization policies, which resulted in the collapse of industry and high unemployment. At the same time, according to the respondents, although almost all enterprises have shut down, the district has enough human and natural resources to restore the local industry, provided there is some initial interest of the investors. In their opinion, it is vitally important to help enterprises at the initial stage. Afterwards, they could become independent and profitable.

Naturally, the rural group focused its attention mainly on agricultural problems. Nevertheless, other groups also seemed familiar with the prob-

lems and considered them as rather urgent. Respondents again pointed to “out-of-order” enterprises. Dozens of profitable dairy factories used to operate in large villages and towns of the district (particular enterprises were specified).

The discussed agricultural problems can be summarized as follows:

- ◆ severe climate conditions: dry summers and long winters
- ◆ the out-of-order irrigation system and the problem of irrigation water
- ◆ the lack of agricultural machinery
- ◆ the difficulty in selling agricultural products

Respondents proposed various ways to restore the local agriculture. The youth group recommended facilitating the development of private farming by offering loans to farmers. One also needs to arrange a sales system for agricultural products so that peasants will be able to profit from their production, while nowadays they spend almost all their incomes on travel expenses.

## **Youth problems**

All groups specified youth problems as extremely urgent even without the moderator’s question, but the youth group held a most active and lengthy discussion on the issue. Respondents emphasized the lack of development opportunities and jobs for youth. The youths are unable to get adequate education. Few entertainment and cultural facilities such as dancing clubs and cinemas; youth radio, newspapers and TV; sports facilities, etc operate in the district. Information on the ongoing processes in Georgia is completely unavailable. Computers are very rare here and many youth have never seen one in their life. Poor sanitary conditions and the damaged façades of houses make the situation even more intolerable.

*“It’s already the 21st century, but some people have never seen a computer in their life” (Group II, No. 5, male, 21 years old)*

*“The life is wild and awfully boring here. There are bad conditions and no places to go” (Group II, No. 3, female, 18 years old).*

In the respondents’ opinion, such circumstances urge the youth to migrate, mainly to Armenia or Russia, since there are better opportuni-

ties and life is more interesting there. Most migrants do not want to go back.

Respondents worried that high unemployment boosted crime and drug addiction. According to some respondents, the number of drug addicts has risen significantly in recent time. However, more respondents claimed that this number was much less than in other parts of Georgia.

*“In my opinion, there are a lot of drug addicts, maybe 60% [of the youth]. When I was young, in Soviet times, the situation was different. Today teens stay out till midnight. They hang around, smoke, and scuffle” (Group I, No. 2, male, 73 years old)*

*“There are not too many drug addicts yet, but there is a danger that their number may grow, if the present situation continues” (Group VI, No. 5, male, 27 years old)*

Respondents believe that new jobs and more employment opportunities for the youth can improve the situation. International organizations and foundations should be asked to sponsor the creation of cultural, educational and sport facilities in the district.

## **Availability of information**

### **Information vacuum**

An information vacuum was highlighted by all groups, but the youth group applied more effort and time to analyzing the problem.

Respondents emphasized that no mass media were available in the district, while people had no opportunities to learn about their rights and the country’s legislation.

There are few local newspapers. Some are published monthly, but they do not give any valuable news or even the latest news – there are only recipes of popular medicines, jokes and historical anecdotes.

There is neither local TV nor radio in the district. The Russian military base has arranged re-broadcasts of Russian information channels, which are the main source of information for the local public. Armenian TV programs are also available for some time every day. As for the Georgian national TV, local residents can receive only its *Vestnik* program, provided power is not off. No other broadcasts reach the district.

Some respondents (mainly in the Georgian group) regretted that they had no chance to watch other Georgian TV programs, first of all, those of the *Rustavi-2* TV company. Due to the lack of information sources, the local population is unable to compare news from various sources or to keep a close eye on the ongoing developments in the country, in general. Central newspapers are delivered to the district with great delay, if delivered at all. Even if the newspapers finally reach the district, people have no money to buy them systematically. At the same time, there is a long-lasting problem that locals cannot speak Georgian. The local population is Russian-speaking, including a part of ethnic Georgians.

*“Out of the Georgian channels, only the state TV broadcasts can be received here. You know what the state [TV] means. But we can watch it only if power is on. We can receive the Vestnik and when you listen to it, you can imagine that the country is flourishing. Its themes and information seem to have remained unchanged since the Soviet times. We have no idea what is going on in Tbilisi” (Group III, No. 8, male, 28 years old).*

Such information means as Internet or e-mail are out of the question. Most local residents have never heard of them.

### The lack of legal information

All groups pointed out that people were unaware of their rights and basic laws. No measures are implemented to acquaint the public with the legislation. Further still, even if new laws are available for reading, most people do not understand them as they are written mainly in Georgian. Governmental officials and civil servants take advantage of the situation and try to benefit from the people’s poor knowledge of laws. Armenian-speaking and Russian-speaking citizens view this as an example of ethnic discrimination.

