

Javakheti after the Rose Revolution: progress and regress in the pursuit of national unity in Georgia

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**Javakheti after the Rose Revolution:
Progress and Regress in the Pursuit of National Unity
in Georgia**

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I. INTRODUCTION

Javakheti¹ is situated in the South-East of Georgia, and is densely inhabited by Georgia's second largest national minority, Armenians.² In most respects, Javakheti has been more dependent on Russia (in socio-economic terms) and Armenia (in cultural terms) than on its proper state, Georgia, since Georgia gained independence in 1991. Throughout the 1990s the region was often described as a 'potential hot-spot', yet another possible breakaway region in the Caucasus. This working paper will look into whether the situation has started to change in terms of whether Javakheti is now closer to becoming an integrated part of Georgia, given that territorial unity has been one of the main priorities of the Georgian government since the 'Rose Revolution' of 2003. The aim of this paper is thus to create a better understanding of the challenges that Javakheti faces, in order to facilitate an informed debate on the current situation and the future development of the region.

This study is based on more than 50 interviews with local inhabitants, the authorities and other related parties as well as on a review of legal documents and analytical articles during November-December 2006.³ The paper is structured in four main parts. First, the recent socio-economic developments in Javakheti will be accounted for. Second, the main NGOs and political actors in the region will be identified and the role of Armenia and Russia will be outlined. At the same time, a recent history of power structures will be provided, as well as an analysis of the current lack of a central framework for integration policies in Georgia. Subsequently the consequences of the ongoing local self-governance reforms, the local elections and the government's attempts to create national unity will be analysed. Finally differences in perceptions between Georgians and Armenians will be elaborated on.

¹ European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) has been present in Javakheti since 2003. By establishing a resource centre in Akhalkalaki (2004) and by assisting in the establishment of Javakheti Citizen's Forum (2005) it works to enhance the local civil society network, through community mobilisation and dialogue with central actors. ECMI has also carried out several fact-finding missions and published policy-oriented working papers. The first ECMI working paper on Javakheti, 'Obstacles Impeding the Regional Integration of the Javakheti Region of Georgia', was finalized in 2004 by Jonathan Wheatley, and can be found at http://www.ecmi.de/download/working_paper_22.pdf.

² According to the 2002 census there are 248,929 Armenians in Georgia. 90,373 of them live in Javakheti and 22,974 in Samtskhe. The remaining Armenians mainly reside in Tbilisi. In addition, there are ethnic Armenians residing in the breakaway republic of Abkhazia, but they were not accounted for in the census.

³ A substantial number of research and fact-finding missions have been conducted in the region. For readers who are not familiar with the region it is therefore recommended to get additional background information. For ECMI reports see www.ecmi.de/rubrik/58/working+papers.

II. JAVAKHETI IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC TERMS

Javakheti⁴ is part of the Samtskhe-Javakheti *mkhare* (province).⁵ It borders both Armenia and Turkey. The climate is harsh, and a significant share of its territory is covered by high mountains.⁶ Javakheti is composed of the *rayon* (districts) of Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki. In Akhalkalaki *rayon* 51 out of the 61 villages with election precincts⁷ are ethnic Armenian, while seven are Georgian (Gogasheni, Apnia, Kotelia, Okami, Azmana, Ptena, Chunchkha), two are mixed Georgian-Armenian (Baraleti and Murjakheti) and one is mixed Armenian, Georgian and Greek (Khospio).⁸ In Ninotsminda *rayon* 29 of the 31 villages with election precincts are Armenian, while one village (Spasovka) is mainly inhabited by Georgians resettled from Ajara in the beginning of the 1990s and one is mixed Armenian and Russian Dukhobor (Gorelovka).⁹

Table 1: Inhabitants of Javakheti according to the 2002 census¹⁰

	Georgians	Armenians	Russians ¹¹	Greeks	Others	In total
Akhalkalaki <i>rayon</i>	3,214	57,516	157	51	37	60,975
Ninotsminda <i>rayon</i>	476	32,857	943	5	24	34,305
In total	3,690	90,373	1,100	56	45	95,280

An important factor behind Javakheti's current isolation and lack of effective infrastructure is its geographic position. The isolation was reinforced during Soviet times by the fact that the region

⁴ Javakheti is the Georgian denotation of this region, in Armenian it is *Javakhk*.

⁵ The province of Samtskhe-Javakheti was created as part of an administrative-territorial reform in 1994 by merging the historical regions of Samtskhe and Javakheti.

⁶ Akhalkalaki city is at an altitude of 1,750 above sea level, while several of the villages in Ninotsminda *rayon* are located on more than 2,000 metres above sea level.

⁷ One election precinct has at least a hundred inhabitants.

⁸ According to the 2002 census there are 56 Greeks in Javakheti, 51 in Akhalkalaki *rayon* and 5 in Ninotsminda *rayon*. In Samtskhe there are in total 684 Greeks. The majority of Greeks fled to Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli from the Ottoman Empire in the early 19th century, while a small share are Caucasian Greeks who lived in Georgia since ancient times. Author's interview with one of the active Greeks in Akhalkalaki.

⁹ The village of Gorelovka is the last compact settlement of Dukhobors in the South Caucasus; Dukhobors are a Russian ethno-religious sect that was forced to resettle in Georgia in the early 19th century. Apart from Gorelovka there are still Dukhobors residing in the villages of Ninotsminda, Orlovka, Efremovka, Spasovka, Sameba, Tambovka and Rodionovka. For more information see Hedvig Lohm, 'Dukhobors in Georgia: A Study of the Issue of Land Ownership and Inter-Ethnic Relations in Ninotsminda rayon (Samtskhe-Javakheti)'. ECMI Working Paper 35. November 2006 available at http://www.ecmi.de/download/working_paper_28.pdf.

¹⁰ *The Results of the First National Population Census of Georgia of the year 2002*; State Statistics Department of Georgia. (Tbilisi: State Statistical Department of Georgia; LTD 'Informational Publishing Centre' Book I, 2003).

¹¹ The Russians are in most cases the Dukhobor population.

shares a border with Turkey. This was one of two direct borders between the Soviet Union and a NATO country, and a 78 km long stretch of land constituted a closed border zone subject to strict travel limitations. The region was dominated by the Russian 62nd divisional base located in the biggest town in Javakheti, Akhalkalaki. Generally speaking, the region was not prioritised in terms of socio-economic development. Apart from the base, it relied mainly on agriculture, specifically by producing dairy products and potatoes. As the Soviet market collapsed and civil wars erupted, the region of Javakheti became virtually isolated from the rest of Georgia in terms of transport infrastructure and economic ties.

The socio-economic problems affecting all of Georgia's regions during the 1990s were endemic in Javakheti: mass unemployment, a bad electricity situation, poor infrastructure and high levels of corruption. Javakheti experienced massive out-migration, mainly to the Russian Federation. There are no official emigration figures, but it can be assumed that as many as 20-30 percent of the population has left.¹² Today most of the remaining inhabitants are relying on subsistence agriculture and cash transfers from relatives in Russia. Since the current government came to power socio-economic conditions in general have improved; nevertheless, conditions have deteriorated somewhat for individual households in Javakheti.

1. The Current Socio-Economic Situation

Certain significant improvements in the economic situation have been observed since the current government took over in late 2003. Today, the Georgian government is regularly distributing state pensions and salaries of public servants throughout the country. Even though the reimbursements remain meagre (the standard state pension is 38 Georgian Lari per month, i.e. around 20 USD), it is an important cash inflow for the impoverished population, who often did not receive any salaries or reimbursements during Shevardnadze's presidency. Another change for the better is a more reliable supply of electricity to the region.¹³ The provision of potable water and the irrigation system have also improved, although some more remote villages still share one single water source (Poka is one example). The state has arranged several youth camps

¹²The official decrease of the population from 1989 to 2002 is however only 11 percent. (It decreased from 107,003 to 95,280.) It can be assumed that the actual decrease of the population is higher than these official figures suggest, since the individuals leaving for seasonal and/or permanent work in Russia are for the most part still included in the 2002 statistics.

¹³Partly this is due to an Armenian-Georgian agreement on providing electricity from an Armenian power plant. See Mikael Hertoft, 'Javakheti: The Temperature 2005'. (ECMI Occasional Paper, April 2006 available at http://www.ecmigeorgia.org/works/occasional_paper_hertoft) at page 20.

where youths from different parts of Georgia meet, which is commonly perceived as a positive integrating initiative. Another positive change is the construction of several football stadiums and sports complexes in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda.

It is also noteworthy that the circulation of Georgian Lari (hereafter referred to as GEL) has increased markedly in Javakheti. Five years ago the Russian rouble was practically the only currency in Javakheti, while today the division is approximately 50-50 in market stalls and shops. The local economy has thereby moved closer towards integrating into the national economy. In terms of financial activities three Georgian banks are nowadays present in Javakheti: the Sakhalkho Bank, the United Georgian Bank and Taobank. Moreover Credo, a credit institution affiliated with World Vision International and the 'Microfinance Centre for Central and Eastern Europe and the New Independent States', has started giving credits to small businesses.

The most significant changes are the extensive infrastructural programs that are being carried out in Javakheti. The Georgian government is investing 25 million USD in the rehabilitation of the road between Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki, which was half-way complete at the time of writing. More importantly, the American 'Millennium Challenge Georgia Fund' is investing 102 million USD in the rehabilitation of the Akhalkalaki-Ninotsminda-Tsalka-Tbilisi road.¹⁴ The repair works will start in mid-2007. The reconstructed Tsalka road will shorten travel time by car from Javakheti to the capital by several hours, since it will be possible to avoid the detour via Akhaltsikhe and Borjomi. The Georgian government has also undertaken to restore the railway from Tbilisi to Akhalkalaki via Tsalka.¹⁵ This will connect with a new railway that is to be built from Akhalkalaki to Kars in Turkey.¹⁶ Once the Kars railway is finalised it will

¹⁴ See www.mcg.ge and Economic Policy Research Center Monitoring of Millennium Challenge Program at osgf.ge/data/file_db/Publications/MCG_Report_ENG_TAAtNu7zIV4.pdf

¹⁵ An old one-track railway connection between Tbilisi and Akhalkalaki via Ninotsminda was already restored by the Georgian government in the summer of 2006. It is scheduled to run only from May to October. The rest of the year the tracks are blocked by snow.

¹⁶ In January 2007 the Azeri government agreed on a long-term 200 million USD loan to the Georgian government to finalise its share of the railroad. Estimates for the total cost of the project vary from USD 400 million to USD 600 million. USD 300 million is supposed to be invested in Akhalkalaki *rayon* in order to construct a 29-kilometre railway track from Akhalkalaki to the Turkish border and to further rehabilitate the 192-kilometre section between Akhalkalaki and Tbilisi. See *Civil Georgia*, 'Azerbaijan, 'Georgia Close to Finalize Deal on Railway Project', 2007-01-12, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=14444>.

connect Turkey and Azerbaijan and will simplify cargo transport from Central Asia and China to Europe.¹⁷

A factor that impacts negatively on the overall socio-economic situation in Javakheti is the rampant increase in prices occurring throughout Georgia, partly as a consequence of the Russian economic sanctions and the increase in fuel costs. (For more elaboration on Russian influences see below.) During 2006, the inflation rate was 8.8 percent and the price of food and non-alcoholic drinks rose by 13.4 percent.¹⁸

2. Transformation of Agriculture

Another reason for the somewhat deteriorated condition of household economies is the transformation of the agricultural sector. Even though Javakheti was an isolated region during Soviet times it was, in agricultural terms, rather fruitful. The black soil is found in the region is productive even though the harsh climate creates a short season. During the Soviet period meat, dairy products, barley, wheat, oats, green peas and lentils were produced. Except for the people employed at the military base, the majority of the population worked in the collective agricultural sector, in the so-called *sovkhozes* and *kolkhozes*. There was also an established food processing industry that processed and distributed agricultural produce throughout the centrally planned Soviet system. When the Soviet Union fell apart the *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes* were abolished and much of their property was embezzled. Together with the collapse of the economic and infrastructural system, this had an immense impact on the region. A few influential people were able to secure the most important assets (such as farm machinery) and the biggest parcels of lands. In most villages, 2-3 families have control over 200-300 hectares, while the rest of the population have typically 1.25 hectares each (at the very best 5 hectares).¹⁹ These large-scale

¹⁷ Armenia, however, opposes the project and urges that the Kars-Gyumri rail link be restored. This link is presently closed due to the trade blockade imposed on Armenia by Azerbaijan and Turkey after the Nagorny Karabakh war. Allegedly, the Armenian lobby also managed to make the US refrain from investing in the Kars-Akhalkalaki project. In Javakheti local nationalist organisations – chiefly *Virk* and *United Javakhk* – also oppose the project. However, a fair share of the local population sees potential socio-economic advantages in the project. Nevertheless, several respondents are concerned by the fact that these major infrastructural investments so far have not generated employment opportunities for the local workforce. *Civil Georgia*, ‘Tbilisi, Baku Agree on Funding of Regional Railway Link’, 2007-01-13, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=14447>.

