

# State Approaches to National Integration in Georgia Two Perspectives

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## Introduction

Since 2005, the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center has implemented the project “Strengthening National Integration in Georgia: Avenues for Competence and Confidence Building on Minority Issues.” This project, made possible by funding from the Department of Eastern Europe and Central Asia of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, has been conducted jointly with the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. It has focused on identifying problems and solutions in Georgia’s national integration process, and to assist in Georgian policy-making on minority integration.

The Georgian government’s handling of minority affairs is important in several respects. First, it is an important area in Georgia’s integration with European institutions; indeed, Georgia is a signatory to numerous treaties that require it to reform its legislation concerning national minority issues. More broadly, however, it is an important element in the building of a democratic and peaceful state. Given Georgia’s problems with externally inspired secessionism, the government’s relationship with minorities within territory controlled by Tbilisi can play an important role not only in framing Georgia’s future, but also in determining its attractiveness to those minorities whose leaderships have chosen to part ways with Tbilisi. Since the Rose Revolution of 2004, Georgia has been changing rapidly; and some of this change – even while aiming at the fuller integration of minority populations with the rest of Georgia in economic, social, and political terms – has caused frictions with minority populations, adding further importance to the government’s handling of the question of national minorities.

This report aspires to provide two perspectives on Georgia’s process of national integration, with a focus on minority issues. The first contribution, “State Building Dilemmas: The Process of National Integration in Post-Revolutionary Georgia” seeks to identify contemporary problems and trade-offs associated with Georgia’s state-building process, with implications for

the state's handling of national integration and minority issues. It is written by two of the Joint Center's researchers with particular expertise on Georgian affairs, Niklas Nilsson and Johanna Popjanevski. They conclude that while the Georgian leadership is increasingly adopting a citizenship-based approach to minority integration, certain priorities in the state-building process risk impeding the introduction of sufficient safeguards for minority rights. Incoherencies and communication deficits in Georgia's approaches to minority integration add to tensions between majority and minorities, as well as between center and region. It is therefore essential that Georgia develops ways to accommodate its visions of national unity with the implementation of international minority rights, and that this process takes place in constant dialogue with minority populations.

The second contribution, "The Georgian State and Minority Integration: Progress Made and Progress Still to Come," is a needs assessment study based on the work of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) on the topic of ethnic minority integration in the Georgian state over a four-year period (2003-07). It is written by Ekaterine Metreveli and Temuri Yakobashvili. The paper concludes that while the Georgian government has been making demonstrated efforts at promoting the national integration of ethnic minorities, the activities have been limited in their scope and application to only sporadic interventions with the overall process still lacking the necessary mechanisms for achieving successful results. The study shows that a more proactive approach from the side of Tbilisi from whence governmental policies will not only be viewed through an ethnic lens will contribute more directly to the desired end.

These analyses will form the base for the future practical projects to be undertaken jointly by the Joint Center and GFSIS in the field of national minority integration in Georgia. Moreover, they constitute a contribution to the academic debate on minority affairs in the South Caucasus, and it is in this spirit that the Joint Center is pleased to make them available to a larger audience.

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# State Building Dilemmas: The Process of National Integration in Post Revolutionary Georgia

Niklas Nilsson and Johanna Popjanevski

## Introduction

Economic development and a government sincerely committed to reform have allowed post-revolutionary Georgia, for the first time since its independence from the USSR, to make serious progress in its state building process. As a result, Georgia increasingly faces a set of dilemmas related to the much-coveted construction of a unitary nation-state. Efforts to reassert the state's authority over its entire territory have not only implied dealing with the unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but also involve the political integration of regions already under government control. While the state building and national integration process involves strengthening central and local state institutions and increasingly providing citizens in remote regions with state services, it also involves a centralization of the state and nation-building efforts to introduce a common national identity across the state's territory. The need for national integration can be considered nationwide, considering the previously quite loose connections between the center and remote Georgian regions. However, as the national integration process advances, certain friction occurs especially in regions densely populated by national minorities. It is in these regions that the aspects of nation building related to the introduction of a common national identity are perceived as most controversial.

This chapter demonstrates a set of dilemmas present in Georgian state building efforts after the Rose Revolution, regarding approaches and policies applied by the central government toward national integration along with perspectives and interpretations of these approaches from the Georgian regions densely populated by minorities.

## Ethnic Nationalism and Disintegration in the South Caucasus

Georgia remains the most ethnically diverse state in the South Caucasus. The latest census undertaken in 2002 disclosed that 16.8 per cent of Georgia's population is of an ethnicity other than Georgian.<sup>1</sup> These results in fact reveal a drastic decrease in the proportion of ethnic minorities since the last USSR census in 1989, when ethnic minorities constituted 29.9 per cent of the overall population.<sup>2</sup> These demographic changes can in part be explained through the *de facto* secessions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and hence the exclusion of minorities in these regions from the census, and through migration patterns which has seen a proportionally larger out-migration of non-ethnic Georgian minorities, most notably ethnic Russians.<sup>3</sup>

In connection to the South Caucasian states' struggle for independence from the USSR, a drastic deterioration of interethnic relations took place throughout the Caucasus, as the initiation of reforms under Perestroika gave way to aggressive ethnic nationalism as a guiding ideology for the statehood of the South Caucasian republics. The overt focus on ethnicity as a determinant of national belonging was in large part a product of Soviet nationality policies, which granted the titular nations of these Soviet Republics exclusive political rights and served to enforce a strong ideological connection between ethnicity and territory. Upon independence, this in turn prevented the development of citizen-based conceptions of the nation, instead leading political elites to focus exclusively on the rights of titular nationalities within the new states.

Throughout the USSR, ethnically based autonomous units had also been created within the Soviet Socialist republics. In the South Caucasus, these took the form of the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics of Abkhazia and Nakhichevan as well as the South Ossetian and Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblasts.<sup>4</sup> Even though the granting of autonomous status to

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<sup>1</sup> Data from 2002 exclude Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which were included in the 1989 census.

<sup>2</sup> Data available at Statistics Georgia, [www.statistics.ge](http://www.statistics.ge).

<sup>3</sup> See Statistics Georgia, "Report: On Preparation and Carrying Out of the 2002 First General National Census in Georgia and the Main Results Thereof", available at: <http://www.statistics.ge/main.php?pform=145&plang=1>.

<sup>4</sup> The Nachichevan ASSR was under Azerbaijani jurisdiction, although geographically separated from Azerbaijan. Nakhichevan had a majority ethnic Azeri population, albeit

these regions meant limited *de facto* independence during Soviet times, it provided the titular peoples of these autonomous regions, Abkhaz and Ossetians within Georgia and Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, with institutions and political infrastructure which, along with substantial support from Russia and Armenia, allowed them to resist the nationalizing policies of their respective central governments in the early 1990s and proclaim their own independent states.<sup>5</sup> The results thereof were the outbreak of civil wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and an interstate war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. These conflicts remain unresolved to date: Abkhazia and South Ossetia have gained *de facto* independence from Georgia and rely heavily on various forms of Russian support, while Nagorno-Karabakh has increasingly merged with Armenia.