*“People cannot defend their rights as they do not know them” (Group VI, No. 4, female, 25 years old)*

Respondents also complained that people have no voice in the legislative process and for this reason, newly adopted laws often do not take into account interests of ordinary citizens.

Respondents proposed that the youth be taught the legislation and their rights. The process must begin in secondary schools, and the edu-

cation system should assume responsibility for teaching human rights. Respondents also suggested that legal consultancy offices must function in towns.

## Education

### Problems of secondary schools

Respondents' considerations about school problems can be summarized in three categories: problems of parents, teachers and pupils. Besides, almost all groups specifically highlighted the heating problem. A long and cold winter usually makes the educational process impossible.

**Problems of parents.** Parents have to spend a lot of money to buy textbooks and other necessary items for their kids. Given the high unemployment and overdue salaries, these school expenses are rather high.

*"Textbooks are very expensive. I need 70 GEL to buy textbooks for my two kids. Few people have such an opportunity"* (Group VI, No. 1, female, 30 years old)

**Problems of teachers.** The so-called "frozen" salaries constitute the main problem here. In recent years, teachers have not been paid salaries for several months every year. In addition, salaries are too small and are hardly enough for teachers themselves, let alone their families. Conditions for the educational process are far from normal: there are neither new methodologies nor necessary equipment or devices, etc.

*"Previous years' salaries of the teachers have been frozen. Some installments have been transferred recently and Akhalkalaki teachers are now paid their overdue salaries for 1998"* (Group I, No. 8, male, 39 years old)

**Problems of pupils.** Pupils do not get adequate education. The heating problem and frequent teacher strikes caused by the arrears of salary undermine the education process. It must be also mentioned that there are no summer camps and facilities for after-school and sport activities. Facilities that used to operate in former times either have deteriorated or were looted.



The textbook of the history of Armenia and the issue of teaching the subject

Several groups raised the issue of the history of Armenia. In the respondents' opinion, the history of Armenia should be included in the curriculum of the Javakheti schools, along with the history of Georgia. Today, the history of Armenia is an optional subject, not in the basic curriculum. Respondents claimed that the local Armenian community viewed the fact as ethnic discrimination.

*“It is a case of ethnic discrimination that schools do not teach the history of Armenia” (Group III, No. 6, male, 28 years old)*

There is also the problem of a textbook. According to the respondents, the Education Ministry does not permit using Armenian-made textbooks for teaching the history of Armenia in the secondary schools of Georgia. At the same time, it does not offer any alternatives.

*“The Georgian education ministry does not allow Armenian schools to use textbooks of the history of Armenia published in Yerevan. They say the textbook must be published in Georgia, but none have been published so far. They neither publish the textbook by themselves nor permit using one published elsewhere. They do not want the Armenians to learn the history of their country” (Group III, No. 8, male, 28 years old)*

## High education

Respondents emphasized that getting higher education was problematic for the Armenian community of Georgia. A majority of graduates of secondary schools leave the district for Yerevan (Armenia) in order to get university education there, while a smaller number go to various Russian cities. Most respondents argued that the youths prefer to acquire a higher education outside Georgia because they do not speak Georgian and, respectively, have few chances to get jobs after graduating.

## **The issue of the state language and ethnic problems**

Respondents, especially the youth, discussed problems of the official Georgian language rather actively and emotionally, and the discussion

was quite extended. Respondents said it was a rather painful problem for them. The Georgian group was less emotional about the issue.

All groups (again except the Georgian one) claimed that ethnic Armenians faced discrimination by the government because they did not speak Georgian. In respondents' words, rights of the Armenian community were violated in such a situation. They feared that the situation might worsen in the future. A small part of the respondents (mainly the youths that have graduated from universities in Armenia or were currently studying there) suspected that it was the government's deliberate policy to oust the Armenian community from Georgia.

Respondents claimed that under the draft language law (though nobody has ever seen or read it) all ethnic Armenians who cannot speak Georgian fluently would be dismissed from office. A lot of respondents were sure that even if the law did not stipulate such a requirement, the government undoubtedly had issued respective instructions.

Respondents assessed such a categorical requirement to speak the state language as the government's coercive policy. In their opinion, it may spark social protests, strain inter-ethnic relations, and even fuel demands for autonomy.

When asked to specify to what degree people were willing to learn Georgian, respondents provided mainly two kinds of opinions. One part of the respondents believed that the population had strong aspirations to learn Georgian. The others claimed that it was true only for those local residents who were going to get employment in Tbilisi. People who plan to migrate to Russia do not need to speak Georgian and prefer to learn Russian or English (the discussion of this theme was somewhat strained).

Some young respondents were openly defiant. In their words, they do not need the Georgian language at all, as they are going to get an education in Armenia and Russia. They said there were no job opportunities for them in Georgia anyway. These respondents explained their position by claiming that they felt an anti-Armenian mood in part of the Georgian population.