¹⁸ See www.statistics.ge.

¹⁹ One important state reform in the early 1990s was to grant each household a maximum of 1.25 hectares of land for free, and it is not rare that this is the only land available for farmers. For more information see Hedvig Lohm, ‘Dukhobors in Georgia: A Study of the Issue of Land Ownership and Inter-Ethnic Relations in Ninotsminda rayon (Samtskhe-Javakheti)’, (ECMI Working Paper 35. November 2006.) available at http://www.ecmi.de/download/working_paper_28.pdf.

landowners were often able to secure this land illegally by knowing (or bribing) the right people in the local bureaucracy. Meanwhile, the majority of people were left with too small land plots and too few resources to create productive and profitable farming units.²⁰ There is also a lack of tractors, seeding machines, ploughs, combines, high quality seeds, pesticides, fertilisers, updated irrigation systems²¹ and qualified veterinarians. During recent years plagues of field mice have destroyed a large part of the harvest. Approximately 45 GEL is needed just to cultivate one hectare, excluding the costs of hiring a tractor and buying seeds, fertilizers and pesticides. Often people cultivate by hand or by horsepower since they cannot afford modern machinery. Furthermore, there are no remaining stoking-up sites, processing industries or canning factories, and given the bad roads to the major markets and the high costs of transportation, it is hardly profitable to bring agricultural products to Tbilisi (this will however improve with the ongoing road rehabilitations).²² Most farmers cultivate potatoes or let their animals graze on their fields. Then they either barter with farmers from other regions, or sell milk to the few cheese factories that exist locally. The Akhalkalaki farmers more often sell potatoes in Tbilisi compared to the farmers in Ninotsminda, who seem to rely on barter to a greater extent.²³

Currently, a second round of privatisation of agricultural lands is taking place in Georgia. Small-scale farmers without proper contracts for their leased lands will most likely be the losers in these changes, since they do not have the means to benefit from privatisation. Most will lack the means to buy cadastral maps and register documents in order to buy lands at special auctions. In addition, there is a major risk that the farmers will not be properly informed by the local authorities. If this process is not transparent and effective, economic conditions for subsistence farmers will deteriorate even further and this will also increase tension between different groups and families.²⁴

Since agriculture does not generate an income for most people, it is necessary for each family to find additional jobs. Merely heating a normal Javakheti house costs around 700-1,000

²⁰ Mercy Corps is currently developing a project on agricultural cooperatives in Akhalkalaki *rayon* to help farmers to pool resources and machinery. In addition, the Millennium Challenge Fund Georgia is giving grants to individual farmers and cooperatives all over Georgia.

²¹ UNDP and CHF have invested money in repairing some of the main irrigation systems in the region.

²² Both World Vision International's Georgia's Entrepreneurs' Fund (GEF) and CHF's 'Georgia Employment and Infrastructure Initiative' is developing projects to rehabilitate infrastructure and to assist in establishing Micro Finance businesses, for example in cheese-producing mini-factories. See respectively http://www.worldvision.org/about_us.nsf/child/aboutus_georgia?Open#today and http://geiiwebsite.web-prs.com/portals/_GEII/static_files/CurrentCHFCommunities.pdf.

²³ Author's interviews.

²⁴ For more information on land privatisation see Lohm, 'Dukhobors in Georgia...'.

USD per winter. In most villages, these costs may be bypassed by drying dung and using it for heating. This is, however, a heavy and time-consuming activity.

3. Socio-Economic Dependency on Russia

From the government's point of view, the main achievement in Javakheti is the complete withdrawal of the 62nd Divisional Russian military base in Akhalkalaki that should be finalised during 2007. Russia has been committed to this withdrawal since 1999, but it was only initiated after a deal was struck in early 2006.²⁵ The Russian military has already withdrawn a major share of its artillery by transporting material to Gyumri in Armenia.²⁶ While this is a step towards consolidating Georgian territorial integrity, it is not welcomed by the population in Javakheti, who are socio-economically dependent on the base. Even though the Georgian government has given away some vague promises on job generation, ranging from plans by the Ministry of Defence to buy milk and potatoes from Javakheti to the establishment of a new Georgian base in Akhalkalaki,²⁷ there are no indications that the government is preparing any active development policy in the region.

Previously the military base, which employed some 1,500-2,000 men, was the main employer in Akhalkalaki *rayon*. (Few households in Ninotsminda *rayon* have been dependent on the base.) The monthly salary for local military servicemen is approximately 300 USD – a good salary in Javakheti terms. In addition, the base has employed local support personnel at the hospital and at a Russian school that is located there. Around the base a local service sector has developed that supplies food and additional services. The base has also created a substantial shadow economy market of gasoline, petrol and building materials.²⁸ Therefore it is difficult to estimate how much the base adds to the local economy. Most estimates range from 500,000 GEL

²⁵ *Civil Georgia*, 'Georgia ratifies Military Treaties with Russia', 2006-04-13, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=12339>.

²⁶ See Vladimir Socor, 'Moscow signals it may redeploy some forces from Georgia to Armenia'. *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 2005-05-24, Volume 2, Issue 101. When it comes to the rest of Georgia the Tbilisi garrison has already been evacuated, while the base in Batumi will be closed by 2008. See *Civil Georgia*, 'Russia Withdraws Tbilisi Garrison Ahead of Schedule', 2006-10-11, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=13839> and *Civil Georgia*, 'Okruashvili Downplays Russia's Threats to Suspend Troop Pullout', 2006-09-30, at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=13713>.

²⁷ *Civil Georgia*, 'Saakashvili Calls to 'End the Isolation' of Javakheti', 2005-09-07, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=10697>. See also David Young, 'Javakheti – Georgia's contagious separatism' May 11, 2006. *Transitions Online*. Available at <http://www.gfsis.org/pub/eng/showpub.php?detail=1&id=99>.

²⁸ See Ekaterine Metreveli. *The Dynamics of Frozen Tension – Case of Javakheti*. (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, Tbilisi, 2004).

to 1,000,000 GEL per month. In comparison, the 2006 annual budget of the *gamgeoba* in Akhalkalaki was 1,972,000 GEL.

The other main source of income for local families is seasonal labour migration to the Russian Federation. In most families it is claimed that at least one male family member worked in Russia during the 1990s on a seasonal basis. It is difficult to estimate how much money is being transferred from Russia, since it is often not done via banks. Some claim that per day more than 25,000 USD are being transferred only via banks.²⁹ This seasonal labour migration has, however, diminished. Already in the year 2000 the conditions of the (often illegal) Caucasian immigrants became more complex as Russia imposed a visa regime on Georgian citizens. Moreover, considering the dramatic deterioration of relations between Russia and Georgia in the autumn of 2006, illegal migrants currently face the possibility of deportation. The attitude towards Caucasians in Russia has also deteriorated.³⁰ Some of the migrants from Javakheti circumvent many of the obstacles by buying an Armenian passport on the black market, but this is a costly, illegal and risky alternative. The procedure costs at least 3,000 USD in bribes and all Armenian citizens run the risk of being forcefully conscripted to the Armenian army.

Local trade is dependent on selling small-scale contraband products (i.e. everyday commodities transported from Armenia). As the central authorities are cracking down on contraband trade all over Georgia, this business has become a risky project.

Thus, while socio-economic prospects in general have improved for the region, mainly through new infrastructural investments, household economies have become increasingly strained. This is mainly due to the small-scale, outdated agricultural structure, which does not make farming worthwhile. At the same time prices of basic commodities are soaring, the main employer (i.e. the military base) is closing down and it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain seasonal work in Russia.

²⁹ Sergey Minasyan; 'Situation in Javakheti in the context of the problem of Russian Military Bases' Withdrawal from Georgia', *21st Century*; Volume 1, 2005.

³⁰ Author's interview. One interviewee said that his relative had now returned to Javakheti 'voluntarily' since he could not bear the constant harassment by the Russian authorities, and the necessity of paying at least 30 GEL a day in bribes to Russian officials and policemen.

III. DIFFERENT ACTORS IN JAVAKHETI

1. *Tbilisi influence on Javakheti*

In practice, Javakheti was beyond the jurisdiction and control of the centre during the early years of independence.³¹ Since the central authorities were not strong enough to uphold control of remote regions, alternative power structures developed. We will now look into how Javakheti was ruled, and to some extent is still being governed.

Throughout the nineties, the then Head of State, Eduard Shevardnadze, gradually developed a power strategy that suited his purposes for Javakheti and kept secessionist sentiments at bay. It was based on aligning with, and co-opting, influential local power-brokers. If someone became too radical, his nationalist sentiments would often be tempered by his being offered a lucrative post either in Tbilisi (for example as a parliamentarian enjoying immunity from prosecution) or in local power structures (for example as head of local customs). These offers were, for the most part, accepted. The power brokers would then be balanced against each other in order to avoid one player becoming too influential. It is common to refer to these players as ‘clans’, implying an influential extended family business occupying influential political posts and controlling important economic activities in the region (for example petrol, firewood, restaurants and hotels).

Interestingly enough it seems that the current government still relies on this strategy, despite dispensing with it in most other regions of Georgia (especially Tbilisi). One example is how one of the early nationalist activists in Javakheti is now chief of police in Akhalkalaki (see below). Another recent example of how this co-optation mechanism works was observed in the aftermath of the local elections in Ninotsminda *rayon* in October 2006. During these elections there was only one party registered in the *rayon* – Saakashvili’s ‘National Movement’. (This was the case in six other *rayons* in Georgia.)³² On the party list there were, however, representatives from two clans – some representing the interests of the previous acting *gamgebeli* (head of administration at *rayon* level), and some representing those of the majoritarian MP from

³¹ Two commonly cited examples are firstly how Gamsakhurdia failed to appoint ethnic Georgian *prefects* in Akhalkalaki and eventually was forced to appoint an Armenian *prefect*. (The *prefect* was executive head of the *rayon*, corresponding with today’s *gamgebeli*.) The second example took place during the days of the Military Council (1992) when the citizens of Javakheti were able to prevent the National Guard from entering Javakheti. See Voitsekhi Guretski, ‘The Question of Javakheti’, *Caucasian Regional Studies*, Vol. 3, Issue 1, 1998.

³² The National Movement got all 10 proportional seats in Ninotsminda *rayon*. In addition, 9 out of 10 Majoritarians are members of National Movement, while 1 independent candidate was elected.

Ninotsminda. When the votes were counted in the *rayon* it turned out that those loyal to the *gamgebeli* had a majority in the 20-seat *sakrebulo*. After an appeal against voting irregularities in one village (Orjalar) was turned down by the local court, the *sakrebulo* voted for the former acting *gamgebeli* as its speaker (which has become an influential post after the local self governance reforms). This was, however, not pleasing to the central players in the National Movement. A meeting was held on November 15, allegedly attended by the newly-elected speaker, the MP, the President's Plenipotentiary Representative in Samtskhe-Javakheti, a vice speaker of the Georgian parliament, and another National Movement member. Once the meeting was over, the speaker handed in his letter of resignation and two weeks later he was arrested on charges of financial fraud.³³ One local NGO representative described the event by saying that 'these are not democratic elections, it is still just the old type of appointments – one person was elected, but this was not acceptable so therefore the election had to be re-run.