Substantial minorities in these states, which did not enjoy an autonomous status, such as Armenians and Azeris in Georgia and Lezgins and Talysh in Azerbaijan, nevertheless did not rebel against their central governments, in spite of strong ethnonationalistic movements within these groups. In Georgia, while not leading to armed confrontation as was the case in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the nationalization policies of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia nonetheless severely damaged relations between the state and its ethnic minorities. In Javakheti, a region in Southern Georgia densely populated by ethnic Armenians, Georgian ethnic nationalism was met by a corresponding Armenian one in the form of *Javakhhk*, an organization formed by local Armenians which basically governed Javakheti between 1991 and 1994. In Kvemo Kartli, home of Georgia's Azeri minority, the organization *Geyrat* emerged in 1990. The organization played an important role in providing security for the Azeri community, especially during the chaotic years 1992-1994, and continued to function as a strong proponent of Azeri interests until the late 1990s. After the conclusion of the war in Abkhazia, Georgia gradually stabilized during the rule of Eduard Shevardnadze, and ethnically nationalistic rhetoric was softened officially. It nevertheless

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with a large Armenian minority. The basis for autonomy for the Ajarian ASSR in Georgia was however not ethnicity, but religion, as the ASSR was in large part settled by Muslim Georgians.

<sup>5</sup> See Svante E. Cornell, *Autonomy as a Source of Conflict: Ethnoterritoriality and Separatism in the South Caucasus – Cases in Georgia*, Uppsala University: Peace and Conflict Monograph Series No. 61, 2002.

remained popular within significant parts of the Georgian leadership and ethnicity remained a primary factor of self-identification among the wider population, Georgians and minorities alike.

Tbilisi's policies of the early 1990s had generated widespread distrust in the policies and intentions of the central government among ethnic minorities. Georgia under Eduard Shevardnadze carried most traits of a failing state, displaying a dysfunctional state apparatus, immense corruption and a lack of control over the state's territory, mainly through the secessions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, the central government also failed to assert full control over other parts of its territory, the most blatant case being the *de facto* autonomous region of Ajaria, run by local strongman Aslan Abashidze until 2004. Additionally, the inaccessible and mountainous region of Svaneti, and the Pankisi Gorge, partly populated by Chechen refugees and until 2002 also a haven for both Chechen rebels and organized criminal groups, were out of reach to central authority. In regions remote from Tbilisi where the central government did exercise a certain amount of control, the overall political and economic weak nature of the state nevertheless resulted in a situation of general neglect, where the state neither possessed the means nor the ambition to promote economic development and meaningful relations between the center and the regions. The result was a disintegrated state, which failed to provide security and basic necessities for its citizens and hence was hardly visible in the everyday life of inhabitants in remote Georgian regions.

The national integration deficit was hence a general problem of the Georgian state, for regions inhabited by ethnic Georgians and minorities alike. However, in regions densely populated by ethnic minorities, such as Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli, the neglect displayed by the state was frequently interpreted as an expression of ethnic discrimination, or even as a conscious policy aimed at forcing these minorities to emigrate.<sup>6</sup> Especially in Javakheti, such views are still quite common, and frequently become a basis for mobilization on an ethnic basis in the form of mass meetings. However, violent incidents have been rare.

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<sup>6</sup> Author's Interviews, Akhalkalaki, May 2007.

After the Rose Revolution in November 2003, the reassertion of Georgia's territorial integrity has remained a central problem for the Georgian state, and a core issue in this respect has been the peaceful resolution of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Before the war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008, these processes were largely dependent on the outcomes of negotiations between the Georgian government and the *de facto* governments of these regions, and were highly influenced by both Russian interests and Georgian efforts to change the situation on the ground through the introduction of alternative leaders more positively inclined toward future Georgian rule over these regions. The war and its outcomes obviously made peaceful conflict resolution a more distant prospect than ever, underlining that the future of the breakaway regions will depend on the larger geopolitical interplay in the region, rather than on efforts by the primary parties.

An issue more exclusively in the hands of the Georgian government is the integration of national minorities on territory controlled by the central government, especially Georgia's sizable Azeri and Armenian minorities. Of high relevance in this respect is that the new government has sought to transform the official position on nationhood and national integration. A conception of the nation emphasizing civic values as criteria for national belonging is increasingly visible in official statements and the government recognizes the necessity of properly integrating remote regions, especially those populated by ethnic minorities, in order to build a functioning and stable state. This approach is also related to the strong ambition on part of the government to integrate with European institutions, which has been accompanied with incentives to provide protection of minority rights.

Georgia's state building efforts and national integration process are, however, not unproblematic, and the development toward a civic conception of the nation in Georgia is still in its very initial stages. Within this process, the strengthening of the state itself may contribute to tensions between the center and the regions, and between ethnic groups. The practice of addressing interethnic tensions through the national integration process is hence simultaneously crucial to the building of a stable and democratic Georgian state and potentially destabilizing. Government approaches applied in this process, while ultimately aimed at the political inclusion of ethnic minorities,

also risk provoking counter-reactions in cases where these approaches are applied in a manner understood as threatening the culture and ethnic identity of national minorities.

### **Government Approaches and National Integration Policies after the Rose Revolution**

With the change in government after the Rose Revolution, Georgia saw several important changes in the relationship between the state and its resident minorities. While the rhetoric of ethnic nationalism promoted under Gamsakhurdia was softened under Shevardnadze, very little political effort under his rule was devoted to addressing the interethnic divisions within Georgian society. The two main reasons for this were, first, that the Georgian state under Shevardnadze was exceptionally weak and lacked both the financial and human resources for pursuing coherent policies in most fields; second, Shevardnadze's political power base rested on a complex balancing of political interests, among which were included both hardliner ethnic nationalists and young liberal reformers. In seeking to first and foremost maintain the fragile stability in the country, issues regarding national integration were largely left aside, as these were viewed as potentially explosive. This tactic implied that both issues regarding the political inclusion of Georgia's minorities and the issue of national integration remained largely unaddressed during most of Shevardnadze's rule.

The Rose Revolution brought to power a government almost completely consisting of young, liberal, reform-oriented politicians of whom many had received their education in the West. The new government embarked on several policies aimed at strengthening the state, including a liberalization of the economy, ambitious anti-corruption policies, and reforms within the police and the security structures. Control over the Ajaria region was rapidly regained, followed by an unsuccessful attempt to pursue a similar approach toward South Ossetia. Regarding the issue of national identity, the government has sought to take a stance of promoting a civic nation, based on citizenship and loyalty toward common institutions, and to publicly underline the belonging of all resident ethnic groups as citizens of the Georgian nation. This ambition is especially visible in speeches made by

President Saakashvili on the issue. Frequent addresses on the issue of national unity and the promotion of civic nationalism in official speeches indeed fill an important function both as a reconciliatory message toward minorities which may serve to ease suspicion toward central authorities, and as an overall communication to the Georgian population of a change in thinking on ethnicity and nationhood on the part of the government. This, in turn, marks a clear departure from the ethnic nationalism of the past and for promoting interethnic tolerance. However, as Nodia notes, for an increasingly democratic and modernizing state like Georgia, “it is not enough to just *tolerate* ‘the other’; a state must find a way to *integrate* ‘the other’ – to make him a willing participant in the national project.”<sup>7</sup> Political measures aimed at the integration of national minorities applied so far have underlined the inherent difficulty in translating visions into political practice.

### State Building Policies and Interethnic Friction

#### *Command of the State Language – A Precondition for National Unity?*

The government defines a primary obstacle to the integration of national minorities as the limited knowledge of the Georgian language among especially the sizeable Azeri and Armenian minorities located in Kvemo Kartli and Javakheti respectively. These minorities have during most of Georgia’s time as an independent country been isolated from political developments in the rest of the country. This is an effect both of physical limitations to communication in the form of extremely poor infrastructure, and to the language barrier which increased after Russian lost its significance in the country.