*"Maybe not the entire Georgian population but a majority of them have anti-Armenian attitudes. That is why I no longer want to learn Georgian in protest" (Group II, No. 5, male, 21 years old)*

The requirement to speak Georgian and the language illiteracy, in the respondents' opinion, was the second main reason – after unemployment

– of migration. Local people prefer to get an education in Armenia or Russia just because of the language problem since secondary schools teach only basics of the Georgian language, which is not enough to enter a university/institute in Tbilisi.

*“I cannot speak Georgian and that is why I decided not to seek education in Tbilisi. They did not teach us enough language at school” (Group II, No. 1, male, 18 years old)*

*“Most people prefer to study in Yerevan just for the poor knowledge of Georgian. The language illiteracy bars them from getting education in Georgia” (Group III, No. 5, female, 23 years old)*

Explaining the poor knowledge of Georgian, respondents first of all pointed to the absence of a respective environment. The overwhelming majority of the Javakheti population (95%) are ethnic Armenians; the others are Georgians and Russians. Russian and Armenian are the languages of communication for them. Most local residents, including ethnic Georgians, speak Armenian. Some Armenian residents (mainly village-dwellers) do not speak Russian. People (except ethnic Georgians) either do not speak Georgian at all or know the language rather badly. Part of the Georgian population also prefers the Russian language.

Inadequate qualification of teachers, poor methodology and bad textbooks were specified as the second important factor.

*“I can read and write, but cannot speak. I need somebody to speak in Georgian with me. I was not properly taught the language at school. A Kakhetian shepherd taught me Georgian in the eighth grade. He did not know the language well himself but the school had no better language teachers” (Group V, No. 1, male, 65 years old)*

Most respondents acknowledged that they should speak the state language but, in their opinion, they must not be required to do it right away. Older respondents said that their generation would hardly be able to learn Georgian. The youths are more likely to learn it but they need time to accomplish this end. It is not realistic to expect the whole population to master the language in one decade. The task will take the time of a whole generation. For the time being, the Armenian and Russian languages should be allowed for use in daily relations and office administrations.

*“There must be at least a 20-year state program to teach the language to the people. It will require the time of a whole generation, not two- or three-month courses” (Group III, No. 6, male, 28 years old)*

Respondents emphasized the absence of state approaches towards the issue. The government does nothing to encourage people to learn Georgian. Schools of ethnic minorities receive textbooks for free from the country of ethnic origin, while textbooks of Georgian schools are so expensive and hard to obtain that people choose the first option even for economic reasons.

### Religious and ethnic discrimination

The region’s population is characterized by ethnic and religious diversity. Most local residents are Orthodox Christian (mainly ethnic Georgians) and Apostolic Christian (ethnic Armenians). There are also Roman Catholic (Armenians and Georgians), Dukhobortsi (Russians), and Muslim (Georgian) communities, and groups of Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, etc.

Despite such a religious diversity, respondents said there was no danger of religious conflicts or discrimination. However, they highlighted occasional problems in relations between various religious communities. For instance, the Catholic and Orthodox communities had arguments over church ownership rights but it involved only a couple of villages and did not develop into a serious confrontation. Religion was never specified as a reason for conflicts or discrimination. Repatriation of Muslim Meskhetians (Meskhetian Turks) was named as the only issue likely to trigger serious conflicts (see the chapter on the repatriation problem below). Respondents mentioned also that the local Georgian Muslim community (Ajarians) was somewhat distanced and isolated, but not because of religion.

On the contrary, all groups, except for the Georgian one, actively and emotionally discussed the issue of ethnic discrimination. In respondents’ opinions, the government does not care much about the country’s entire population but ethnic Armenians, as non-Georgian residents, are treated especially badly and unfairly. It may be stated that respondents viewed almost every unresolved social or economic problem in the light of ethnic discrimination.

*“Problems that affect the whole Georgia are more urgent and take ethnic dimension in Javakheti” (Group III, No. 8, male, 28 years old)*

A majority of the young respondents expressed such a position more strongly and consistently. At the same time, they emphasized that governmental agencies and officials, not the Georgian population, were to blame for the ethnic discrimination. There is a danger, however, that tensions may give birth to a Georgian-Armenian confrontation. Respondents specified the following signs of ethnic discrimination:

- ◆ curricula of secondary schools do not include the history of Armenia
- ◆ due to the poor knowledge of Georgian, people are dismissed from office or their job applications are rejected
- ◆ due to wrong administrative policies, residents of the Akhalkalaki district have to visit Akhaltsikhe every time they need to solve even a minor bureaucratic problem
- ◆ the traffic police treat ethnic Armenians worse than Georgians
- ◆ all documents and administrative files are in Georgian, etc.

In respondents' words, skilled employees are often dismissed from office, while their inexperienced colleagues remain only because they are ethnic Georgians. Respondents claimed that there was a special order or instruction to remove all ethnic Armenians from offices under the pretext of not speaking Georgian.

*“Our rights are violated. Those not speaking Georgian are sacked or their job applications are rejected. Employers require submitting job applications in Georgian. Otherwise they refuse to consider them” (Group III, No. 6, male, 28 years old)*

Respondents specified several cases when dismissed employees brought a lawsuit and managed to regain their office by the court ruling.