The Ninotsminda MP is also an example of how Javakheti's main power brokers managed to survive the Rose Revolution. This MP was a loyal supporter of Shevardnadze from 1999 until the Rose revolution. When the tables turned, he changed his political affiliation and survived. Such a quick reorientation was, for the most part, not possible for Shevardnadze's former allies in Tbilisi, but in Javakheti the main players remained in power. Even though the *sakrebulo*s have new members after the local elections, the system has not changed. The structure of co-optation from central levels is one of the main impediments to change in the region. The co-opted players retain their *status quo* since it is in their interest that government actors remain convinced that they are the only ones who can be trusted, banging the drum against 'Russian-influenced separatists'. In Section V, this working paper will discuss the more 'official' ways for the government to establish control, or national unity, over Javakheti.

2. Role of Armenia and Russia

It is important to bear in mind that Javakheti previously had almost no contacts with Georgia. Culturally and historically their ethnic kinsmen in Armenia have played a more important role than Georgia, while Russia is the socio-economic anchor and security guarantor. In Armenia, more than 100,000 citizens are recent migrants from Javakheti³⁴; emigration started after World

³³ Author's interview.

³⁴ See Clair Delessard, 'The "Orphans" of Javakheti', *Georgia +*, Issue 1, June 2005.

War II and has continued since then.³⁵ This constitutes an important impetus for Armenia to incorporate Javakheti issues onto its own political agenda as well as for the continuation of humanitarian assistance to the region. When Georgia declared independence in 1991 many Armenian Javakhetians had already voluntarily participated in the Nagorny Karabakh war, which began in 1988. But even though Javakheti gathered weapons and emotions ran high, a violent secessionist movement never emerged. The standard explanation is that their mother country, Armenia, could not afford to fight on two fronts; enemies in both Azerbaijan and Georgia would leave Armenia virtually blockaded.³⁶ Thus, for geopolitical reasons the Armenian authorities are interested in maintaining good relations with Tbilisi rather than taking sides with Javakhetians. In its new 'National Security Strategy' Armenia identifies the Russian Federation and Georgia as its two main strategic partners.³⁷ Another example of how Yerevan is trying to please Tbilisi is the recent arrest by Armenian Special Forces of one of the most active Javakheti nationalists.³⁸ "Yerevan does not like it that we have an agenda", as the activist himself commented.³⁹

The influence of Russia can be accounted for in both socio-economic and psychological terms. As described in detail above, both remittances from seasonally employed Javakhetians in Russia and the contribution of the military base constitute the main cash inflows to the region. Beyond this, however, there are also psychological factors that underpin the importance of Russia in the perception of Javakhetian Armenians. Most Armenians argue that they have shared habits and mentality with Russians ever since the 1830s when the Russians conquered the region from the Ottomans. As one respondent explained: "The Russian soldiers may be bad or good, corrupted or not, but they are *our Russians* – we know them. With others, NATO forces for example, we don't know them and that scares us."⁴⁰ The base is thus seen as a security guarantee by the population in Javakheti, who for the most part settled there after upheavals in the Ottoman Empire (both in the 1820s and the 1910s). Many of them have ancestors that fled from the

³⁵ There are several socio-economic organisations in Armenia for Javakheti Armenians, among them the political party 'Zor Airenik' (Mighty Homeland). See Zaal Anjaparidze, 'Javakheti region complicates Georgian relations with Armenia', *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 2005-05-24. Volume 2, Issue 101.

³⁶ See, among others, Svante Cornell, *Small Autonomy and conflict: ethnoterritoriality and separatism in the south Caucasus - cases in Georgia*. (Uppsala, Institutionen för freds- och konfliktforskning, 2002.)

³⁷ Reported by Interfax news service February 8, 2007.

³⁸ The Armenian Special Forces arrested one of the *United Javakhk* leaders, Vahag Chakhalyan, for having 'illegally passed the border without sufficient identification' – which is quite a strange claim in Javakheti, where people go to Armenia on an everyday basis, often with insufficient documents. The arrest came after *United Javakhk* had raided the local election commission in Akhalkalaki in October 2006. After one month, Chakhalyan returned to Javakheti, after becoming a *persona non grata* in Armenia.

³⁹ Author's interview, December 2006.

⁴⁰ Author's interview.

Turkish massacres of Christians in the 1910s, and they are still suffering from the trauma, under the impression that the Turks will come back to kill them.⁴¹ This fear is a crucial part of the collective identity of many Armenians in Javakheti, and it is being continuously transmitted to younger generations: even nursery rhymes touch upon it.⁴² Surprisingly, the base is also considered an important security guarantor by locals against *Georgian* aggression.⁴³

3. International NGO involvement in Javakheti

During the 21st century several international organisations have carried out projects in Javakheti. The Program of Conflict Prevention and Integration of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (which incorporates legal assistance, language training and special re-broadcasting of Georgian news from the main channels into Armenian) has probably had the most impact on the region, especially through its news re-broadcasting.⁴⁴ However, the OSCE is now withdrawing from Javakheti, and stepping up its activities in Kvemo Kartli *mkhare*. The UNDP Samtskhe-Javakheti Integrated Development Programme (SIIDP) has been active in the region for several years, but most respondents are not well aware of what UNDP is actually doing. Under its 300 million USD program the American ‘Millennium Challenge Georgia Fund’ has – apart from the major Javakheti road rehabilitation program – projects to improve the performances of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, as well as agribusiness development activities in Georgia which will benefit Javakheti as well as other regions of Georgia.⁴⁵ International NGOs such as Care, CHF, CIMERA, ECMI, Mercy Corps, Urban Institute and World Vision International also carry out projects in Javakheti.

In addition, Javakheti receives support from the Armenian state. Sixteen schools were renovated in Samtskhe-Javakheti during 2006 (400,000 USD), and school books, encyclopaedias and other equipment were donated. Each year the Armenian state also finances university studies for 70

⁴¹ In this sense, the recent murder of the Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink did not improve Armenian-Turkish relations. In Akhalkalaki there was a meeting to honour Dink’s funeral on January 23, 2007.

⁴² One rhyme goes “When you grow up you have to get big and strong so you can kill many Turks.”

⁴³ See for example Niklas Nilsson, *Threats to National Community – A Minor Field Study on Threat Perceptions and National Identity in Georgia*. (Department of Political Science, Lund University, Sweden, 2005).

⁴⁴ See Stephanie Kautzman Bjøro *Integration as a Conflict Regulation Mechanism – an Analysis of the OSCE’s Integration Program in Samtskhe-Javakheti, Georgia*. (Oslo, The Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Oslo, 2005).

⁴⁵ See http://www.mcg.ge/english/Our_works.htm.

students from Samtskhe-Javakheti in Armenia.⁴⁶ Moreover, Javakheti receives humanitarian assistance from the rather influential Armenian Diaspora in the US and France. One important Diaspora organisation is HOM (an abbreviation for Union of Armenian Aid). HOM was established as a charity organisation in 2002 and gives assistance to medical institutions, for socio-economic improvements (mainly renovations of schools) and, according to its representative, also cooperates with the local church to help people to 'find their faith'.⁴⁷ Another active organisation is the 'Dashnak Javakhk Relief Program Committee' which has channelled more than 250,000 USD to Javakheti since 2001.⁴⁸

4. Local actors and organisations in Javakheti

There are more than 50 registered local NGOs in Javakheti, but only a few of them are actually active. In the Javakheti Citizen's Forum⁴⁹, for example, there are about 15 local NGOs cooperating on regional integration and development issues. In terms of local socio-political organisations there are several that share the same nationalist ideology and agenda. These organisations rely on a couple of hundred active supporters, and when sensitive issues come to the fore, they manage to mobilise a larger number of people to attend their demonstrations. As Marina Elbakidze at the 'Caucasian Centre for Peace, Democracy and Development' explained: "There is one standard set of issues that you can always mobilise the population in Akhalkalaki around: before it was the Russian military base, but it became passé after the Russians agreed to start withdrawing. Now it is the status of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the churches in Javakheti, the right to use Armenian as a regional administrative language and maybe opposing the Kars-Akhalkalaki railway."⁵⁰ The central authorities and also ethnic Armenian parliamentarians tend to stress that the demonstrations are staged, paid for by Russia. This, however, seems unlikely. Some funding for these organisations certainly comes from abroad, often from the Armenian Diaspora or from successful Armenian businessmen in Russia. Most importantly, it seems that nationalist ideology rather appeals to the locals. Even if they might not agree with the more radical statements, they still attend the meetings.

⁴⁶ See for example International Crisis Group, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*. (Crisis Group Europe Report Issue 178, 22 November 2006 at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4517&l=1>), p.29.

⁴⁷ Author's interview.

⁴⁸ International Crisis Group, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*... at page 19.

⁴⁹ Javakheti Citizen's Forum was established by ECMI and it seeks to promote dialogue between central authorities and local actors, as well as to further the integration of the region of Javakheti.

⁵⁰ Author's interview.

In terms of local political activity it is important to understand the slight difference between Akhalkalaki *rayon* and Ninotsminda *rayon*. The political scene tends to be more complex and volatile in Akhalkalaki. In general the population of the latter is more easily mobilised and highly suspicious of ‘Georgian initiatives’, whilst the Ninotsminda dwellers seem to be more inclined to local intrigues. This difference in mentality may be created by the presence of the military base in Akhalkalaki, generating possibilities for closer links with Russia and for trading. Therefore the organisations with a nationalist agenda have their hubs in Akhalkalaki. The most important actors are *Javakhk*, *Virk*, JEMM (Javakheti Youth Sport Union) and ‘United Javakhk’.

The oldest player is ***Javakhk***, which was established in 1988 to preserve Armenian cultural heritage, science and history, and to promote the protection of national institutions and the development of the region. Local activists, including Samvel Petrosyan, today’s Head of Police in Akhalkalaki *rayon*, were the initiators of this movement. Before 1995, *Javakhk* was, in practice, running the show in Javakheti. Since then, it has lost its central position, and several of its members are now members of the National Movement.

Virk became famous in 2002, when David Rstakyan tried to register it as a political party. According to the Georgian Law on Political Associations of Citizens (Article 6) it is illegal to establish parties according to a regional or territorial basis, and because of this Rstakyan failed to establish a proper party. Today, Rstakyan claims that *Virk* has more than 7,000 members all over Georgia,⁵¹ but this number seems exaggerated. Others estimate that the organisation has a maximum of 1,000 active members – maybe less. Even though *Virk* seems to be less influential today than it was a couple of years ago, the organisation is respected among locals and its demands to make Javakheti an independent administrative region, and for the right to register *Virk* as a regional political party, has strong support.

In recent years **JEMM** has established itself as a popular actor on the local scene (JEMM became a registered NGO in 2001). Its goal is to make the youth stay in Javakheti, by creating better opportunities and activities for them. Among other things, JEMM established a big sports gym in Akhalkalaki and about 20 gyms in surrounding villages. They also have a radio station (even though they claim that the local authorities are disturbing their frequency) and publish a monthly magazine, *Khachatun*. In addition, they established a Boy Scouts organisation. Some

⁵¹ Author’s interview.

respondents claim that their leader, Vahag Chakhalyan, is following close in the footsteps of *Virk*. He and JEMM allegedly also have connections with the French Diaspora and receive donations from rich Armenian businessmen in Russia.

Recently *United Javakhk* has attracted the most attention, with JEMM activists as its most prominent participants (including Chakhalyan). It functions as a rather amorphous umbrella organisation for local actors. *United Javakhk* was established on March 10 2005, in direct connection with the Georgian parliament's resolution demanding an immediate withdrawal of the Russian military bases in Georgia, and arranged two major demonstrations against the withdrawal (March 13 and March 31). Back then the withdrawal was a very sensitive issue for Javakhetians and had the potential to mobilise much of the population. As a result, *United Javakhk* grew very influential. According to themselves, they filed an application both in 2005 and 2006 to become a political party, which was rejected on the same basis as *Virk*. In order to circumvent the ban on regional parties, *United Javakhk* leaders decided to strike a deal with the party 'Industry Will Save Georgia' in order to participate in the October 2006 local elections (see below).