While uniting the multicultural nation under a common state language is a component of forging a common national identity, the government’s promotion of proficiency in the dominant ethnic group’s language as a core precondition for inclusion in the civic nation by necessity incorporates certain ethnic features into this national identity. This leads to several questions regarding the balance between promoting a common language and

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<sup>7</sup> Ghia Nodia, “Georgia: Dimensions of Insecurity” in Coppieters & Legvold (eds), *Statehood and Security: Georgia after the Rose Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005.

safeguarding the language rights of national minorities. The components of national integration policy promoted so far have emphasized the need for increased teaching and administrative use of the Georgian language in regions populated by minorities. These policies are controversial, as they are often viewed as providing inadequate means for protecting the language rights of national minorities. The promotion of the Georgian language thus has a set of potentially problematic consequences for relations between the government and national minorities. These come to the fore especially regarding minority access to education and employment in the public sector, and in communication between citizens and official bodies, as well as between local and central administrations.

### *Education*

The reform of the Georgian education system is often described as one of the most ambitious undertakings of the post-revolutionary government. It is generally viewed as a success, modernizing and providing efficiency to education institutions, eliminating the previously rampant corruption within higher education, and bringing the Georgian education system in closer accordance with European standards and the Bologna process.<sup>8</sup> However, when implemented in regions densely populated by minorities, the reforms hold a set of potentially problematic consequences for the national integration process. The established system of primary and secondary teaching in minority languages has hitherto caused an impediment to the integration of non-Georgian speaking minorities into Georgian society.<sup>9</sup> Education institutions have in this regard arguably served as “schools for émigrés,”<sup>10</sup> as the vast majority of graduates from these schools have chosen to pursue higher education in Armenia, Azerbaijan, or Russia.

In order to promote the use of Georgian in secondary education, the new education legislation adopted in 2005 stipulates that all state schools must teach Georgian language and literature, Georgian history and geography, and

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<sup>8</sup> Author's Interviews, David Darchiashvili, Director, Open Society Georgia Foundation, Tbilisi, May 7, 2007; Ghia Nodia, Director, Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, Tbilisi, May 4, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, Europe Report No 178, November 2006, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Author's Interview, Ghia Nodia, Tbilisi, May 25, 2005.



“other social sciences” in Georgian by the school year 2010-2011 (in Abkhazia, also in Abkhazian).<sup>11</sup> Regarding secondary education, it is particularly these clauses that provide for tension between center and region; however, the law does otherwise permit the continued education in their native language for pupils whose native language is not Georgian<sup>12</sup> and provides options for schools to include minority languages and the culture and history of minorities beyond the subjects prescribed by the national curriculum.<sup>13</sup> Teaching of Georgian has hitherto been inefficient, due to insufficient financing, a lack of qualified teachers (in spite of government programs aimed at attracting teachers to minority regions), and inadequate teaching methodologies. Furthermore, schoolchildren in minority regions have little contact with the Georgian language outside the classroom.<sup>14</sup> These deficiencies in language teaching cause a well grounded skepticism toward the government’s objective of providing a sound knowledge of the Georgian language in secondary education. Fears have been expressed in minority regions that schoolchildren risk receiving an inferior education due to increased language requirements.

An additional concern is related to the introduction of Georgian subjects and new textbooks on these subjects (previously, minority schools in Kvemo Kartli and Javakheti were supplied with textbooks from Azerbaijan and Armenia). As the new Georgian textbooks provide narratives of history and geography from a Georgian perspective, differing from those of minority groups, the reforms are sometimes described as threatening to the ethnic identities of minorities.<sup>15</sup>

In line with the education reform and introduction of higher standards in the system of higher education, national entrance exams were introduced for state accredited higher education institutions under the law on higher education from 2004, including among other topics Georgian language and

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<sup>11</sup> Law of Georgia on General Education, Articles 5.4, 58.5.

<sup>12</sup> Law of Georgia on General Education, Article 4.3.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Wheatley, “The Status of Minority Languages in Georgia and the Relevance of Models from Other European States”, ECMI Working Paper #26, March 2006, p 9.

<sup>14</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia’s Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, pp 26-27.

<sup>15</sup> See Levan Gigineishvili and Ieva Gundare, *History Teaching in Georgia: Representation of Minorities in Georgian History Textbooks*, Geneva: Cibera, 2007.

literature.<sup>16</sup> However, the first time these exams were held in 2005, a very low number of Armenian and Azeri graduates from minority language schools were able to enroll at Georgian universities. The system for national examinations was modified in 2006 as applicants could take a larger part of the test in Russian, and the threshold for passing in Georgian was eased, allowing for a larger number of minority language students to enroll.<sup>17</sup> The Akhalkalaki branch of Tbilisi State University, opened in 2002, was abolished in 2007, due to inadequacies. While this decision was probably correct against the context of improving higher standards in higher education, it is likely to further discourage members of the Armenian minority from pursuing higher education in Georgia, and has provoked negative reactions in the region.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Employment and Representation*

Another area where the language policies cause friction between center and region is in practices and employment in local administration in regions densely populated by minorities. While minorities generally are very poorly represented in official structures at the central level, the picture differs somewhat when it comes to minority representation in local administration. In Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts in Javakheti, where Armenians constitute 94 per cent and 96 per cent of the population respectively, Armenians hold most official posts. However, in Akhaltsikhe district, where Armenians comprise 37 per cent of the population, they are very poorly represented in local administration. In Marneuli and Bolnisi districts in Kvemo Kartli, where Azeris constitute 83 per cent and 66 per cent respectively, ethnic Azeris are barely represented at all at the higher levels.<sup>19</sup>

Overall, very few Armenian and Azeri local officials have a working knowledge of the Georgian language. While Georgian law demands that the Georgian language be used in local administration and courts,<sup>20</sup> the center has

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<sup>16</sup> Law of Georgia on Higher Education, Article 89.4.

<sup>17</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, pp 28-29.

<sup>18</sup> Author's Interview, Ghia Nodia, May 4, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Figures from Statistics Georgia, 2002 Census, Ethnic Groups by Major Administrative-Territorial Units. See International Crisis Group, "Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities", pp. 8-9 for exact figures.

<sup>20</sup> See the 1997 Law on Common Courts, the 1998 Law on Public Service, the 1999 Administrative Code and the 2005 Organic Law of Georgia on Local Self Government.

so far turned a blind eye to the informal practice of using Armenian and Russian as working languages within the local administration in Javakheti.<sup>21</sup> However, since 2005, the central government has started to implement reforms aimed at establishing a merit-based civil service through professional testing of officials, including language knowledge. Testing is likely to have more serious effects in Javakheti, as a larger proportion of the few Azeri officials in Kvemo Kartli are proficient in the state language. Translation has in some cases been provided for these exams, and failing the tests does not automatically provide a ground for discharge. However, in both regions officials have been fired due to an insufficient knowledge of Georgian, and have in several cases been replaced by ethnic Georgians.<sup>22</sup>

If a strict implementation of Georgian law on language use in public administration continues, very few local Armenians would be qualified for official posts in Javakheti, which would require the recruitment of ethnic Georgians from other regions.<sup>23</sup> The implementation of the law requiring knowledge of the state language among civil servants thus limits minorities' access to employment in the public sector. Georgian officials frequently refer to the Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration as the primary example of government efforts of training minority representatives for jobs in the public sector.<sup>24</sup> While running on a small scale, the school does provide a six-month training program in public administration, including three months of language courses as part of the curriculum. While being a positive initiative, three months is not sufficient for minority representatives without a prior knowledge of Georgian to acquire a working knowledge of the language and the employment record upon graduation has so far been unimpressive.<sup>25</sup>

### *Communication between Center and Regions*

Until 2005, Russian remained the primary language for communication between different regional authorities, even though Georgian law requires

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<sup>21</sup> Wheatley, "The Status of Minority Languages in Georgia...", pp. 8-11.

<sup>22</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, pp 23-24; Interviews, Akhalkalaki, May 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Wheatley, "The Status of Minority Languages in Georgia ...", pp. 12-13.