### **The state, the government, and the region**

The analysis of the issue is based on the following general tendencies:

- ◆ the lack of confidence in the government
- ◆ pro-Russian orientation
- ◆ nostalgia for the Soviet past

## Attitudes towards the state and the Georgian government

Almost all groups displayed negative and critical attitudes towards the current Georgian government. Respondents also repeatedly recalled Zviad Gamsakhurdia's rule, claiming that ethnic minorities were much more insecure at that time. In their words, theoretically this situation may recur (see the chapter on the Russian military base). Respondents blamed the government for the deteriorated industry, wrong privatization policies, and for economic and social problems. Young respondents expressed negative opinions more strongly and emotionally.

Some respondents emphasized that although the country shifted to a capitalist system, the government should be still held responsible for rebuilding the industry and solving social problems.

Respondents said they did not believe in democracy propagandized by the government because, in reality, people's concerns were never taken into account in the decision-making process. Corrupt governmental officials do not care about the country's citizens at all. They are concerned only with their personal incomes. They remember people only in time of elections but never fulfil their election promises.

As mentioned above, part of the respondents viewed the government's indifference towards the region's problems in the ethnic context. They suspected that the government intentionally abstained from solving local problems in order to urge the Armenian community to emigrate from Georgia.

People often compare their current living conditions with the Soviet-time life and claim that the latter was much better. They emphasize such advantages of the Soviet regime as the absence of ethnic problems, no confrontation between the Armenian and Georgian communities, higher living standards (guaranteed pensions, salaries, and jobs), better social programs, etc. Not only the elderly but even younger respondents, who lived their childhood in the USSR, felt nostalgia for the Soviet past.

*"We did not realize that we lived in communism [that is, very well]" (Group I, No. 3, male, 37 years old)*

*"We have to live in bad times. Our parents lived in the USSR, while we live in times of trouble and change. The youths are pessimistic about the future" (Group II, No. 2, male, 29 years old)*

## The centre and the region

Respondents were quite unanimous when evaluating relations between the centre and the regions: the centre does not seem interested in normal relations with the regions; it lacks coherent plans and policy, and, worse still, its policy towards ethnic enclaves is often aggressive. Just such a policy led to the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The center's wrong policy also accounts for strained relations between Ajaria and Tbilisi.

*“The government does not have any regional or ethnic policy. Georgia is a multi-ethnic country but they do not think about the others. They do not want to think about the reasons of the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Even ethnic Georgians have come to demand autonomy – Ajarians, Megrelians. Small wonder the Svans may also raise similar demands in such a situation. The Georgians themselves try to break away from the central government. Finally only Tbilisi will remain under the central rule. Tomorrow Aslan Abashidze may declare himself president of Ajaria and Georgia will disintegrate into small kingdoms. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have actually seceded from Georgia” (Group III, No. 6, male, 28 years old)*

*“The government does not have clear understanding of economy, language and political issues. It also lacks a well-developed and efficient regional policy” (Group III, No. 8, male, 29 years old)*

## Elections

Respondents were dismissive and mistrustful of the elections. All groups evaluated the process not as an opportunity to choose people's representatives but as a means for particular individuals to gain personal benefits. They gave examples of election rigging and described how information was concealed by the mass media. For instance, the national TV did not report about protest rallies of the Akhalkalaki dwellers during presidential elections. Quite the contrary, the TV said the elections went off without any problems.

A good deal of the respondents said they did not vote in the last elections and would never vote in the future because they did not believe that their vote would count. As soon as they are elected, candidates forget their election promises at once.

Respondents censured popularly elected MPs and local authorities appointed by the central government alike. They said there was not much difference between them. Local self-governments also do not defend people's interests and are only anxious to retain their offices granted to them by the centre.

*“They appoint such people who discriminate against local residents and violate their rights. In Soviet times there was a possibility to complain to superior bodies, and officials feared it. There are no such possibilities at present – there is nobody to protect or care about you” (Group IV, No. 7, male, 61 years old)*

When asked whether the situation would change if local authorities were elective, most respondents pessimistically answered that changes were unlikely.

*“They make a lot of promises during the pre-election campaign but forget about you afterwards. It does not matter whether they are elected or appointed. Nothing will change” (Group VII, No. 6, male, 33 years old)*

In the end, however, most respondents agreed that it would be better if all appointed offices (sakrebulo, gamgebeli, rtsmunebuli, etc) were made elective in the future because it would make officials accountable to the people, not to their bosses.

## Problems of the administrative arrangement and management

In respondents' opinion, the government's policy on the territorial-administrative arrangement of the country is wrong and discriminatory. They said (the Georgian group did not focus on the issue) it was wrong to merge Samtskhe and Javakheti into a single administrative region. It was even more artificial to incorporate the Borjomi district into it. Respondents believed that the government arranged the region in such a way, deliberately, in order to ensure that no region would have an Armenian majority and, respectively, to reduce Armenian representation in state agencies.

In a similar vein, some respondents argued, the government arranged the village sakrebulo in order to undercut the Armenian representation in government agencies. While several Armenian villages share one sakrebulo, each Georgian village has its own.