In addition, there are some other organisations based on 'the standard Javakheti nationalist agenda', such as the *Union of Intellectuals*. Allegedly, some Akhalkalaki actors are also affiliated with the pan-Armenian party *Dashnaktsutyun* (the Armenian Revolutionary Federation); a radical party that propagated aligning Javakheti with Armenia throughout the 1990s.⁵²

⁵² In the party program of Dashnaktsutyun, Armenia's borders should be defined by the Sevr agreement, a peace agreement from August 10, 1920 where the territories of Nakhichevan, Karabakhk and Akhalkalaki *rayon* were part of Armenia. The party is, however, currently in the Armenian coalition government and therefore does not raise this issue publicly.

IV. INCONSISTENT INTEGRATION POLICIES

Following independence in 1991, multiethnic Georgia experienced the rise of the first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia's ethnic populism as well as two civil ethno-territorial wars in South Ossetia (1991-92) and Abkhazia (1992-93). Nationality was mainly defined along ethnic lines, and at worst national minorities were seen as 'treacherous guests', or 'Kremlin's agents in Georgia'.⁵³ While Eduard Shevardnadze downplayed the inflammable Gamsakhurdia ethnic-nationalistic rhetoric, he made no real steps to address integration issues made no real steps to address integration issues during his time as Head of State (1992-2003). The current Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili has made serious attempts to forge a civic identity (i.e. equal inclusion and opportunities for all citizens), but so far his presidency has been more focused on national unity than on protecting minority rights.⁵⁴ The creation of national unity has been pursued in several ways, as we will see in the following sections. Initially, progress in terms of fulfilling international minority rights standards since 2003 will be assessed, as well as the level of political representation of national minorities in Georgia.

1. Fulfilling International Minority Rights Standards

With respect to **legal frameworks** Georgia has recently ratified the Framework Convention on National Minorities (FCNM)⁵⁵ and the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation⁵⁶. At the same time, the government has so far failed to fulfil its promises to the Council of Europe by postponing the signing and ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML). This charter provides substantial rights for minority

⁵³ For a good introduction to the Gamsakhurdia times see Ghia Nodia, 'Political Turmoil in Georgia and the Ethnic Policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia'. In Coppetiers, Bruno (ed). *Contested Borders in the Caucasus* (Brussels, 1995), available at <http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/ContBorders/eng/ch0101.htm>.

⁵⁴ See for example International Crisis Group, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*. (Crisis Group Europe Report N 178, 22 November 2006 available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4517&l=1>) or Bert Middel 'Minorities in the South Caucasus: Factor of Instability?', NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Sub-Committee on Democratic Governance, available at <http://natopa.ibicenter.net/default.asp?SHORTCUT=683>.

⁵⁵ This convention entered into force in April 2006. See Jonathan Wheatley, 'Implementing the Framework Convention on National Minorities in Georgia – A Feasibility Study' (ECMI Working Paper # 28, available at http://www.ecmi.de/download/working_paper_28.pdf).

⁵⁶ Ratified in August 2006.

groups to use their languages, a highly sensitive issue for the Georgian government.⁵⁷ Moreover, the Georgian parliament has so far failed to adopt a Law on National Minorities.

On the central governance level, the government has not assigned an executive body to deal with regional integration, decentralisation and minority rights protection issues. Instead, several authorities, including the Ministry for Refugees and Accommodation, the State Minister on Civic Integration and the Security Council, are involved in, but rarely held accountable for, the lack of consistent progress. As in all policy fields, government structures relating to minority protection remain weak and lack institutionalization and coordination. The State Minister on Civic Integration (established in 2004), for example, is supposed to implement what Georgia has committed itself to by ratifying the FCNM, but she basically has no budget⁵⁸, no strategy or say in general politics⁵⁹. While the previous Presidential Adviser for Civic Integration, Anna Zhvania, represented a progressive force,⁶⁰ she was transferred to another job in late 2006.⁶¹ She was replaced by a young, inexperienced politician who has not managed to publicly address civic integration issues so far. In the parliament, two committees deal in parallel with issues related to minority rights protection and regional integration: the ‘Human Rights and Civil Integration Committee’ as well as the ‘Regional Policy, Self-Government and Mountainous Regions Committee’.

Two positive steps forward are the establishment of the Council of National Minorities, a consultative body under the auspices of the Public Defender’s Office (December 2005), and the creation of the Zurab Zhvania School for Public Administration in Kutaisi, which provides training of national minorities in the field of public administration.

At **regional level** there is a certain amount of duplication between the President’s Plenipotentiary Representative in Samtskhe-Javakheti (also referred to as the ‘trustee’ or

⁵⁷ For an analysis of the situation see Jonathan Wheatley, ‘The Status of Minority Languages in Georgia and the Relevance of Models from Other European States’, (ECMI Working Paper #26, March 2006, available at http://www.ecmi.de/download/working_paper_26.pdf).

⁵⁸ For 2007 the budget allocation was only 200 000 GEL. See *Civil Georgia*, ‘2007 State Budget Approved’, 2006-12-29, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=14393>.

⁵⁹ The Minister has failed to force the established ‘National Council on Civic Integration and Tolerance’ to develop a National Civic Integration Strategy and an adjoined Action Plan to improve the integration and political participation of national minorities in the regions – or for that matter to integrate other ethnically Georgian regions.

⁶⁰ She was, for example, the one to initiate a National Council on Civic Integration and Tolerance, which was supposed to develop a Strategy and Action Plan on Civic Integration.

⁶¹ Interestingly enough, the new post was Chief of the Intelligence Service, which might be an indicator of how the Georgian government sees its national minorities. See *Civil Georgia*, ‘New Chief of Intelligence Service Appointed’, 2006-09-19, at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=13592>.

‘governor’), and the ‘regular’ executive and representative bodies, i.e. the *rayon gamgebelis* (executive managers) and *sakrebulo*s (elected local municipality councils). Since there is no legal basis for the duties and responsibilities of the President’s Plenipotentiary Representatives, their interrelationship with the ‘regular’ bodies is unclear and often dependent on the influence of individual power brokers. Currently, the Regional Policy, Self-Government and Mountainous Regions Committee in the parliament is elaborating a draft law to clarify the situation. Among the potential responsibilities of the Presidential Representative is a monitoring function of the local authorities as part of the new Organic Law on Local Self-governance.

To sum up: the Georgian government has created a legal platform for upholding international human and minority rights standards, but so far it has not managed to transform these intentions into national legislation (e.g. into a law on national minorities) and concrete policy action. Similarly, there is no authority assigned to deal with the integration of regions and/or minorities, and therefore both duplication and uncertainty complicates the resolution of these issues. It is important to bear in mind this overall weakness in institutional capacities and responsibilities while considering the situation in Javakheti – as well as the distance between Javakheti and central structures.

2. Insufficient Political Representation of National Minorities

National minorities, including ethnic Armenians, remain heavily under-represented in central posts in Georgia.⁶² This lack of representation is a major obstacle to truly integrating national minorities in general, and Javakhetians in particular, into Georgian society. At *mkhare* (province) level the situation is little better. The President’s Plenipotentiary Representative in Samtskhe-Javakheti has, for example, never been Armenian. In fact, the province of Samtskhe-Javakheti was created as part of an administrative-territorial reform in 1994 by merging the regions of Samtskhe and Javakheti. Samtskhe has a majority of ethnic Georgian inhabitants, while Javakheti is dominated by ethnic Armenians. Often the inhabitants of Javakheti do not identify themselves with this territorial division, claiming that this is a way for the Georgian government to circumvent the interests of national minorities.⁶³ (More than 90 percent of Javakheti’s population is ethnic Armenian, see Table 1, while only 20.5 percent of the population of

⁶² International Crisis Group has made an extensive counting exercise in its report *Georgia’s Armenian and Azeri Minorities*.

⁶³ Several actors in Javakheti have tried to abolish the unification of Samtskhe and Javakheti ever since it was created in 1994; among them David Rstakyan’s organisation *Virk*. Author’s interviews October-December 2006.

Samtskhe is Armenian). However, compared with the Azeri-dominated region of Kvemo Kartli, Armenians are much better represented at the level of the *rayon*.⁶⁴ The head of the tax authorities and police in both Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki are Armenian. Both judges in Ninotsminda are Armenian, while 2 out of 3 judges in Akhalkalaki are Armenian (the third is an Armenian-speaking Georgian from Akhaltsikhe). The only other important position held by a Georgian is that of local head of customs.

Proportional political representation in Javakheti is also somewhat impeded by disproportionate electoral units. The individual electoral units have not been revised since 1921. The electoral precincts have therefore grown disproportionate to the actual population. In Akhalkalaki *rayon*, for example, 7 Georgian villages have 5 electoral districts, while the remaining 58 Armenian or mixed villages share the remaining 17 electoral districts.⁶⁵ This creates barriers to increasing the political participation and representation of minorities.

In conclusion, it can be said that there are still no proper mechanisms for developing consistent strategies, creating action plans and implementing regional development or infrastructural standards on national minorities. Neither are national minorities sufficiently represented in political institutions. These two factors are major impediments to the successful establishment of national unity, and a civic idea of Georgian citizenship.

⁶⁴ Jonathan Wheatley, 'Obstacles Impeding the Regional Integration of the Kvemo Kartli Region of Georgia' (Working Paper 23, February 2005) at http://www.ecmi.de/download/working_paper_23.pdf.

⁶⁵ See International Crisis Group, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities...*

V. INITIATIVES FOR CREATING ‘NATIONAL UNITY’

Even though no authority is designated to develop a consistent approach to integration of national minorities and regional integration in Georgia, the current government is acting to create national unity in several ways. Here the main steps, relevant activities and events will be outlined: local self-governance reforms, local elections, educational reforms, reforms of the public sector and the monolingual policy of the government.

1. Political Representation and Local Self Governance Reforms

Georgia is a highly centralised state, and previously little responsibility was delegated to the regions (although for the most part they remained far from the reach of the weak central governmental structures). The 2005 local self-governance legislation therefore aims to decentralise responsibilities and powers to the regions. A new structure of 5 self-governed cities⁶⁶ and 65 municipality (formerly *rayon*) *sakrebulo*s has been created in Georgia in order to redistribute more extensive responsibilities to lower level decision-making bodies. These local self governance units are intended to function independently of the state: for example, they should create budgets based on local tax revenues and centrally redistributed funds, take care of former state properties and carry out small scale infrastructure projects. In addition, they are supposed to develop strategic plans on issues such as environmental protection, health care, culture, law enforcement and rule of law. The new legislation on local self governance should therefore mean that the newly elected legislative bodies, the *sakrebulo*s, and their appointed executive managers (*gamgebelis*) have increased influence over local development. Everyday monitoring and implementation should be facilitated in the villages by local ‘managers’ who are appointed by the *gamgebelis*.

Even though this reform redistributes responsibility to lower levels, it remains to be seen if it will decentralise power and increase political participation and influence over local matters for the rural population in general and for national minorities in Javakheti in particular. In practice, the reforms are actually centralising local decision-making by abolishing the lowest tier of local self-government, that of the community (*temi*). Out of formerly 1,100 *sakrebulo*s all over Georgia, only 65 municipality *sakrebulo*s remain. In Javakheti one *sakrebulo* exists in

⁶⁶ Batumi, Rustavi, Poti, Kutaisi and Tbilisi.