<sup>24</sup> Author's Interviews, Government Officials, Tbilisi, May 2007.

<sup>25</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, p 29; Author's Interviews, Tbilisi, May 2007.

the Georgian language to be used for these purposes.<sup>26</sup> Since the stricter enforcement of these laws began, central authorities refuse to accept documents in Russian. This obviously complicates communication between regional and central authorities, as all documents transmitted to Tbilisi need to be translated. Furthermore, the increasing use of Georgian in local administration and courts provides obstacles to the communication between citizens and authorities. In Kvemo Kartli, where most officials are Georgians, most official documentation is in Georgian, whereas in Javakheti, the same trend can be observed in offices in which Georgians have more recently occupied senior positions. As a consequence, both Armenians and Azeris increasingly need translators in their communication with administrative bodies, as well as for understanding legislation. The latter aspect in particular provides significant delays in court rulings and limits access for non-Georgian speakers to fair legal processes. Before 2005, laws requiring Georgian to be used in citizens' interaction with authorities were rarely applied. However, as they are now enforced, minorities face increasing difficulties in interacting with state structures. This in practice poses a dilemma between enforcing legislation requiring Georgian as the language of communication between the state and its citizens and promoting the civic participation of minority citizens.<sup>27</sup>

The language barrier is the most obvious obstacle to the civic integration of Georgia's national minorities, and by extension to the promotion of a unified and civic nation. Yet, the aspects of the promotion of the Georgian language within the education system and public administration accounted for above provide a central source of tension between the central government and minority communities. The general point of friction seems to be that the ambitious timeframe for implementing language legislation is accompanied neither by sufficient opportunities for minorities to master the language, nor by protection of minority languages to an extent viewed as acceptable by minority communities. While these policies seek to address what is rightfully considered the most crucial component of the national integration process, their implementation without addressing these issues may well provide for additional difficulties on the part of minority representatives in

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<sup>26</sup> 1995 Constitution, 1998 Law on Public Service.

<sup>27</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, pp. 23-25.

accessing jobs and education, and lead to further estrangement between Tbilisi and minority regions. Such a development would reinforce already existing concerns among minority communities and potentially lead to increased tension.

### **The Perceived Divergence between National Unity and Minority Rights**

The government's stance on the promotion of the state language on the one hand, and the protection of minority languages on the other, highlights a problematic misperception concerning the role of minority protection in civic integration processes. In its strive towards unification of the Georgian state, the present government has a tendency to view minority rights as contrary to the civic integration concept. Several factors contribute to this misperception.

The problem is to some extent linked to a mishandling of the concept of minority protection throughout the last decade. From the mid-1990s, possibly as a response to an emerging international focus on minority issues after the break-up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, former President Shevardnadze increasingly attempted to portray himself as the protector of the rights of national minority groups. A number of efforts were made to anchor the basic principles of tolerance and equality in the legislative rhetoric. For instance, the Georgian constitution of 1995 guaranteed equality of all citizens, stating that: "Everyone is free by birth and is equal before law regardless of race, color, language, sex, religion, political and other opinions, national, ethnic and social belonging, origin, property and title, place of residence"<sup>28</sup> and that "Citizens of Georgia shall be equal in social, economic, cultural and political life irrespective of their national, ethnic, religious or linguistic belonging"<sup>29</sup>. Moreover, in 1999 the state acceded to the Convention against all forms of Racial Discrimination, and with its accession to the Council of Europe in April the same year, it undertook to ratify two conventions protecting the rights and freedoms of national minorities: the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Displaying his intention to harmonize Georgian legislation with these international

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<sup>28</sup> Article 14.

<sup>29</sup> Article 38.

minority rights frameworks, Shevardnadze adopted in the early 2000s a national action plan on “Strengthening the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms of Minorities living in Georgia.”<sup>30</sup> This was desirable both at the international level, where organizations such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe increasingly emphasized the idea of minority rights as a tool for conflict prevention, and at the domestic level, where a group of increasingly influential, Western-oriented politicians (including current President Mikheil Saakashvili and former Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania) promoted compliance with international law as a means for integrating Georgia into European structures.

However, while rhetorically promoting the basic principles of tolerance and equality, in practice the former administration did little to provide for concrete mechanisms to include national minorities in Georgian public life. In fact, issues of integration and participation of minority representatives in central structures were largely, and deliberately, left aside. Instead, the former president guaranteed both the stability of the Georgian nation and his own rule through pursuing a *laissez-faire* policy towards the minority-populated regions, where minority communities were left to develop their own societal structures and regional identities. Thus, minority protection was translated into a system of strong regional self-governance, where, for instance, the Soviet legacy of primary and secondary education in minority languages was preserved. As a consequence, until this date, minority protection in the Georgian context is often perceived as equaling regional autonomy, omission to learn the state language, and an overall alienation of national minority groups. Against this background, the present government, which is determined to break down the legacy of regional isolation, sees few benefits of implementing a system which may only isolate minorities further.

Second, the experience of ethnic conflicts, and of external involvement in these, has provided for a political climate in which both representatives of the central government and the ethnic majority at large voice skepticism to claims for collective minority rights. In cases where such rights imply various forms of political autonomy, which has in turn often been requested

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<sup>30</sup> Adopted through Presidential Decree No.68, of March 2003.

by the more radical political groups, in Javakheti especially, these are frequently seen as implying secessionist ambitions. This is due to a conceptual misinterpretation of the nature of minority rights, both by the central government and those minority groups voicing such claims. Minority rights, in their intended sense, protect the rights and freedoms of individuals as opposed to groups. However, the common tendency to confuse minority rights with the rights of “peoples” has in Georgia’s case resulted in a perception that a system of minority rights entails the right to self-determination, and may equip minority communities with tools for secession. With Kosovo’s secession from Serbia, and its possible implications for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the awarding of collective minority rights to minority communities has become an increasingly sensitive issue in Georgia.<sup>31</sup>

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the weak domestic lobbying for enhanced minority rights is seemingly interpreted by the central government as an acceptance of the *status quo* by minority communities. Thus, the government tends to treat the establishment of a minority rights framework as an honoring of its international obligations rather than a necessity in any Georgian context. As Wheatley notes,<sup>32</sup> this is linked to the low representation of minority representatives in the central structures and the absence of political parties representing national minorities. Georgian legislation explicitly prohibits the formation of political parties with regional or territorial traits. Thus, regional parties such as Virk and United Javakhk, who strongly promote the right of the Javakheti-based minorities to use the Armenian language, have no legitimacy in the eyes of the central government. Such parties are also viewed as pursuing a radical and separatist agenda. Thus, there is no platform from which minorities can credibly voice demands for minority protection measures or raise awareness on the potential role of minority rights. As a result, awareness on minority protection remains weak, not just within the decision-making structures but among the population at large. In a survey<sup>33</sup> conducted within the USAID-

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<sup>31</sup> Author’s Interviews, Tbilisi, January 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Wheatley, “Implementing the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities: A Feasibility Study”, ECMI Working Paper #28, October 2006, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Available at: <http://www.una.ge/pdfs/surveyreport.pdf>.

funded National Integration and Tolerance in Georgia (NITG) project, while 66 per cent of respondents nation-wide believed that minority rights should be protected, only 19 per cent agreed that minorities should enjoy special legislative protection. As much as 59.1 per cent of the respondents claimed that they were completely unacquainted with existing national minority rights legislation. The lack of public demand for minority rights appears to serve officials with the argument that existing legislation sufficiently reflects principles of equality and that priority should be given to more pressing issues. Moreover, officials tend to point to the lack of minority rights claims as a sign of minorities in Georgia being exposed to hardships unrelated to their ethnicity.<sup>34</sup>

The government's reluctance towards establishing a framework for the protection of national minorities has become particularly visible with the implementation of international minority rights instruments. As noted above, with its admission to the Council of Europe in 1999, Shevardnadze's government undertook to ratify two conventions dealing directly with minority protection: the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (hereafter the Framework Convention) and the European Charter for Minority or Regional Languages (hereafter the Language Charter), but failed to do so during its time in office. In January 2005, the Council of Europe urged the new Georgian government to honor its obligations and ratify the two conventions.<sup>35</sup> Whereas the Framework Convention was ratified on December 22, 2005, the state has at the time of writing yet to ratify the Language Charter.