Although the Akhalkalaki district is larger, the regional administration is headquartered in Akhaltsikhe – some respondents viewed this fact also in light of ethnic discrimination. Under such a system Javakheti residents have to visit Akhaltsikhe every time they need to settle even a minor bureaucratic problem (for instance, to get a passport, birth certificate, driving license, etc). Bureaucrats take advantage of the situation, trying to extort as much money as they can from ethnic Armenian residents. As a result, the everyday life of the local population is full of problems and, at the same time, the Armenian community has a negative attitude towards the state.

### **Privatization and the forms of ownership**

When examining the economic situation, respondents laid great emphasis on the problems of privatization. Most respondents said that the government should have abstained from privatizing enterprises, i.e. prevented the takeover of the public property by various individuals. This opinion was especially maintained by older respondents. Respectively, the government must be responsible for creating new jobs. Most respondents specified that they would rather get employment in state-run organizations as the state would be responsible for solving all issues.

But there were also different opinions. Some respondents admitted that privatization was inevitable in the new economic environment but it should not have been carried out in such an unfair and unlawful way. Instead of restoring the production, new owners of the enterprises embezzled and misappropriated assets and equipment they got on the cheap. Most respondents suggested that the privatization law must stipulate that the new owners of the enterprises shall be responsible for maintaining the production.

At the same time, all groups discussed problems of private businessmen and entrepreneurs. Some respondents said that the government should support small businesses, while, in reality, the government is actually placing obstacles to the development of small businesses by adopting wrong legislation and by widespread corruption.

## Corruption

### Corruption in governmental agencies

Respondents stated unanimously that all governmental agencies at all levels were plagued with corruption. Unless they pay bribes, local residents will have to spend a lot of money, time and effort (shuttling between Akhalkalaki and Akhaltsikhe) to solve their problems. Feeling that it's not worth the trouble, people are ready to pay bribes. Respondents said all residents suffered from the bribery but ethnic Armenians were affected most of all since they had to pay larger bribes than ethnic Georgians.

*“My nephew had to visit the passport service four days running to get a foreign passport since the head of the service was in Tbilisi at that time and nobody but he, himself, took responsibility to settle the issue. Meanwhile my nephew was rather pressed for time as he was going to Yerevan to enroll in a university there. His parents had no choice but to pay a bribe” (Group I, No. 6, male, 41 years old)*

Respondents specified such reasons for corruption as the low salaries of civil servants, the population's poor knowledge of laws, and the people's mentality and morality. They said with a monthly salary of 40 GEL or even less, civil servants could not provide for their families without bribery.

*“We have to pay for everything. They also have to bribe their bosses. The entire system is corrupt” (Group VI, No. 7, male, 32 years old)*

### Police

Respondents highlighted that the traffic police treated citizens, especially ethnic minorities, very badly. The police routinely halt and check cars with Akhalkalaki registration numbers – for any reason or no reasons at all – and to extort bribes from them.

*“They halt you, and if you are an ethnic Armenian, they demand you to pay under any pretext or simply because you are Armenian and do not speak Georgian” (Group II, No. 5, male, 21 years old)*

People themselves sometimes encourage such police behaviour. Drivers often stop their cars and pay 2-3 GEL to the police even if the police do not order them to halt.

*“Sometimes people themselves are interested in breaching the law, i. e. paying bribes. If not, some rule is violated they may be fined 20 GEL, but they prefer to pay 3 GEL to everybody’s satisfaction” (Group VI, No. 5, male, 27 years old).*

People also have other kinds of problems in relations with the police. For instance, local residents once rallied in front of the gameoba in protest against frequent blackouts. Gameoba officials refused to talk to them and the police broke up the rally, using force and beating the people.

### Corruption at the border with Armenia and in the customs services

Local people keep close relations with Armenia based on kinship or common trade interests. Most young people get a university education in Yerevan. Many also travel to Russia via Armenia for seasonal work in Russian cities. That is why the border regime and customs duties and procedures are very important for the local residents. With current official and unofficial rules and prices, it is rather difficult and expensive to cross the border.

According to respondents, there is only one border checkpoint on the Armenian territory for people to pass customs and border control. As for the Georgian territory, there are 6-7 such checkpoints and it takes a lot of time and money to pass all of them. In respondents’ words, almost every structure is able to set up a checkpoint with a respective name (for instance, “sanitary control”), demanding payments for clearance.

For this reason, prices are high for imports from Armenia. Prices for fruits have almost tripled this year since the customs duties and the number of checkpoints increased. In the respondents’ opinion, the country and the whole nation will benefit if the procedure to cross the Armenian border is simplified.