Akhalkalaki *rayon* (previously there were 22 community *sakrebulo*s), and one in Ninotsminda *rayon* (previously 9 community *sakrebulo*s). To increase the representation of the village population, one majoritarian *sakrebulo* member represents the respective interests of the village(s) that previously had a *sakrebulo* of its own. The intention is to create local decision-making bodies which can function independently. However, these bodies still have an extremely limited budget and both the elected *sakrebulo* members and the local staff lack basic understanding of what can be done and how it should be done. There is a lack of knowledge, resources (such as the Internet) and, when it comes to Javakheti, even of sufficient understanding of the Georgian language to understand legal documents. One of the main obstacles, according to the director of the Centre for Effective Governance System and Territorial Arrangement Reform (CEGSTAR), is that *sakrebulo* members and *gamgeoba* staff are not aware of the possibilities that the reforms grant them, or are not capable of harmonizing and implementing it due to a lack of funding, training and human resources.⁶⁷

In terms of extra aid for remote and mountainous regions, there exists an equalizing formula that is supposed to redistribute funds from the central budget to the less developed regions of Georgia; however, so far the funds are small and the definition of what is counted as a ‘mountainous region’ is still under discussion.

There is also a lack of accountability in terms of what central executive body is responsible for the successful implementation of this decentralisation. Currently the main body dealing with the reform is the State Commission on Effective Governance System and Territorial Arrangement Reform, which is chaired by the president and representatives from several different ministries and involved bodies. This commission convenes only occasionally. It is assisted by the abovementioned organisation, CEGSTAR (mainly funded by UNDP), and partially coordinated by the ‘Regional Policy, Self-Government and Mountainous Regions Committee’ in parliament.

The local executive bodies are not directly representative, as the *gamgebeli* (or the mayor of the self governed cities) is appointed by the *sakrebulo*, while the Plenipotentiary Representative of the President is appointed by the president. This might have a negative impact

⁶⁷ Author’s interview.

on the decentralisation process and on the possibilities of raising public trust in local politics. Currently there is no body that is monitoring the implementation of the local self-governance reforms at *rayon* (municipality) level. According to a draft law, the Plenipotentiary Representative of the President will have this responsibility in the future.

To sum up, the new reform could be an important tool for decentralisation and increased integration of regions in Georgia in the mid- to long term. Implementation of these reforms began with local elections held on October 6, 2006. However, there is a lack of funding to create a decentralised, independent local governance system. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that the local political actors might not be capable of exercising the extensive rights that the reform grants them, or have the political will to do so. As one employee at the CEGSTAR explained: “Recently I was carrying out a survey with the new municipalities. When I asked the speakers of *sakrebulo*s if they had any problems, many answered: ‘No we don’t have any problems, why should we? I was elected by everyone in the *sakrebulo*, not only by the National Movement representatives but also by the opposition.’” In many municipalities, the local politicians are thus not accustomed to the idea that they should initiate and implement a political agenda, or address and solve local problems. This passivity is probably a Soviet legacy that is difficult to change in the short term. This is especially the case in Javakheti, which is still ruled through a centrally co-opted clan system.

2. The October 2006 Local Elections in Javakheti

On October 6 2006, local self governance elections were conducted in Georgia. In Ninotsminda *rayon* the only registered party was Saakashvili’s National Movement (see above), while the National Movement and ‘Industry Will Save Georgia’ (hereafter referred to as the ‘Industrialists’) were registered in Akhalkalaki. Initially, Igor Giorgadze’s ‘Justice Party’ also opened an office in Akhalkalaki, but never registered for the elections. The fact that there were so few opponents to the governing party was a nationwide problem – since the Rose Revolution oppositional parties have been weak and non-influential. In fact, Akhalkalaki turned out to be one of the *rayons* in Georgia that had the highest number of votes for an opposition party: The National Movement got 64 percent of the votes, while the Industrialists got 32 percent.⁶⁸ The

⁶⁸ The Industrialists received 3 party list positions, while the National Movement received 7 in Akhalkalaki *rayon*. In the Majoritarian positions 15 out of 22 positions belong to National Movement supporters while the remaining 7 have formed a so-called ‘Initiative group’ and were initially loyal to the Industrialists. In Ninotsminda *rayon*, the

popularity of the Industrialists is due to the fact that *United Javakhk* had made a deal with them to run on their list, in order to be able to participate in the elections.⁶⁹ The existing ban on regional political parties might be negative for the integration of Georgian regions which are compactly settled by national minorities. In other post-Communist countries the establishment of regional parties supported by national minorities have had a positive impact on political participation and, in the long run, integration of densely settled national minorities.⁷⁰ The reason for the success of *United Javakhk* (i.e. the Industrialists) in the Akhalkalaki elections is probably that they are seen as a young and energetic force compared to the old, co-opted and corrupt political leadership. *United Javakhk* claim that they got more than 32 percent of the votes in Akhalkalaki *rayon*. Once the elections were over, their supporters started protesting against the election results, stating that 70 percent of the voters voted for them, which was the percentage of the vote won by the Industrialists in the city of Akhalkalaki. They claim that the results in the other election districts were falsified since they were not able to monitor the elections there. However, local National Movement representatives claim that *United Javakhk* had more people monitoring the polling stations than they did.⁷¹ Indisputably, falsifications and fraud were carried out in Javakheti. According to international and local observers there were question marks in relation to the appointment of local Election Committee members, as well as problems with the voters' lists (for example: the deceased were not deleted from the civil registry data, individuals were registered in the wrong villages and thereby could not vote) and with technical voting procedures. It is, however, not possible to verify the extent of the falsifications and fraud. International monitoring was sporadic; even though there were mobile monitors from the OSCE and the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), they had no possibility of monitoring the elections properly. According to ISFED, substantial irregularities were

National Movement was the only registered party, which thus received the total number of the party list votes (10), and 9 out of 10 Majoritarian seats (the last was an independent candidate).

⁶⁹ According to *United Javakhk* they tried to contact other oppositional parties, for example Salome Zourabishvili's party 'Georgia's Way', but they did not want them on their lists. Probably they were assumed to be extremists.

⁷⁰ See Denis Dafflon, "Managing Ethnic Diversity in Javakheti: Two European Models Of Multilingual Tertiary Education" (ECMI Working Paper 25, February 2006), available at http://www.ecmi.de/download/working_paper_25.pdf.

⁷¹ Author's interview.

observed during the pre-election and election day processes.⁷² The ratio of inaccurate results was most likely higher in the more remote and mountainous villages.⁷³

However, *United Javakhk* did not file any complaints to the District Election Committee (or anybody else), and neither were they able to specify exactly *where* and *how* the elections had been falsified to the extent that they claim. When asked about why they did not document the fraud or file proper complaints, they claim that the elections were announced so unexpectedly⁷⁴, that they themselves were naïve and did not know the procedures.⁷⁵ Instead, two days after the elections some 300 *United Javakhk* supporters tried to take over the temporary office of the District Election Committee in Akhalkalaki. Discussions got heated, and developed into a confrontation between local police and *United Javakhk* supporters, and the local, newly-appointed chief of police was taken to hospital. Despite the initial disagreements between the ‘old actors’ and the young ones, however, the new *sakrebulo* in early 2007 unanimously voted for a speaker, Khachik Aivazyan, and eventually re-elected Arthur Yeremyan, the *gamgebeli* who had been in his post since 2003. The young actors received no influential posts in the new *sakrebulo* (i.e. posts that come with a salary).

3. Education Reforms

Another important way for the central government to create a unified Georgia is through extensive reforms in the educational sector, in primary, secondary and higher educational facilities. In 2005 the Law on General Education was ratified, which aims at creating a standardized merit-based education system. Decentralised school governance has been introduced; according to the reform, a board of trustees composed of teachers and parents should be the decision-making body. The schools have also been restructured so that each school gets vouchers based on how many teaching hours they need. Furthermore, the reform also aims at raising the qualification of teachers and head teachers by conducting trainings and arranging qualifying tests.

⁷² The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), *Report on Monitoring the October 5, 2006 Local Self-Government Elections*. 2006.

⁷³ One respondent from a remote village, for example, admitted to having earned 300 USD from a candidate by voting in the place of about 30 elderly people.

⁷⁴ Initially the president had proposed to conduct elections in December 2006, but then announced it for October: this raised concerns as to whether candidates would have enough time to hand in their registrations.

⁷⁵ Author’s interview.

It is envisaged that by 2010 Georgian will be the main language of instruction in Georgian Language and Literature, History and Geography of Georgia and other social sciences in minority language schools.⁷⁶ At the same time, a project carried out by the Ministry of Education and Science in collaboration with the OSCE is translating Georgian books into minority languages. The UNDP has also financed new material for teaching Georgian in multilingual environments.⁷⁷ Previously public schooling in minority languages was allowed all over Georgia; in Javakheti it was mainly conducted in Russian or Armenian.⁷⁸ Now these schools have to gradually increase the number of subjects taught in Georgian, starting with history and geography. These, however, are sensitive subjects in Javakheti. Most local Armenians demand that their children should be taught Armenian history, at least as an extra-curricular subject, but so far no books have been elaborated and approved by the Ministry of Education and Science. Therefore most schools teach Armenian history with books provided from Armenia, but without being able to give official grades to the pupils. This creates problems for students that wish to study Humanities in Armenia, where these grades are required. Moreover, schools are required to become more cost efficient. This will most probably create mergers of smaller schools, a process that might affect minority schools negatively.⁷⁹ In schools where Georgian is not the language of instruction, three Georgian-language lessons per week are obligatory from first grade onwards. As of today, even qualified Georgian language teachers are lacking in Javakheti. One project initiated in 2004 aimed at attracting qualified Georgian teachers to teach the Georgian language, literature and history in minority language schools in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli by offering them a much higher salary than normal (500 GEL instead of 100 GEL). Since the teachers were not bilingual they had problems with teaching methodologies, often relied on teaching the pupils phrases by heart, and the impact of the

⁷⁶ The rest of the Social Sciences should continuously be taught in Georgian, while Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Foreign Languages, Physical Education and Fine Arts can be taught in minority languages.

⁷⁷ See Bela Tsipuria, 'From State Language Education to Civic Integration', *Language Policies and Education in Multilingual Societies* (CIMERA Publications, 2006), p.19.

⁷⁸ For example in Akhalkalaki there are 3 Armenian schools, 1 Russian and 1 Georgian. In addition there has been a school at the Russian military base, but it will be closed down in May 2007. In Ninotsminda there are 2 Armenian, 1 Russian and 1 Georgian school. In the villages there is normally one Armenian school, apart from the villages where Georgians reside. In Spasovka there is one Armenian and one Georgian school. Please note that in the 'Russian schools' there are generally only Armenian pupils, apart from in the half-Dukhobor village of Gorelovka.

⁷⁹ For example, the Georgian schools in Javakheti might be merged with the surrounding Armenian schools, which will be detrimental for the learning process of the Georgian speaking children. The secondary school in Sameba, Ninotsminda *rayon* might for example soon be merged with a neighbouring Armenian school due to lack of finances for heating. See *The Messenger*, 'Georgian secondary school to close in the village of Sameba', 2007-02-27.

program was limited.⁸⁰ Many of these ‘imported’ teachers left, as they could not put up with the hard living conditions in the region. The project finished in the summer of 2006, and so far few state efforts to improve the language and methodology skills of teachers have been carried out.⁸¹ Therefore, as schools gradually introduce additional subjects in Georgian, the lack of bilingual, qualified teachers using interactive, task-based and child-oriented methodologies will become a problem, as will the need for suitable teaching materials for teaching Georgian as a second language. Even if the schools in Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki are able to find teachers, the remote villages will not. Another matter that irritates local Armenian-speaking teachers is the higher salary received by Georgian teachers. Today, a standard monthly salary is 100 GEL, but teachers in Georgian Language, History and Geography normally get 12 GEL extra. This is perceived as a discriminatory hierarchy; teachers in the ‘Georgian subjects’ are worth more than others. Another problem is access to textbooks and teaching aids. Today, Javakhetian schools are provided with Armenian school books for free, while the Georgian books are either very outdated or new and expensive. In some cases the books are not even available.⁸²

In the new Law on Higher Education (2004), the Ministry of Education and Science has made the accreditation procedure for higher learning institutions stricter. Previously, there existed 127 universities in Georgia; now there are only 34 accredited public universities left.⁸³ There also used to be an abundance of university branches. Today only two are left; one in Signaghi and the Akhalkalaki branch of Tbilisi State University.⁸⁴

The ongoing reforms in the higher education sector will probably increase the quality of education markedly, and make it more attractive in the long run to study in Georgian universities. Studying in Georgia is less expensive than in Armenia, both in terms of accommodation and university fees, and these two factors in combination will probably make university studies in Georgia gradually more attractive – if the students are able to speak good enough Georgian.