#### *The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*

The 1995 Framework Convention constitutes the first legally binding document directly addressing the rights of national minorities. The convention has no direct effect for its parties, but needs instead to be interpreted and implemented into domestic law. Its aim is to provide for principles for minority protection, leaving states with a certain margin of appreciation when translating its provisions into national law. The

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<sup>34</sup> Author's Interviews, Tbilisi, May 2007.

<sup>35</sup> See Council of Europe declaration 1415 of 2005.



implementation process is monitored by an Advisory Committee, to which state parties are obliged to report within one year of ratification.

As noted above, throughout the post-revolutionary era, a main sticking point in adhering to international minority rights instruments has been the perceived contradiction between enhanced minority protection and pursuing the government's vision of civic nationhood through national integration.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the process of developing an appropriate model for implementation of the Framework Convention has proven problematic. When the state submitted its first report on the implementation process to the Council of Europe in 2007, it had yet to decide both on a definition of a national minority and a model for translating the convention into domestic law.

A particular impediment to implementing the Convention is the tendency among officials to treat it as an international commitment rather than a necessity in any Georgian context. Ratification of the convention is often referred to as a result of Western pressure and as constituting a part of Georgia's European integration process. At the same time, the rather flexible nature of the convention leads to it being perceived as somewhat lacking in authority, resulting in continuing stalemates in the implementation process. As a result of the general skepticism towards the convention, lawmakers tend to focus on how to ensure that the implementation of the convention does not interfere with the national integration processes, instead of on how it could serve as a tool in the state-minority relationship.

This attitude was particularly displayed in a parliamentary resolution<sup>37</sup> adopted in connection with the ratification of the Framework Convention in 2005. The state expressed in the resolution a number of informal reservations to the convention, seemingly aimed at limiting its scope of application. Parliament noted that full application of the convention could only be ensured after Georgia regains control over its territory. While confirming its obligations under article 10 of the convention, which addresses the right of minorities to use their native language in private and in public life, parliament added that the state is equally obliged to provide minority

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<sup>36</sup> See opinions expressed in Johanna Popjanevski and Niklas Nilsson, "National Minorities and the State in Georgia," Uppsala & Washington: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Conference Report, August 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia (#1938-I), unofficial translation.

representatives with conditions for learning the state language. Moreover, with regard to article 16, which urges states to refrain from measures which alter the demographic situation of regions inhabited by national minorities, parliament stated that this principle should interfere neither with resettlements of victims of ecological disasters nor with the temporary resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP)s on Georgian territory.

In the same resolution, the state presented a declaration on what constitutes a national minority in Georgia. A list of criteria limited the convention's beneficiaries to a group whose members: a) are citizens of Georgia b) stand out from the prevailing population in terms of language, culture, and ethnic identity; c) have inhabited the Georgian territory for a considerable time, and; d) live compactly. A concept paper<sup>38</sup> presented by the Human Rights and Civic Integration Committee of the Georgian parliament in the spring of 2006, added that a group cannot be considered a national minority if its members represent autochthonous populations; the titular nation of the autonomies; do not wish to preserve or develop their identity, or; are small in number. Although the definition was never formally submitted to the Council of Europe or integrated into any Georgian legislative acts, it nonetheless raised concerns among NGOs and experts in the minority field. While states are encouraged by the Council of Europe to establish their own definitions of the convention's beneficiaries, a definition should naturally never contradict the nature of the Framework Convention. The Georgian definition, which sought to exempt minorities inhabiting ethnically diverse regions of Georgia from the protection sphere of the convention, was considered by many as incompatible with the right of self-identification, as envisaged by the convention's article 3, and with the anti-discrimination principle in article 4.

Whereas state officials now appear to agree that the original definition was somewhat premature, a new definition has yet to be elaborated. Indeed, establishing a definition that, on the one hand, takes into account the Georgian reality and, on the other, reflects international standards has proven troublesome. Whereas the Framework Convention implies that a

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<sup>38</sup> "Concept on the Protection and Integration of Persons belonging to National Minorities", issued by the Committee for Human Rights and Civic Integration of the Georgian parliament, 2005.

definition should be as inclusive as possible, based on the right for individuals to choose whether or not to be treated as a national minority, there is seemingly a fear that the right to self-identification of minority representatives will contradict the civic integration concept. This attitude is linked to the general perception that minority rights should be applied cautiously and that the convention's principles, if applied widely, may be counter-productive to national integration in Georgia. At the same time, officials are aware that a definition that is too narrow and selectively awards rights to certain groups and not others may put Georgia in breach of international norms and standards.<sup>39</sup>

Another obstacle in the implementation process, and in the overall process of strengthening minority rights in Georgia, is the continuing lack of coordination among state bodies dealing with minority issues. After the accession to power of President Saakashvili's administration in 2004, some notable initiatives were taken to strengthen the traditionally weak institutional framework for minority issues. In 2004, the president established a State Ministry for Civic Integration and made an important statement by appointing ethnic Ossetian Zinaida Bestaeva as State Minister for Civic Integration. The Ministry was tasked to initiate and supervise national integration efforts and to serve as a focal point for institutions and NGOs working in the field of minority issues. Nevertheless, the Ministry was by many observers regarded as an inefficient body, due both to a lack of strong leadership and insufficient funding. Moreover, a special Advisor to the President on Civic Integration was appointed. In August 2005, a State Council on Civic Integration and Tolerance was formed under the Ministry for Civic Integration, tasked to monitor the implementation of the Framework Convention and to enhance coordination in the field of minority issues. The council brings together representatives from the government, the Parliament, the Public Defender's Office, Georgian Public Broadcasting, and four leading NGOs. Together with a policy task force, formed within the USAID funded NITG project, the council is tasked with devising concrete strategies for implementing the convention and developing a National Integration Strategy and Action plan.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Author's Interviews, Tbilisi, May 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Author's Interviews with Council Participants, Tbilisi, May 2007.

However, over the last two years, several of these important initiatives have been abandoned. After only a few months in office, the Presidential Advisor on Civic Integration was moved to a different post within the administration and has so far not been replaced. Furthermore, with the establishment of a new cabinet in early 2008, the State Ministry for Civic Integration was abolished. Some of its competencies were transferred to the State Ministry for Reintegration, replacing the State Ministry for Conflict Resolution. The State Ministry for Reintegration's mission is to work towards the restoration of the unity of Georgian territory, including the reintegration of local citizens, returning refugees, and IDPs from certain regions.<sup>41</sup> The subordinated State Council of the former Ministry for Civil Integration, now headed by the Prime Minister, continues to cooperate with the NITG task force in preparing a national action plan on integration, but reportedly the council meets on a sporadic and irregular basis.<sup>42</sup> So far its only concrete output has been the drafting of Georgia's first state report on the implementation process, which was submitted to the CoE Advisory Committee in the spring of 2007. The council is now responsible for elaborating an appropriate definition of national minorities, as well as a model for implementing the Framework Convention, but this work has not been completed as of yet.