*“It is five times more expensive to take one bag of potatoes to a relative. You will have to pay at every corner. Everybody is able to make a checkpoint and demand money” (Group I, No. 8, male, 39 years old)*

*“One has to pass several checkpoints and pay money at each of them. Nobody can understand which of them is official and which*

*is informal. I wish there was only one customs checkpoint and all problems would be over” (Group IV, No. 4, male, 64 years old)*

## **Particular political issues**

### **The Russian military base**

All age, social or ethnic groups of respondents were unanimous in their attitude towards the withdrawal of the Russian military base. However, arguments and emotional approaches of the Armenian and Georgian respondents differed. Most respondents were against the withdrawal of the base. They predicted that the process might trigger serious protest actions and riots.

Respondents put forward mainly economic and political arguments to justify the importance of the base for the local population. When asked by the moderator, respondents specified that the economic arguments prevailed over political ones but their emotional reaction suggested that, in reality, political arguments had greater weight for them.

According to respondents, lots of local residents (about 1,500 people) are employed at the base and economically depend on wages they are paid there. Wages are paid in a timely way and are quite high by Georgian standards. Another positive factor is that the Russian base has arranged imports of foods (for instance wheat flour) and other goods, while local peasants are able to sell their agricultural products to the base personnel.

At the same time, the Russian base is viewed as a security guarantee, while Turkey is considered the main threat. The Armenian community’s historical perception of Turkey regards this country as an enemy (lots of Armenians were massacred in Turkey in the early XX century and only Russia was their savior at that time). Nobody believes that the Georgian army can effectively defend the region from Turkey, which it views as the historical enemy of Armenians. Moreover, respondents feared that after the Russian base withdrew from Georgia, it might be replaced with NATO troops, in particular, by Turkish army units. Such a possibility is especially unacceptable for them.

*“If the base pulls out, it may be replaced with the Turks. The Turks are our enemies and, therefore, we won’t accept it. They are respon-*

*sible for the genocide of Armenians. We will not allow the Russians to withdraw the base. They once tried to do it and all the people rose in protest. The same thing will happen again” (Group VI, No. 4, male, 64 years old)*

At the same time, a good number of the respondents said they expected the base to defend them from a likely aggression of their own state, Georgia. They recalled the policy of Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s government, which was aggressive towards ethnic minorities, promoting the idea: “Georgia for Georgians”. Respondents feared that the situation may recur and, if so, just the Russian base would be the only help for them.

*“We need the base as a protection against the Georgian government. If another Gamsakhurdia comes to power, we will need security guarantees” (Group II, No. 6, male, 28 years old).*

Georgian respondents did not share these arguments. However, they also are against the withdrawal of the base as they have gotten used to it, while an uncertain future frightens them. They also doubt that the government has any particular plans to solve the problems that may be brought about by the withdrawal process. However, the Georgian group expressed different opinions as well.

*“One can justify foreign military presence in the country from an economic viewpoint, but there are no political reasons for such presence, no matter whether it is the Russian or the Turkish army. Georgia must have its own army” (Group VI, No. 6, male, 33 years old)*

## The Georgian armed forces

In view of an expected withdrawal of the Russian military base, respondents analyzed Georgian military capabilities. They unanimously concluded that the Georgian-Turkish border was absolutely unprotected, Georgia had no army, and one could hardly count on hungry soldiers deployed in the region. In respondents’ words, 2-3 border guards, who are assigned to defend the border, are fed by local residents. In return for foods, the servicemen work for local peasants in their farms. Georgia lacks funds to maintain the army and recruits are not trained at all.

Respondents censured the government’s policy with regard to the so-called “force ministries”. In their opinion, the country does not need so many policemen and soldiers, especially with its meager state budget.

Also, the compulsory military service should be abolished. Part of the young respondents has served in the Georgian army. In their words, the army does not teach the soldiers anything but only hurts them. Quite often, servicemen return from the army as disabled people. The conscription system is unfair. As a rule, only conscripts from poor families are drafted. Many of them have health problems and should be deferred from the military service. Respondents suggested that a professional all-volunteer military force would better suit the country's needs.

*“Georgia must have a professional army. Soldiers should be paid salaries. In case of willingness young men must be able to opt for military professions” (Group VI, No. 7, male, 32 years old)*

### Repatriation of Muslim Meskhetians

The overwhelming majority of the respondents was flatly against repatriation of Muslim Meskhetians and expressed their attitude rather emotionally. They emphasized that the repatriation may trigger various conflicts. Respondents' opinions can be summarized in three main groups:

- ◆ A majority of respondents are flatly against repatriation.
- ◆ A small number of respondents acknowledged that Muslim Meskhetians have moral and legal rights for repatriation but they warned that under the current hard economic and political situation, the process might spark conflicts. This group includes also those respondents (mainly ethnic Georgians) who consented to repatriating Muslim Meskhetians but only after IDPs from other regions of Georgia (Abkhazia, South Ossetia) return to their homes.
- ◆ A rather small number of respondents neither objected to the repatriation nor believed that it may cause any conflicts. This group includes also those respondents who consented to the repatriation on condition that Muslim Meskhetians would be settled in other parts of Georgia, not Samtskhe-Javakheti.

On the whole, one can draw a conclusion that the local population views the problem of repatriation in the ethnic context rather than in terms of human and citizens' rights.