⁸⁰ Britta Korth, Arnold Stepanian, Marina Muskhelishvili *Language Policy in Georgia - With a Focus on the Education System*. (CIMERA publications, April 2005 available at http://www.cimera.org/en/projects/Policy_Paper_Final.doc) see page 41-42.

⁸¹ The international NGO CIMERA is however financing multilingual schooling and methods in Samtskhe-Javakheti. See http://www.cimera.org/en/projects/ind_projects.htm.

⁸² The books cost 5-7 GEL each, which is costly for the families. In terms of availability, one interviewed teacher gave an example that they only had 10 copies for the 7th grade, which only covered one third of the class.

⁸³ See http://www.mes.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=GEO&sec_id=850.

⁸⁴ However, currently, the Akhalkalaki branch of Tbilisi State University cannot get a renewed accreditation before 2008 since it failed to fulfil the Ministry of Education and Science’s technical requirements; for example, the library is deemed insufficient. Thereby they cannot accept new students until they manage to obtain a proper accreditation.

For national minorities the educational reform is problematic in terms of what language the students can study in and also in terms of passing the standardised Unified National Examinations (UNEs). Firstly, it is no longer possible to study in languages other than Georgian at state universities – apart from at the Departments of Philology. (There are, however, private universities teaching in English, such as the ‘Caucasus School of Business’ or the ‘Georgian Institute of Public Affairs’). Secondly, standardized national exams, the so-called UNEs, have been introduced for those who want to enter a Georgian university.⁸⁵ In 2005 UNEs were held for the first time and turned out to be disastrous for the minority students; out of 64 Armenian applicants from Javakheti only 4 passed. The following year, after the OSCE initiated a special intensive language training course, in collaboration with the Georgian language houses in Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki, the scores got markedly better: according to the Georgian Language House in Ninotsminda, 48 students from Javakheti applied in 2006 and 21 passed.⁸⁶

The Akhalkalaki branch of Tbilisi State University initially worked on a quota basis (60 percent Armenians and 40 percent Georgians). Now the quota system has been eliminated by the educational reform and these changes are upsetting for locals, who assume that abolishing the quota system is a way of marginalising their interests, since ‘their’ children are not able to enter ‘their’ university. During 2006, the university claimed that the ratio of students remained the same: 60 percent of the 382 students are Armenian and 40 percent are Georgian, and therefore, that there is no reason to worry.⁸⁷ Still, it can be stated that the UNEs create new obstacles for prospective students from compactly settled minority regions such as Javakheti to enter Georgian universities.⁸⁸

4. Administrative reforms

Apart from reforming the local self governance system and the educational sector, the Georgian government is now trying to institutionalise administrative practises and establish rule of law

⁸⁵ The exam in 2005 was testing the level of Georgian Language and Literature, General Abilities, Foreign Languages and Mathematics. For 2006 the test was slightly altered so that students could also pass the added tests in Geography and History in Russian.

⁸⁶ Statistics provided by the Georgian Language House in Ninotsminda.

⁸⁷ Unofficial statistics provided by the Akhalkalaki branch of Tbilisi State University.

⁸⁸ In fact, a bi-lingual university could be an important integrating factor for regionally isolated national minorities. This was the case in Romania. See Denis Dafflon, ‘Managing Ethnic Diversity in Javakheti: Two European Models Of Multilingual Tertiary Education’ (ECMI Working Paper 25, February 2006), available at http://www.ecmi.de/download/working_paper_25.pdf.

throughout the entire country. This is yet another way of integrating the formerly disconnected regions with the rest of Georgia.

During the Soviet period the population in Javakheti had little or no contact with the Georgian language. In practice, Russian has been the administrative language in Javakheti ever since the 1830s, while Armenian has been functioning as the major spoken language of communication. Even after Georgian independence in 1991, Russian continued to function as the *unofficial* administrative language in Javakheti. During Shevardnadze's time the region mainly had contacts with nearby Armenia or with the Russian Federation, and Georgian influence was close to non-existent. From 1991 to 1995 extensive rights with regard to using minority languages in official contexts were given to the citizens. However, in the 1995 constitution Georgian was made the sole state language, along with Abkhaz in Abkhazia. The law also made it the responsibility of the 'interested party' – not the state – to translate necessary documents into Georgian. But neither the local authorities nor, for that matter, the central state enforced this legislation. Today the situation has changed markedly.

In order to work in the public sector, Georgian law requires a certain command of Georgian. The state authorities are now attempting to create a merit-based bureaucratic cadre by firing incompetent and/or corrupt staff and, in parallel, by raising the salaries of the remaining employees. They also carry out tests on basic knowledge of the state language, the Georgian constitution and relevant legislation. So far doctors, judges and lawyers have been tested and head teachers are currently being tested.

These reforms are, however, problematic in Javakheti. The region is densely populated by national minorities out of which the absolute majority – including those who used to be employed as local civil servants – do not know Georgian. Officially, Armenian government employees should use Georgian in all contexts, and communicate with each other in Georgian. Nevertheless, even in the local *sakrebulo*, where the working language is officially Georgian, the vast majority of elected representatives speak only Armenian and Russian.

In some cases civil servants were able to do the test with the help of an interpreter, but this possibility seems to be an *ad hoc* improvisation, not an officially regulated solution.⁸⁹ When new staff are hired, Armenians thus often fail to fulfill the language requirements. This has created tension in Javakheti. In the eyes of local Armenians, the idea of replacing Armenians at

⁸⁹ The Ministry of the Interior, for example, allows people to take tests for becoming a patrol police officer in Russian, if they wish – even though this is not in accordance with Georgian legislation.

official posts with Georgians is a discriminatory measure in itself. Knowledge of Georgian is not seen as a merit; rather they are of the opinion that local people should be employed to help the region to survive. Most people also consider locals to be more qualified since ‘they know how to run things here’.⁹⁰ According to respondents, it is common that dismissed Armenians claim they were fired on basis of their ethnicity, even though it might have been because they were incompetent or because they were corrupt.⁹¹

If the monolingual policy is enforced, it will be very difficult to run everyday business in Javakheti.⁹² Another problematic issue is the possibility of appealing to higher courts. Since the investigative documents in Akhalkalaki are not written in proper Georgian, appealing is a complicated procedure, as the Georgian courts can refuse to use documents written in languages other than Georgian.

In addition, locals in Javakheti are not aware of Georgian laws and new administrative practices. It is difficult to access legislation, since it is mainly available only in Georgian. Even though initiatives have been carried out by the NGO community to translate legislation into Russian and Armenian,⁹³ access is still limited. Therefore the reactions to government reforms in Javakheti tend to be negative. The existing information vacuum feeds suspicions and stereotypes among locals which in its turn creates possibilities for the local political actors to mobilise the population around nationalist agendas. Time and again, local respondents refer to the ongoing changes as ‘forced assimilation’. Partially this perception is a consequence of the government’s failure to develop consistent integration policies and to properly inform the population about the ongoing reforms.

⁹⁰ Interviews with the author. See also Jonathan Wheatley, ‘The Status of Minority Languages in Georgia and the Relevance of Models from Other European States’, ECMI Working Paper 26, March 2006, available at http://www.ecmi.de/download/working_paper_26.pdf.

⁹¹ This was the case when Armenian border guards were fired as a result of a massive clean-up operation of the border guards all over Georgia in December 2005. A smaller protest was arranged following these dismissals, even though most locals understand that this was not a case of ethnic discrimination. Author’s interviews.

⁹² One illustrative example is a court case in Akhalkalaki in December 2006 that this author attended. The process was a very confusing activity. According to the established, informal practice the defendant can request what language should be used in court. In this case the defendant had chosen Russian. When the court adjourned, the preliminary testimonies were read aloud in Georgian and unofficially translated into Armenian so that the witnesses would understand their own testimonies. The last witness was Georgian, and this person was not able to understand his own testimony even though it was written in Georgian [!]. During the rest of the session the defendant was speaking in Russian and the witnesses mainly in Armenian while the judge was mixing Russian, Armenian and occasionally Georgian.

⁹³ Notably this has been done by the Georgian NGO Public Movement Multinational Georgia. ECMI has also published a frequency dictionary where Georgian, Russian, Armenian and Azeri administrative words and concepts can be compared.

5. The Failure to Establish Trust in Rule of Law

The Georgian state also seeks to unify the country through reforms of the law enforcement agencies. The traffic police reform has been positively received by many local inhabitants.⁹⁴ Everyday corruption has somewhat declined. However, in general the government has so far failed to communicate the advantages and importance of rule of law in Javakheti. Previously, disagreements or illicit activities were normally solved informally. Several respondents are therefore upset by the fact that minor criminal offences now result in big fines. One respondent took a bride-kidnapping⁹⁵ in a nearby village as an example. According to Georgian legislation, bride-kidnapping is illegal, but previously the law enforcement agencies did not pay attention to this matter. Rather, they were solved among the families. In this concrete case the man was sentenced to pay quite a substantial fine, which infuriated the respondent: “The authorities now are focused on fines. This is money that people do not have, and that only ends up in some local budget. But really what they should be doing is informing people about their responsibilities and rights. If people do not know the legislation they cannot be blamed for breaking the law. Now this man has to sell his assets to pay the fine or pay bribes.”

Another example is an incident that took place in October 2005. Without prior notice, the financial police came from Akhaltsikhe and closed down several small shops in Akhalkalaki. These shops had not reported their incomes during the previous three months, and consequently had not paid any taxes. This had, according to the regional tax inspectorate, created a big deficit in the *gamgeoba* budget. The procedure came as a shock to the local businessmen. According to some, the deficit was due to incompetent local tax authorities, rather than tax evasion. Following the incident, about 400 people participated in a protest in Akhalkalaki. The meeting got rowdy, and as some representatives of the Special Troops of the Ministry of the Interior appeared, a fight broke out and the situation ended with one riot policeman shooting in the air to dissolve the protesters. One demonstrator had to be taken to hospital. President Saakashvili initially stated that this was just a way of trying to create law and order in a region where previously there was none, but some days later the regional representative of the Special Troops publicly apologized

⁹⁴ However, the patrol police is mobile in Samtskhe-Javakheti and is therefore not continuously present in Javakheti. Author's interview.

⁹⁵ Bride-kidnapping: when a man kidnaps a woman in order to marry her, with or without her consent.

for the violence used while dispersing the demonstration.⁹⁶ Why did this intervention create such a heated response? That the regional tax authorities inspect local shops is a normal operation in states with stronger institutional capacities and a higher level of public trust; for the locals of Javakheti, however, it was something out of the ordinary. Like in the rest of Georgia, people in general do not trust state authorities; neither do they see tax payment as a collective obligation. Rather they are accustomed to corrupt low-level officials who try to solicit bribes from them. If they start to pay taxes, they reason, they would have to raise the prices so that locals could not afford to buy their products, and they would have no means for survival. More nationalistic respondents referred to this incident as the beginning of a 'police state' era. Thus, the population in Javakheti has a clear tendency to interpret the enforcement of rule of law as a discriminatory act committed against them.