#### *The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*

As previously noted, the protection of language rights of national minorities has been one of the most sensitive aspects of enforcing a framework for minority protection in Georgia. In Georgia, like in many of the other post-Soviet states, large parts of minority communities lack knowledge of the state language, and the tradition of supporting minority language education is often seen as one of the main reasons for the isolation of the Georgian regions. Against the context of the Georgian state building project, where the promotion of the state language occupies a central position for promoting national unity, Georgian officials frequently express the opinion that the provision of special language rights for minorities, even on a regional basis,

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<sup>41</sup> Office of the state Minister for Reintegration, "Mission Statement", available at: [http://smr.gov.ge/en/about\\_ministry](http://smr.gov.ge/en/about_ministry), accessed October 21, 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Author's Interviews, Tbilisi, May 2007.

will counteract the national integration process, since this would lessen the incentives for minority communities to learn the state language.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, the 1992 European Charter for Minority or Regional Languages, which specifically aims at protecting minority languages of a state, remains a source of skepticism among Georgian decision-makers. While the charter applies neither to languages spoken by recently immigrated minority groups nor to mere dialects, it is commonly perceived as opening up to recognition of certain Georgian dialects (such as Mingrelian and Svan) as regional languages, and thus the potential alienation of linguistic minorities. As a consequence, the charter has neither been ratified, nor signed by the Georgian state. Whereas discussions about an appropriate model for implementation of the Language Charter are reportedly underway, no information on the timeframe for ratification is currently available.

A main reason for the delay in ratifying the Language Charter is the general lack of understanding of the purpose of the charter among state officials. A common argument is that the Framework Convention sufficiently covers the language rights of national minorities and thus, that the Languages Charter is superfluous.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, whereas the Framework Convention is accepted by the Georgian authorities as a reaction to the break-up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the Language Charter is considered a Western construction, designed in the late 1980s and thus failing to reflect the linguistic particularities of the former Soviet societies.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, a major source of concern among state officials is how an enhanced framework for language rights will interact with the Georgian legislation.<sup>46</sup> As a result of language and education reforms in recent years, Georgian legislative acts such as the Administrative Code and the law on Public Service dictate that the Georgian language must be used in all spheres of public life (except for in Abkhazia). With both the Language Charter and the Framework Convention promoting the rights of minorities to freely use

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<sup>43</sup> Author's Interviews, Government Officials, Tbilisi, May 2007. For a comprehensive argument on the government's difficulties in implementing international minority rights legislation, see Wheatley, "Implementing the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities..."

<sup>44</sup> Author's Interviews, Tbilisi, October-December 2005.

<sup>45</sup> Author's Interviews, Tbilisi, May 2007.

<sup>46</sup> Author's Interviews with state officials, Tbilisi, October-December 2005.

their own languages in public life, legal amendments may be necessary to harmonize Georgian national legislation with Council of Europe principles. Only naturally, this is a sensitive and time-consuming process as it requires a careful reassessment of national policy goals.

The seeming inflexibility displayed by the government regarding the promotion of the Georgian language in all spheres stems from the government view that priority must be given to the rapid promotion of national unity, and provisions of language rights are seen as compromises in this regard. This perception is also closely linked to the real and perceived vulnerability of the Georgian state. National unity must in the governmental view be given priority to separate political and cultural interests, since ethnopolitical divisions have since independence been at the heart of Georgian state weakness, as manifested by the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The backdrop of this approach to national integration is that without a level of protection for minority languages, and allowing at least the temporary use of these languages in local administration and communication between center and region, Georgian language policies risk resulting in a *de facto* discrimination of national minorities.<sup>47</sup> The government's reluctance to provide minorities with special language rights also fuels fears in minority-populated regions that their ethnic identities risk becoming marginalized and so providing activists, especially in Javakheti, with arguments that the government pursues the assimilation of national minorities.<sup>48</sup> In fact, minority representatives from all camps in Javakheti frequently argue that better legislative protection of minority languages would ease much of the tension related to the national integration process and would thus provide increased incentives for learning Georgian.<sup>49</sup>

### **Other Controversial State-Building Measures**

The issue of language is by far the most debated example of a crucial state building policy causing friction between the center and minority-populated regions. However, several other examples in this regard can be observed:

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<sup>47</sup> Wheatley, "The Status of Minority Languages in Georgia ...", pp. 17-18.

<sup>48</sup> Author's Interviews, Akhalkalaki, May 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

*Reestablishing Territorial Integrity*

The reestablishment of control over Georgian territory has been a cornerstone of government policy since the Rose Revolution. This rapidly paid off through the abolishment of Ajaria's de facto autonomy in 2004. A similar attempt to establish government control failed in South Ossetia the same year, while the period preceding the August war saw efforts more focused on using "soft power" to undermine the legitimacy of the secessionist government. The events in 2004 nevertheless rendered fears among especially Javakheti Armenians that the new government might use aggressive tactics also against them,<sup>50</sup> fears that have likely been reinforced after August 2008. Abkhazia had been more successful in establishing state structures and a certain amount of legitimacy of its own, albeit remaining highly dependent on Russian support for its de facto statehood. As previously noted, the prospects for reestablishing Georgia's territorial integrity have been seriously diminished after the August war. The declaration of independence of both territories and Russia's unilateral recognition of them as independent states have rendered previous conflict resolution processes obsolete and reinforced the impression that the regions constitute components of the larger conflict between Russia and Georgia, which can only be resolved within this framework.

Georgia's unresolved ethnopolitical conflicts have arguably had several effects on relations between the ethnic majority and minorities within the territory controlled by the Georgian state. The heritage of ethnopolitical conflict has seemingly made all forms of ethnically based political activity, even where this aims at promoting minority rights, potentially threatening in the eyes of the government, both in terms of potential secessionism and through awareness that ethnic divisions within the country may be exploited by external actors.

More moderate claims by minority actors, advocating aspects of cultural autonomy such as special language rights, are thus also frequently viewed as extremist. These may not be seen as posing threats to Georgia's territorial integrity, but certainly as counteracting the promotion of national unity and national integration, as accounted for above. This however also puts a strain

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<sup>50</sup> Author's Interviews, Akhalkalaki, June 2005.

on dialogue between the central government and minorities, as it becomes very difficult to find common points of reference regarding how minority rights should be properly safeguarded.

An aspect of reestablishing territorial integrity with direct effects on the relationship between the government and minorities has been a persistent campaign for the withdrawal of the four Russian military bases on Georgian territory. The Vaziani base near Tbilisi was closed already in 2001, and the Gudauta base in Abkhazia is officially closed, although it is still used by Russian troops.<sup>51</sup> The removal of the two bases in Batumi and Akhalkalaki has remained contentious; however, Tbilisi's position in the issue gained increased vigor after the Rose Revolution and an agreement was reached in 2005 that the bases were to be fully evacuated in 2008. Both the Akhalkalaki and Batumi bases were closed in 2007 and July 2008, respectively.<sup>52</sup> The Akhalkalaki base had been a continuous strain on relations between the central government and the Armenian minority of the Javakheti region. The base was previously a main employer for residents of Akhalkalaki, through enrolment in the Russian army, providing civilians with labor inside the base, and through constituting the primary buyer of agricultural produce from the region. However, the Russian presence in the region has also served as a symbolic protector against the perceived genocidal ambitions of Turkey against Armenians, and fears were often voiced that if the base was removed, it might be replaced by a NATO base, manned with Turkish soldiers. More controversially, the base was also described by locals as providing security against potential aggression from the Georgian state, as was experienced during Gamsakhurdia's rule in the early 1990s.<sup>53</sup> After 2004, the base gradually lost its economic importance due to troop withdrawals; however, the security aspects of the base continued to play a role.<sup>54</sup> In the government's view, the base served mainly as a Russian propaganda platform, utilized to provoke negative sentiments against the Georgian government among local Armenians, and stirring unrest in the region in

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<sup>51</sup> See Vladimir Socor, "Russia's Retention of Gudauta Base: An Unfulfilled CFE Treaty Commitment," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, May 22, 2006.