At the same time, it was obvious that respondents lacked information about the issue and relied mainly on rumors. Since the government does

not inform them about its plans, they feel that nobody is interested in their opinion. As a result, they are aggressive towards both the government and potential repatriates.

To justify their position, respondents first of all used economic arguments, just like they did in the issue of the Russian military base. However, the following discussion and emotional debates vindicated that ethno-political and historical arguments were more important.

The economic argument states that the country cannot afford additional burden in the current hard economic situation. Repatriation may worsen the social and economic situation of the region, creating favorable grounds for conflicts.

*“What will happen if there are two hungry men in a family and the third one joins them? Nothing good. They will clash with each other” (Group I, No. 7, female, 48 years old)*

*“Under current circumstances, Georgia will be hardly able to accommodate several thousand people in addition to its present population” (Group II, No. 2, male, 29 years old)*

Many respondents feared that repatriation might create problems in connection with the property, houses and lands of the repatriates. Former houses of Muslim Meskhetians and their lands now belong to other owners. In some districts, there are conflicts between local residents over the land ownership and repatriation will only worsen the situation. At the same time, it is noteworthy that a small number of Georgian respondents agreed that prospects were not so bad for repatriation and if necessary, land plots can be spared for repatriates.

Respondents also said that they would not consent to the repatriation of Muslim Meskhetians even if their economic situation improved. Whatever the economic situation is in the country, they said, Muslim Meskhetians should not be allowed to return to Georgia since there are other reasons for conflicts, particularly as conflicts may break out on the grounds of ethnicity or religion. It is noteworthy that some Georgian respondents were more tolerant: they said religion was unlikely to cause conflicts in the region. For instance, they referred to Muslim Ajarians who reside in the region without problems.

At the same time, the factor of ethnicity seems more significant. A majority of respondents (mainly ethnic Armenians and some Georgians) regarded Muslim Meskhetians as ethnic Turks. They considered them

enemies on the basis of historical arguments. In their opinion, ethnic Armenians and Georgians constitute the native population of the region, while the Turks are not welcome in Meskheti as they must live in their homeland, Turkey.

*“The Turks are enemies of the Armenians and Georgians. Joseph Stalin made a right decision to deport them from Georgia. Do you know how many Armenians they slaughtered? I think they must not return. Maybe Akhaltsikhe dwellers want them to return. If they return, there will be another Sumgait”* (Group I, No. 2, male, 73 years old).

*“The native population of the region consists of ethnic Armenians and Georgians. [Muslim] Meskhetians are guests here”* (Group II, No. 2, male, 29 years old)

Many respondents looked into the issue in the context of historical justice. As mentioned above, some Georgian respondents said they would consent to the repatriation only after Georgian refugees return to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Armenian respondents linked the issue to the events of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Armenian community was massacred in and expelled from Turkey. They argued rather emotionally that Muslim Meskhetians would have no rights to return to the region until Turkey recognized the genocide of Armenians. In their words, they will consent to the repatriation of Muslim Meskhetians, only if Turkey repatriates expelled Armenians and gives them back their lands.

*“Muslim Meskhetians will be able to return only if the Turks admit to having committed genocide of Armenians, give them back their lands, and pay damages”* (Group IV, No. 8, male, 45 years old)

Respondents were suspicious about the persistent intention of Muslim Meskhetians to settle in the economically backward region, even though local residents tend to emigrate from there. In their opinion, repatriates seem to have political motives or maybe some forces try to use them as a tool to achieve their political goals. Particularly, respondents claimed that repatriation of Muslim Meskhetians might be part of the Turkish expansionist strategy or an attempt to revive the Pan-Turkic policies.

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<sup>1</sup> Thousands of ethnic Armenians were massacred or ousted from the Azerbaijani town of Sumgait in 1998



*“Azerbaijan and Turkey have devised a plan to settle ethnic Turks in neighboring territories. They have a high birth rate and will soon outnumber and expel ethnic Armenians and Georgians. What will happen afterwards? Turkey will be the only state there” (Group V, No. 5, male, 52 years old)*

*“Some forces seem interested in their repatriation. Even local residents want to leave the region. The Pan-Turkist program is at work. They want to conquer these lands and unite the Muslim world” (Group III, No. 8, male, 29 years old)*

Some respondents (mainly the young) argued that while older Muslim Meskhetians might have nostalgia for their homeland, the young generation must not have such feelings. They know nothing about Georgia and are perfectly used to their present residence. As they keep insisting on getting back to Georgia, it means that there must be hidden political reasons.

Some respondents claimed that repatriates would be paid quite a lot of money in compensation. Besides, they also have accumulated quite large savings. So they will have enough money to settle in Javakheti. But if they are better off than the local population, local residents will become aggressive towards them.

Respondents suggested also that governmental officials may have lucrative interest in the repatriation, i.e. they may want to misappropriate large funds allocated to the process.