6. Language – the Biggest Barrier to Integration

For Georgian authorities trying to establish 'national unity', knowledge of the state language is a must – in order for the regions to implement local self-governance reform, to take advantage of the reformed education system or enjoy more 'transparent' administrative practices. Today, language is therefore the biggest barrier to integration of national minorities in Georgia. Up until recently the population had difficulties in understanding why Georgian could be beneficial for them. Today, they are more inclined to learn Georgian, since it is difficult to get jobs both in Armenia and Russia and the Georgian state is pushing the language issue much more. But the population in Javakheti has been given few opportunities to learn the state language. There is no environment for learning Georgian, and there is a lack of clear incentives and methodological learning support. The Georgian state has not managed to create consistent programs for language trainings either for adults, or for pupils of secondary schools. Trainings have been carried out by the OSCE, but their impact has been limited⁹⁷ and they are now withdrawing from the region. A typical comment is "I hope that it will be possible for our small children to speak Georgian, but for me it will be difficult to manage properly, and also for my children who are about to graduate from secondary school it is very difficult to have such a good command of Georgian that they need in order to enter university or get a job."

⁹⁶ Olesya Vartanyan, 'Shots in Akhalkalaki', *Panorama Magazine*, (International War and Peace Reporting, October 2006).

⁹⁷ See Federation Internationale des ligues des Droits de l'Homme, (FIDH) 'Ethnic Minorities in Georgia', *International Fact-finding Mission Report no. 412/2* (Paris, April 2005) at page 16.

This way of promoting the state language *de jure* follows international recommendations on national minorities.⁹⁸ In addition, it can be said to be a precondition for a truly integrated Georgian state in the long run. But in the short term it creates a discriminatory attitude towards the compactly settled national minorities in Javakheti, since they receive no real opportunities and proper resources to learn Georgian, and are thereby excluded from full participation in public life.⁹⁹ In addition, monolingualism is not compatible with the European Charter for Regional Languages that Georgia has pledged to ratify. Local actors therefore demand either that Armenian should be allowed at least for a transitory period of 15-20 years, or that it should be granted the permanent status of administrative language in the region. This demand is in accordance with international minority rights recommendations, albeit as a recommendation rather than an obligation.¹⁰⁰ In the words of one of the more ‘radical’ local actors: “You know, we didn’t arrive here recently; we were here before independence was declared in 1918, and this is our homeland, and our state. When the referendum was held in 1991 people here voted for the old constitution from 1921 that stated that we had the right to use our language in the region. And what do we get now? It would have been better if we had fought, like South Ossetia, they are now being offered extensive autonomic solutions while we get nothing.”¹⁰¹

In the following section, some differences between Armenians and Georgians in terms of perception will be discussed. The focus will lie on the perception of history, the fear of demographic change, the tendency for mass meetings, the negative role of media and the idea of the future status of Javakheti.

⁹⁸ The main documents are the Lund recommendation on effective participation of ethnic minorities in public-political affairs; the Oslo recommendation on linguistic rights of ethnic minorities; the Hague recommendation on rights to education of ethnic minorities; as well as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. For an overview of the legal framework see Johanna Popjanevski, *Minorities and the State in the South Caucasus: Assessing the Protection of National Minorities in Georgia and Azerbaijan*. (Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2006) available at www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/Silkroadpapers/0609Popjanevski.pdf.

⁹⁹ For a more extensive discussion on the state policy on language issues see Jonathan Wheatley, ‘The Status of Minority Languages in Georgia...’ and Denis Dafflon ‘Managing Ethnic Diversity in Javakheti...’.

¹⁰⁰ Notably the so called ‘Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities’ that states that a region where more than 20 percent of the population belongs to a national minority should grant the minority language an administrative status.

¹⁰¹ Author’s interview, December 2006.

VI. DISPUTED ISSUES: HISTORY, DEMOGRAPHY AND AUTONOMY

1. *The Historical Settlers of Javakheti*

Armenians have been living in today's Georgia since the early Middle Ages. Historically they were urban dwellers, mainly engaged in trade and handicrafts.¹⁰² When they inhabited the Javakheti region, however, is a matter of disagreement between Armenians and Georgians. The Armenians on one hand claim that there have always been Armenians in Javakheti. Georgian historians, on the other hand, argue that Armenians arrived only after 1829. This difference of opinion surfaces in disagreements about the historical origin of churches in Javakheti.¹⁰³ What can be taken for fact is that the absolute majority of Armenians in Javakheti resettled there in the 19th century. One wave of around 30,000 Armenians arrived when the Russian-Ottoman war ended in 1829, after the territory had been annexed by Russia. The second major wave of Armenians arrived from Eastern Anatolia¹⁰⁴ after the forced expulsion of Armenians from the Ottoman Empire in 1915. They were mostly fleeing from Turkish massacres of Christians. This historical experience is an essential part of the collective identity of Armenians in Javakheti, and creates impediments for such matters as the planned repatriation of Meskhetian Turks to Javakheti.¹⁰⁵

2. *The Miscommunication on Churches*

The origin of the historical inhabitants in Javakheti is thus disputed between Armenians and Georgians. Another interconnected and equally sensitive topic is the historical origin of specific churches. So far the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Georgian Orthodox Church have failed

¹⁰² Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, Second Edition, 1994) at 86-87; 202.

¹⁰³ The majority of today's population belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church, while a minority are Roman Catholics. In Akhalkalaki *rayon* the villages of Turtskhi, Khulgumo, Alastani, Varevani, Kartikami and Bavra are Roman Catholic villages (the latter two do not have a church but the first four villages do). In Turtskhi there is also a priest and a nunnery with two Polish nuns and two local nuns. In Ninotsminda *rayon* the villages of Eshtia, Uchmana, Toria, Zdanovakan and Aspara are Catholic. The church in Eshtia is open. In the absence of an official priest, services are conducted by a deacon from Turtskhi. The Roman Catholics receive some humanitarian aid and support from the Vatican, but try to redistribute it also to other villagers in order to defuse tension around the issue.

¹⁰⁴ Or what nationalist Armenians refer to as Western Armenia.

¹⁰⁵ Up until 1944 there was also a small number of Meskhetian Turks residing in Javakheti. The Georgian government has undertaken an agreement with the Council of Europe to repatriate the Meskhetian Turks – a sensitive issue in Javakheti where most Armenian inhabitants still have very negative feelings towards Turks. The absolute majority of the Meskhetian Turks, however, resided in today's Samtskhe. According to local respondents, Meskhetian Turks in Javakheti mainly resided in the villages around Lake Paravani in Ninotsminda *rayon*, such as the village of Sagamo.

to reach a common understanding or agreement as to how to deal with some specific churches.¹⁰⁶ Since local church representatives do not communicate with each other, several misunderstandings have developed into violent encounters between local Armenians and Georgian Orthodox groups. This occurred in the villages of Koumordo and Samsari. In the case of the 11th century church in Koumordo the dispute started some years ago but became more heated during Easter 2004 and 2005, when Georgian Orthodox believers tried to make pilgrimages to the church. According to locals they came unannounced to the village and the locals did not want to let them enter the church; they also threw eggs at them.¹⁰⁷ In the case of Samsari, the dispute is over the remains of an ancient cave church complex,¹⁰⁸ and reached its peak in the summer of 2005 when a Georgian student expedition tried to go there to, in their understanding, restore the church. This, however, also implied taking away newer Armenian Apostolic inscriptions. Fist fights broke out, and two Georgian students ended up in hospital with concussion. In villages inhabited by Armenians, old Georgian (or possibly Greek) churches have also been adapted to the Armenian Apostolic liturgy.¹⁰⁹

Another incident that yet again points to miscommunication between the two churches and their congregations took place in early January 2006 when Father Nikoloz, the Georgian Archbishop in Akhalkalaki, was celebrating the New Year by shooting fireworks without prior notice. Instead of enjoying the fireworks, a part of the local population in Akhalkalaki thought a war had started, and consequently the following day *United Javakhs*'s boy scouts arranged a demonstration claiming that Javakheti is their land and that the 'aggressive' Georgian Orthodox church should leave. (During the April 2005 demonstrations, they also entered the monastery to 'check if they had weapons'; the tumult was dissolved by the police.)

The Armenians see the churches as 'theirs', and perceive the Georgian Orthodox believers as aggressive intruders, while the Georgian side want to restore what they see as their indisputable cultural heritage. As of today the situation is frozen, and neither the Armenian Apostolic Church nor the Georgian Orthodox Church is officially using these churches. In 2005 a joint Georgian-Armenian commission was set up to study the historical backgrounds of the

¹⁰⁶ However, the tensest discussions are related to five churches in Tbilisi and one in Akhaltsikhe.

¹⁰⁷ To complicate the matter further, there are Greek inscriptions in the church, according to the local Greek community, indicating that this church might actually be Greek!

¹⁰⁸ Within the complex one church is already blessed by the Armenian Apostolic Church.

¹⁰⁹ Mainly in Satkhke, Karneti and Choren.

churches.¹¹⁰ However, so far there have been no results. Since Georgia does not have a law on religion, it is impossible for the Church to acquire the status of a legal entity. Instead, it is proposed by the Georgian authorities that the Church should register as an NGO and thereby be able to function in Georgian society. This is something that the Armenian Apostolic Church opposes. In the words of Father Babken, the Deputy Archbishop stationed in Javakheti: ‘These Armenians are citizens of Georgia, but their church is not being acknowledged by the state. Why is this so?’ As a consequence of this, individual Armenian churches cannot be registered and have no legal status in Javakheti.

3. The Fear of Demographic Change

As mentioned, there exists a fear of demographic change among Javakhetians. This fear originates both from when the Armenians left today’s Turkey, and also from the early 1990s. As many Dukhobors in Ninotsminda *rayon* migrated to Russia in the early independence years, their houses were bought by the then state-affiliated ‘Merab Kostava Foundation’ in order to resettle ecological migrants from Adjara there.¹¹¹ This was during the Gamsakhurdia period, and the Foundation was partially based on a nationalist ideology, according to which altering the demographic balance in Javakheti in favour of ethnic Georgians was seen as an advantage for securing the historical Georgian nation. Informally established organisations with funding from Armenia (such as the *Parvana*) therefore also bought houses to safeguard *their* ethnic kin. After more than a decade, most of the Adjarans have left, and local Armenians for the most part live illegally in the houses provided for Georgian eco-migrants. Only one village is densely inhabited by Adjarans, and some of these individuals indeed portray themselves as guardians of Georgia proper. Accordingly, local Armenians have a constant fear that the government will compactly settle more Georgians in the region, or repatriated Meskhetian Turks.¹¹² This fear also creates tension with other groups residing in Javakheti, notably the Russian Dukhobors.¹¹³ Every step and reform made by the Georgian authorities is thus seen as a way to push the Armenians from their native lands.

¹¹⁰ *Civil Georgia*, ‘Joint Commission to Study Armenian-Georgian Church Row’, 2005-04-30, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=9750>.

¹¹¹ ECMI is currently finalizing a working paper on ecological migration in Georgia.

¹¹² See, for example, Sergey Minasyan. ‘Situation in Javakhet in the context of the problem of Russian Military Bases’ Withdrawal from Georgia’ (2005); *21st Century*; Volume 1.

¹¹³ For a discussion on land disputes among Dukhobors and Armenians see Lohm, ‘Dukhobors in Georgia...’.

However, this slightly paranoid attitude is not unique for the Javakheti Armenians. Interviews with the Georgian authorities and individuals show that they have extreme perceptions of what Javakheti is – even though the absolute majority of them have never visited the region. There are still lingering suspicions that the Armenians are ‘treacherous separatists’, who would start a war as soon as they are granted the opportunity to do so – just like Abkhazians and South Ossetians. In fact, it is often mentioned that the Armenians participated on the side of the Abkhaz in the civil wars of the nineties. Some Georgian respondents went as far as to suspect that the population is a fifth column of the Russian KGB, who are present in Javakheti in order to infiltrate Georgia. In fact, it is often stated from the Georgian side that Russian security forces are deeply involved in Javakheti politics. This presence, however, is difficult to trace. This conviction might be reinforced by the fact that Javakheti used to be an isolated, high security military border zone with special restrictions, and that these suspicions remain in the mentality of locals and in the minds of Georgian officials.