<sup>52</sup> Vladimir Socor, "Georgian Flag Raised over Akhalkalaki," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume 4, Issue 128, July 2, 2007; Civil Georgia, "Russia Hands Over Batumi Military Base to Georgia," *Civil Georgia*, November 13, 2007.

<sup>53</sup> Author's Interviews, Akhalkalaki and Tbilisi, June 2005.

<sup>54</sup> Author's Interview, Ghia Nodia, Tbilisi, May 25, 2005.



order to weaken Georgia. Moreover, Javakheti has a high rate of illegal arms,<sup>55</sup> a fact which is often thought to be connected to the base.<sup>56</sup>

Both Russian-Georgian negotiations on the removal of the base and the final implementation of these agreements have stirred tension in Akhalkalaki, and local political actors have on several occasions staged protests demanding the base to remain deployed. The fact that these protests were a direct expression of a discrepancy between the central government's interests regarding the reassertion of Georgia's territorial integrity and the economic and security-oriented concerns of the Armenian minority gave the issue a particularly problematic dimension. Political actors in Javakheti were in this regard largely viewed by Tbilisi as an instrument of the Russian secret services for counteracting the reduction of Russian military presence in Georgia. While no concrete instances of Russian attempts to instigate ethnic tension in Javakheti have been proven, this suspicion is not completely irrational since Russia has certainly applied the tactic of escalating interethnic tensions in order to sustain its leverage in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as in other instances.

### *Establishing Rule of Law*

Another aspect of Georgian state building that has since the Rose Revolution caused friction with national minorities are the efforts made to sustain Georgian border security and combat smuggling, in particular along the border with Azerbaijan in Kvemo Kartli. Tightened customs regulations along this border have caused frustration among the ethnic Azeri population, which is traditionally accustomed to engaging in cross-border trade with neighboring Azerbaijan. Tension on this issue was especially prevalent during 2004 and 2005, with a number of incidents occurring at the border checkpoints and police raids against Azeri villages in search of contraband. As Welt argues, the Georgian government has avoided strict enforcement of border controls, in particular regarding the closure of the Red Bridge market on Azerbaijani territory, in order not to provoke tensions with Georgia's

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<sup>55</sup> See David Darchiashvili, "Georgia: A Hostage to Arms", in Anna Matveeva (Ed.), *The Caucasus. Armed and Divided*, Saferworld, 2003.

<sup>56</sup> Author's Interviews, Tbilisi, May 2005.

Azeri minority.<sup>57</sup> Tensions have to a lesser extent occurred at border checkpoints in Javakheti.

The government's anti-corruption campaign has also to some extent caused tensions with minority populations. On the one hand, even minority activists usually considered by Tbilisi as extremist compliment the government for its success in reducing corruption, terming it as one of the very few visible improvements in the Javakheti region.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, corrupt practices, for example in entering higher education or for getting one's way in court proceedings, have been in place in Georgia for decades. As anti-corruption reforms increasingly block such opportunities, these have on some occasions caused resentment.<sup>59</sup> Especially combined with the language policies which serve as new barriers to accessing public goods, anti-corruption policies are sometimes viewed among national minorities as an additional constraint to their opportunities. There is also a tendency especially in Javakheti to view less popular aspects of a strengthening state, such as increasing tax collection and an improved presence of law enforcement, as discriminatory, a reaction which can be attributed to a general lack of trust in the rule of law.<sup>60</sup>

### *Infrastructure Development*

The Baku-Akhalkalaki-Kars railway, construction of which was inaugurated on November 21, 2007, has given rise to mixed feelings among Javakheti Armenians. On the one hand, many locals are positive toward the project, foreseeing that it will help boost economic development in the region. On the other hand, the railway's exclusion of Armenia, which remains under embargo from Azerbaijan and Turkey following the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, has provided for certain skepticism.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Cory Welt, "Political Change and Border Security in Eurasia: The Case of Georgia," *The Nonproliferation Review* 12:3, pp. 517-518.

<sup>58</sup> Author's Interview, Nairi Iritsyan, United Javakh, Akhalkalaki, May 21, 2007.

<sup>59</sup> Author's Interview, Marina Elbakidze, Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, Tbilisi, May 4, 2007.

<sup>60</sup> Hedvig Lohm, "Javakheti after the Rose Revolution: Progress and Regress in the Pursuit of National Unity in Georgia," *European Center for Minority Issues*, April 2007, pp. 33-34.

<sup>61</sup> Author's Interviews, Akhalkalaki, May 2007.

An infrastructure project of high significance to the region is the reconstruction of a road between Tbilisi and Akhalkalaki, funding for which has been made available by USAID through the Millennium Challenge Account. When completed, this road will drastically shorten travel times between Akhalkalaki and Tbilisi, and is envisioned to contribute significantly to Javakheti's economic development and integration with the rest of Georgia. The project has suffered from several delays;<sup>62</sup> but road rehabilitation is now envisioned to be completed in 2010.<sup>63</sup> However, the delays have led many in Javakheti to doubt that the project will ever be implemented, and that the government's marketing of the project as one of its key efforts in integrating the region is yet another empty promise of improvement.<sup>64</sup>

### **Regional Political Processes**

Problems in the regions densely populated by minorities are similar to other rural Georgian regions. Unemployment, living conditions, and poor infrastructure are the main problems cited in all Georgian regions.<sup>65</sup> However, the weak command of the Georgian language among especially Armenians in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region and Azeris in Kvemo Kartli poses an obvious barrier to their integration. Unemployment, poor living conditions, and deteriorating infrastructure are in these regions frequently understood in ethnic terms, and are, especially by certain local political actors, regarded as an expression of ethnic discrimination or conscious neglect by the authorities, and as manifestations of a policy aimed at forcing minorities to migrate from Georgia; while language policies are understood as attempts at assimilating minorities. A clear risk therefore exists that problems of a socioeconomic nature, related to an overall lack of resources, are politicized and related to interethnic problems, thus fueling distrust toward the central authorities. The centrally designed policies for national

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<sup>62</sup> See Economic Policy Research Center, "Monitoring of Millennium Challenge Program: II Stage Report," September 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Millennium Challenge Georgia Fund, "MCG Quarterly Bulletin," Issue #10, July 2007.

<sup>64</sup> Author's Interviews, Akhalkalaki, May 2007.

<sup>65</sup> United Nations Association of Georgia, Institute of Social Researchers, BCG Research, "National Integration and Tolerance in Georgia," USAID National Integration and Tolerance in Georgia Project, 2007, p. 74.

integration accounted for above have been met with counter-reactions, especially in the Armenian-populated Javakheti region. Several organizations forwarding negative standpoints against past and current government policies have emerged in this region, and the more recent efforts aimed at national integration have only served to further exacerbate ethnically based regional activism.