Respondents examined also the issue of responsibility for the deportation of Muslim Meskhetians in the past century. A majority of them blamed the deportation on the Soviet government and Joseph Stalin. It must be mentioned that some respondents – the elderly and the young alike – admitted that it was a right political decision at the time because Muslim Meskhetians could not be trusted. Anyway, respondents believed that neither the region’s population nor the Georgian government must be held responsible for the deportation. At present, only Russia or most likely Turkey must assume responsibility for Muslim Meskhetians as they are ethnic Turks.

### The border and customs checkpoint in Kartsakhi

Respondents’ attitudes towards the inauguration of the border and customs checkpoint on the border with Turkey near the village of Kartsakhi may be grouped into three categories:

- ◆ the region will not benefit from the Kartsakhi checkpoint, either economically or politically;
- ◆ the economic situation may improve in the region but some negative processes may ensue;
- ◆ the checkpoint will play a positive role and will not pose any dangers.

In all groups, a majority of respondents favored the first position, i. e. they were negative about the inauguration of the checkpoint at the Georgian-Turkish border. Some claimed that the region would get neither economic nor political benefits. Only corrupt officials are likely to profit from it. Respondents pointed to the operations of a similar checkpoint in the Akhaltsikhe district (Vale), which did not improve the economic situation of the local residents at all.

*“Only millionaires benefit from open borders. We will get nothing. It may be even worse for us as drug trafficking and crime will increase. They will force us into slave labour” (Group I, No. 3, male, 37 years old)*

Other respondents claimed that although the region may benefit from the checkpoint economically, the ensuing negative effects would outweigh the advantages. They also feared that drug trafficking and prostitution would increase. So would illegal logging of forests, resulting in soaring prices for wood.

A small number of the respondents (about one fifth of the total) – mostly young people and females – admitted that operations of the checkpoint may have positive effects as the growing turnover of goods would cut prices. Their opponents argued that prices might really drop, but only for low-quality products.

*“They import poor-quality wheat flour. When they live here, the Turks do not eat bread made from their flour” (Group V, No. 6, female, 35 years old)*

*“The Turks used to murder local residents 90 years ago. Today they may not kill them literally but prostitution and drugs will have the same effect. Javakheti will not benefit if the border is opened” (Group II, No. 1, male, 18 years old)*

Many opponents of the checkpoint viewed the issue in the context of Turkey’s image as an enemy. Some respondents claimed that it was

a political rather than economic issue. In their opinion, Azerbaijan will be able to import munitions and tanks openly through the new checkpoint – until now, such imports were secret. On the other hand, some respondents emphasized that despite such negative attitudes, a number of ethnic Armenians made regular trips to Turkey for trade operations.

### **Possible scenarios of future developments and respondents' recommendations**

When asked about their views on the future and possible solutions to the problems, respondents (especially from older age groups) did not seem too hopeful. In their words, it's no use speaking about the future as nothing will change anyway. Most respondents had ambivalent attitudes. On the one hand, their hopes for the future were not high, but at the same time they said the situation may somewhat improve with time.

A minority of the respondents drafted rather pessimistic scenarios: all local residents would emigrate and the region would come to a dead end. But despite many complaints, a larger group of respondents said they would try to do something to improve the life in the district.

Young respondents were also critical and skeptical but when "pressed" by the moderator to specify what must be done in the region, they came up with quite an extensive list of particular activities and problems that must be addressed. However, they expressed all their ideas in a skeptical vein. In their words, the region is hardly able to tackle the situation on its own, while the government is either unwilling or unable to solve local problems. This position can be summarized as follows: the region has enough human and natural resources to improve the political and economic situation but these resources are useless without state assistance and investments. External support must be directed to rebuild or construct local industrial enterprises. Afterwards, they will become profitable and continue to operate independently.

Young respondents participated in the discussion with more enthusiasm when it focused on the youth problems. In their words, they are ready to participate in any programs and activities but the lack of information and financial resources hamper their efforts.

At a brainstorming session, respondents formulated the following laundry list of recommendations on the most urgent needs and tasks of the region:

- ◆ roads must be repaired
- ◆ industrial enterprises must be restored, small businesses and farms should get assistance
- ◆ taxes must be reduced; the region needs a privileged taxation system due to its severe climate conditions
- ◆ the government must increase salaries and pensions, and pay them on time
- ◆ the government must do something about the problems of education
- ◆ medical care must be free of charge or at least there must be significant discounts for the poor
- ◆ information on the legislation and other issues must be available not only in Georgian but also in Armenian and Russian
- ◆ the local population, especially the youth, must be educated in laws and human rights
- ◆ the government must work out and implement a reasonable and humane state language program. To this end, local residents must get an opportunity to get respective education in Tbilisi and should be financially encouraged to get back to the region
- ◆ the gap between the centre and the regions must be narrowed. The government should take into consideration people's concerns. Democratic institutions must be established in the region, while the offices of gamebeli and rtsmunebuli (heads of district and regional administration respectively) should be elective
- ◆ human rights must be protected
- ◆ corruption should be checked at all levels and in all spheres. The information and communication network must be extended, and local mass media must progress
- ◆ cultural activities must be promoted
- ◆ the government should support youth initiatives and creation of youth organizations