In some Georgian eyes, the mass demonstrations in Javakheti are not signs of socio-economic problems or discrimination; rather they are an act of betrayal by recent guests on Georgian territory. The fact that they do not speak Georgian is also seen as a sign of disrespect and lack of goodwill, and it is assumed that if they do not speak Georgian they cannot be expected to get any help from the Georgian state.¹¹⁴ According to Georgian respondents, it is normal that these Armenians should turn to ‘their’ ethnic kin, and to ‘their’ state Armenia rather than to the Georgian authorities if they encounter problems.¹¹⁵

Local Armenians thus tend to victimize themselves and are in constant fear of assimilation attempts by the central government, of ‘white genocide’ as they describe it (i.e. when they are forced away due to unbearable living conditions) or forced demographic change. This tendency is exploited by the local political organisations to boost their popularity and to mobilise the rural population around their demands. The victimization is in its turn seen as a danger of separatism from the Georgians, which perpetuates the vicious circle.

¹¹⁴ This was, for example, the attitude of the Presidential Plenipotentiary Representative in Samtskhe Javakheti towards the Russian Dukhobors when he was interviewed by ECMI in October 2006. See also Britta Korth, Arnold Stepanian, Marina Muskhelishvili, *Language Policy in Georgia - With a Focus on the Education System*, (CIMERA Publications, April 2005, available at http://www.cimera.org/en/projects/Policy_Paper_Final.doc) page 27-30.

¹¹⁵ Korth, Stepanian, Muskhelishvili, *Language Policy in Georgia...* see page 40.

4. The Constant Perception of Discrimination

As mentioned above, Armenians in Javakheti see themselves under constant threat. The failure of the Georgian state to deliver socio-economic, infrastructural and technical improvements to the region is often seen as discrimination, rather than a consequence of a weak state with insufficient funding and capacities to deliver public goods. For example, when there is a shortage of electricity this is seen not as a general failure of the Georgian state to deliver public services to all regions in Georgia, but as discrimination against them as Armenians. Another example of this is how one respondent referred to the fact that there is central heating in the Georgian school in Akhalkalaki (about 60 pupils in total), whereas the three Armenian schools in town do not have central heating (where there are several hundred students in each school). In their understanding, Georgians are first class citizens who receive high quality public goods, while the Armenians will have to settle for worse living conditions.

5. Mass Meetings Instead of Political Participation

Mostly local political organisations have expressed political ideas through demonstrations, rather than representative politics. Partly this might be related to the constitutional ban on regional parties. How this can be detrimental to a solution of the problems that Javakheti faces is illustrated by the way *United Javakhk* organised demonstrations from March 2005 to April 2006. On March 13, 2005 *United Javakhk* arranged a mass demonstration against the closure of the military base. Estimates of the number of participants vary, ranging from 10,000 to 3,000. During these mass demonstrations *United Javakhk* also demanded that the Georgian government should acknowledge the Armenian genocide of 1915, make it possible to officially teach Armenian history in Armenian-language schools, adopt a law on protecting minority rights, and develop self-governance and regional infrastructure.¹¹⁶ Initially this demonstration drew the attention of government representatives. The organisers of the demonstrations were invited to meet the Minister of the Interior, Vano Merabishvili. Promises were made to compensate the loss of employment opportunities that the withdrawal of the base would create. The local activists perceived that the state took their opinions into account.¹¹⁷ Not long after the demonstrations a regional branch for issuing passports was opened, and a mobile driver's license service was

¹¹⁶ See Zaal Anjaparidze, 'Javakheti region complicates Georgian relations with Armenia'. *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 2005-05-24, Volume 2, Issue 101.

¹¹⁷ Author's interview.

initiated. (These two provisions had also been demanded at the demonstrations.) Following this initial success, mass meetings turned into a standard formula for *United Javakhk*.

In January 2006, United Javakhk used similar mass protests to secure a resumption of the electricity supply in much of Akhalkalaki. Following the protests, individual electric meters were eventually installed in Akhalkalaki *rayon* in accordance with the demonstrators' demands. Given their success, these acts of civil disobedience seemed a rather promising approach to politics: quick action, and quick results. What creates the mobilisation possibilities for these demonstrations are socio-economic problems (as with the closure of the military base) or general mismanagement (like the electricity incident), which is addressed by local organisations. If the state does not act, it is then perceived as a matter of ethnic discrimination – a convincing basis for mobilisation for local Javakhetians.

However, civil disobedience did not prove a sustainable strategy for United Javakhk. Following another incident in April 2006 when demonstrations organised by United Javakhk over the death of an Armenian man in the town of Tsalka turned into a mini-riot in which a court and the university were forcibly broken into, much of the goodwill that initially surrounded the movement evaporated. Recently the Georgian authorities have begun tracking down the organisers of the demonstrations. In November 2006 a court case was initiated against Arthur Pogosyan, the 'main activist' in the January 2006 demonstrations against the electricity distributing company. Pogosyan was consequently sentenced to pay 2,000 GEL in fines and was given two years probation. The judge claims that cases are being prepared against the people who were active during the April 2006 demonstrations as well.

6. The Negative Role of the Media

The mutual suspicions discussed above have their origin in the xenophobia of the Gamsakhurdia period and the ethno-territorial conflicts during the early nineties. These legacies have left Georgians afraid of losing control over yet another region of the country. However, the lingering mistrust is reinforced by a mutual lack of accurate information. Javakheti's inhabitants rely mainly on Armenian and Russian information,¹¹⁸ as they do not understand the Georgian

¹¹⁸ Such as Armenia TV, OTR, RTR and NTV. See Olesya Vartanian, 'CMI Javakheti, Gruzija', *Report 2007-01#37*, Centre for Journalism in Extreme Situations, available at http://www.cjes.ru/bulletin/?bulletin_id=2314.

broadcasts, and Russian news outlets often portray Georgia in a negative light and do not accurately cover Georgia's internal politics.¹¹⁹

On the Georgian side the information on Javakheti is also often negative.¹²⁰ The only news that ever reaches Tbilisi is when another mass meeting has been arranged, and often the shows are edited in such a way that the entire population is portrayed as dangerous separatists, rather than discontented Georgian citizens from the region demanding socio-economic improvements. This creates the impression that Javakheti is a potential 'hot spot' and not just the home of a few nationalists that are mobilising a marginalised minority population which lives under a severe socio-economic situation, is heavily dependent on Russian money and was previously completely detached from Georgia.

7. The Non-Resolved Status of Javakheti

One of the biggest question marks in terms of regional integration and local self governance is the frozen situation in relation to Georgia's two breakaway republics. As long as the future status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia remains uncertain, there is no obvious answer as to how the territory of Georgia will ultimately be arranged and what types of responsibilities and freedoms will be given to the respective regions of the country.¹²¹ This complicates the integration of Javakheti, where respondents feel the need for settling their status and the level of their autonomy. In this context it is important to remember that what respondents mean by the word 'autonomy' varies. Some attribute only limited definitions of cultural autonomy to the concept, while others talk about a high level of economic and political self governance. Contrary to what is often stated in Georgia, the political actors in Javakheti have never raised secessionist claims,

¹¹⁹ However, it should be stressed that the information vacuum in Javakheti has been improved by the OSCE project of translating the main Georgian news outlet into Armenian on the local TV-channels in Akhalkalaki (ATV12) and Ninotsminda (Parvana TV). This project will, however, soon come to an end, and it is not clear if financing will continue. In addition, the Georgian First Channel broadcasts the daily news program *National Moambe* in minority languages. Every week day there is a 30 minute minority language news show at 16.00. The Armenian show is on Wednesdays. In addition there is a daily Russian 20 minute news show at 16.30. However, this is far from peak viewing time and the broadcasts are rather short. The Georgian Public Broadcasting (GPB) also broadcast Armenian news at 20.30 each day. See http://gpb.ge/moambe_3.php?lang=geo&tm_id=0&sub_id=3.

¹²⁰ See Olesya Vartanian, 'CMI Javakheti, Gruzija', *Report 2007-01#37*, Centre for Journalism in Extreme Situations, available at http://www.cjes.ru/bulletin/?bulletin_id=2314.

¹²¹ See Article 2.2. of the constitution of Georgia.

only claims for autonomy or federative solutions.¹²² In the words of *United Javakhk* leader Vahag Chakhalyan: “We want stability, and not war. My wife is Georgian, so why would I want a conflict? We had the opportunity for secession in the 90s, and didn’t take it then.”¹²³

Rather, it is the language issue that is the biggest barrier to the integration of Javakheti. It is thus mainly a matter of cultural and linguistic autonomy that the local population as well as the radicals want to safeguard – something which Javakheti used to have during Soviet times. This cultural and linguistic autonomy is put in jeopardy by the monolingual drive by the authorities, according to many respondents. This wish to reinforce the Georgian language throughout the country is an important measure to create a cohesive democratic state, but currently it is done without proper support to its remote and linguistically isolated minority regions, notably Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli *mkhare*. This Georgian hardline monolingual attitude might even be detrimental to the creation of ‘national unity’ since it decreases trust among Javakhetians.

¹²² See for example Ghia Nodia and Alvaro Pinto Scholtbach, *The Political Landscape of Georgia. Political Parties: Achievement, Challenges and Prospects*, NIMD, ODIHR, CIPDD, (Delft, 2006) p 72.

¹²³ Author’s interview, December 2006.

VII. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Today, Javakheti has become psychologically and socially closer to the rest of Georgia compared to a couple of years ago. This can be seen, for example, in the way the Georgian Lari is becoming more commonly used in market places relative to the Russian Rouble. The infrastructural improvements also make it easier and quicker to travel from Javakheti to Tbilisi. The majority of Javakhetians have accustomed themselves to the fact that the Russian military base will withdraw from Javakheti. The withdrawal, in combination with the current stalemate in Georgian-Russian relations, will, however, create additional economic difficulties and, very possibly, an increased unemployment rate for an already impoverished region. As of today the government has not offered any viable alternatives in terms of employment generation, or any strategies for developing agriculture – which is one of the very few remaining means of survival for locals. The situation is slightly improved by international NGOs such as CHF, which offers microfinance alternatives for farmers.

Generally speaking, the local population in Javakheti consider themselves to be citizens of Georgia. However, they do not feel welcomed by the central government and are convinced that they, as national minorities, are being treated as second-class citizens. Local respondents also fear that the central authorities want to change the demographic balance and force them away from their ancestral lands by creating bad living conditions (what radicals refer to as a ‘white genocide’). Therefore, Javakhetians remain easily mobilized by nationalist slogans, and perceive the poor socio-economic situation, which can be found in all remote regions of Georgia, as ethnic discrimination.

Local actors remain easily co-opted by the central authorities, and this is probably one of the main impediments for bringing about a true integration of Javakheti. As long as they are more interested in private deals and profits, instead of creating change for the region, no real regional development will take place in Javakheti.

It should also be noted that the nationalist actors (for example *United Javakhk*) remain unable to address problems on a local level, or to hold their local politicians accountable for the lack of changes. Instead, they focus on cultural and linguistic issues, using demonstrations as the main tool for change – a detrimental choice since it intimidates and infuriates Georgian public opinion.

The Georgian government attempts to create ‘national unity’ by applying a strictly monolingual policy, i.e. that Georgian should be used as a language of instruction also in the minority language schools (albeit introduced gradually) and at university; and it should be the only administrative language used throughout Georgia. However, proper tools for improving language skills in the linguistically isolated Javakheti are still lacking. Attempts to create national unity are made in an inconsistent way, without understanding the need for balancing integration with protection of minority rights. Thus, the government is trying to use sticks instead of carrots towards its national minorities, forcing them to learn the state language as soon as possible. This attitude tends to deter local Armenians, who have not been given the opportunities to learn the state language.

Even though the Georgian government has started to address the ‘hard’ issues – renovating schools and roads and attempting to establish a merit-based bureaucratic cadre – it is still lagging far behind in terms of ‘soft’ issues – creating trust, establishing accountable local governance and safeguarding minority rights (especially linguistic ones), as well as improving the political participation of minorities at central level. Therefore the recent reforms which strive towards an integrated Georgia run the risk of being counterproductive in Javakheti if nothing is done to ease the socio-economic consequences of the Russian military base withdrawal and to increase the trust of the population.