Since independence from the Soviet Union, political activity among Georgia's minorities has taken quite different forms. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the autonomous status of these regions, along with Russian political and military support, permitted the engagement in armed conflict with the emerging Georgian state. Georgia's Armenian and Azeri minorities, however, never resorted to armed violence or opted for armed secession from Georgia. During the process of gaining independence from the USSR, the Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions nevertheless saw the emergence of organized political groupings strongly following Armenian and Azeri ethnic nationalist agendas. Of these, the Armenian organizations were, and still are, by far the most organized. In 1988-89, the movement Javakhk<sup>66</sup> emerged in reaction to the war in Nagorno-Karabakh – and as a response to the increasing Georgian nationalism under Gamsakhurdia. Javakhk functioned as an umbrella organization for regional forces promoting Armenian nationalist agendas. In 1991, Javakhk activists managed to thwart central appointments of Georgian prefects to Javakheti and, due to the political turmoil in Tbilisi following the ousting of Gamsakhurdia and the war in Abkhazia, maintained a de facto authority over the region until 1994.<sup>67</sup> During its time as the region's dominant political actor, Javakhk put forward an agenda focused on an autonomous status for Javakheti within Georgia, rather than secession. During the second half of the 1990s, the Shevardnadze government gradually regained control over the region through providing local elites with posts in the local administration and police, in exchange for their loyalty to the central power.<sup>68</sup> As an effect, Javakhk gradually lost its authority on the local political scene. Former members of Javakhk later

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<sup>66</sup> Armenian for Javakheti.

<sup>67</sup> David Darchiashvili, "The Armenian Community of Javakheti: Collective Memories and Current Concerns" in Ghia Nodia (Ed.) *Ethnic-Confessional Groups and Challenges to Civic Integration in Georgia*, 2002, p. 30.

<sup>68</sup> Svante E. Cornell, *Autonomy as a Source of Conflict*, pp. 202-203.

formed Virk, which allegedly has strong ties with, and receives funding from, the Dashnaksutyun in Armenia and the Armenian Diaspora in France and the United States. Virk leaders frequently voice demands for political autonomy for Javakheti, and claim that government integration policies constitute a covert campaign for assimilating Javakheti Armenians, or alternatively for changing the ethnic composition in Javakheti in order to turn Armenians into minorities in their own region.<sup>69</sup> Attempts were made in 2002 to register Virk as a political party. This was prevented, however, by Georgian legislation banning territorially or regionally based political parties. Estimates of Virk's support base vary from the organization's own claim of 7,000 active supporters to a maximum of 1,000 by other observers. The organization's agenda for political autonomy is nevertheless popular in the region.<sup>70</sup>

If Javakhk and Virk members can be considered the old guard of Armenian activists in Javakheti, the younger generation has in later years been represented by the organizations United Javakhk and JEMM. United Javakhk is largely a coordinating organization for local actors, which emerged in connection to the parliamentary resolution in March 2005 demanding the withdrawal of Russian military bases in Georgia. United Javakhk managed to mobilize substantial support on this issue, and staged two demonstrations against the withdrawal of the Akhalkalaki base on March 13 and 31, 2005.<sup>71</sup> United Javakhk seemingly enjoys substantial support among locals. However, the organization's leaders have been accused of co-optation due to informal dialogue meetings with representatives of the central authorities during 2006.<sup>72</sup> JEMM is short for Javakheti Youth Sport Union, with an agenda focusing on sports and other activities for local youth, and the organization's leaders have been among the most active in rallies organized by United Javakhk.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Author's Interview, David Rstakyan, Virk, June 2005.

<sup>70</sup> Lohm, "Javakheti after the Rose Revolution...", p 17.

<sup>71</sup> "Akhalkalaki Residents Rally Against Pullout of Russian Base," *Civil Georgia*, March 13, 2007; "Ethnic Armenians Protest Against Closure of Russian Base," *Civil Georgia*, March 31, 2005.

<sup>72</sup> Author's Interviews, Tbilisi, September 2006.

<sup>73</sup> Lohm, "Javakheti after the Rose Revolution...", pp. 17-18.

It should also be noted that, with assistance from international organizations (primarily the European Center for Minority Issues), more moderate NGOs have also emerged in Javakheti. The most significant example is the Javakheti Citizen's Forum, which seeks to promote dialogue between local NGOs and the government, but has yet to develop a significant support base.<sup>74</sup> Its leaders express concerns over developments in Javakheti, and stress the need for allowing Javakheti Armenians the proper time and opportunities for learning the state language, and for allowing Armenian to function as an administrative language in the meantime. They also request improved communication of government policies in the region.<sup>75</sup>

United Javakhk and JEMM in particular have organized numerous protest rallies in Akhalkalaki. The above-mentioned protests organized by United Javakhk were followed by numerous rallies between 2005 and 2007. Issues raised at these demonstrations have ranged from protests against the Russian base pullout to closure of trade facilities by the financial authorities, electricity shortages, and the killing of an Armenian man in Tsalka.<sup>76</sup> During the local elections of October 2006, only two parties were registered in Akhalkalaki district, President Saakashvili's National Movement and the "Industry Will Save Georgia" (IWSG) party. During the elections, United Javakhk allied with IWSG and ran on its lists. The party received 32 per cent of the vote in Akhalkalaki, one of the highest votes for an opposition party in any Georgian district. After the vote count, United Javakhk claimed that the votes were falsified and tried to take over the District Election Committee.<sup>77</sup> During these events, JEMM leader Vahag Chakalian, in a clear reference to the Rose Revolution, appeared with a rose in his hand, claiming it was time for a revolution also in Javakheti.<sup>78</sup> During a rally in April 2007, United Javakhk leaders Artur Pogosyan and Nairi Iritsyan were arrested; Pogosyan was brought into custody in Tbilisi and Iritsyan released on bail. United

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<sup>74</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, p. 16.

<sup>75</sup> Author's Interview, Armen Darbinyan, Javakheti Citizen's Forum, Akhalkalaki, May 21, 2007.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, "Locals, Police Clash in Akhalkalaki", *Civil Georgia*, October 6, 2005; "Protesters Raid Court, University in Akhalkalaki", *Civil Georgia*, March 11, 2006; "Rally in Akhalkalaki for Armenian Language Status," *Civil Georgia*, April 13, 2007.

<sup>77</sup> Lohm "Javakheti after the Rose Revolution...", pp. 25-27.

<sup>78</sup> Author's Interview, Marina Elbakidze, Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, Tbilisi, May 4, 2007.

Javakhk stated after the incident that the organization's leaders are deliberately targeted by Tbilisi in order to silence critical voices and that such measures risk destabilizing the region.<sup>79</sup> Iritsyan states that arrests of activists have occurred frequently and that the fear of reprisals increasingly limits open criticism of government policies.<sup>80</sup>

Locals sometimes claim that Armenian officials occupying positions after the local elections in October 2006 are exempted from demands of language proficiency due to a continuation of Georgian co-option of influential Armenians. Thus, it is claimed, local officials are more reluctant to criticize Tbilisi's policies – relations between the central and local administrations have improved after these elections – while the sentiment among locals has not been affected, or has actually worsened.<sup>81</sup>

Representatives of Virk and Javakhk are proponents of broad political autonomy for Javakheti,<sup>82</sup> however the trend in the more recent rallies organized by United Javakhk and JEMM has moved from a focus on the military base issue in 2005 towards increasingly protesting against Georgian language policies and demanding status for Armenian as a regional administrative language.<sup>83</sup> Local activists in these organizations consider the language policies discriminatory through limiting access to education and jobs, and suspect that professional language testing will require local Armenians to leave their posts in local administration in favor of Georgians.<sup>84</sup> The latter concerns are aggravated by the fact that new posts in local administration are increasingly occupied by ethnic Georgians from Azpindza and other regions. These attitudes are, however, not only articulated by JEMM and United Javakhk representatives. Rather, concerns over government language policies, increasing the recruitment of Georgians in local administration, and support for Armenian as a regional administrative language, at least on a temporary basis, are voiced broadly,

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<sup>79</sup> "United Javakh is Starting Rebellion?" Resonanzi, May 3, 2007.

<sup>80</sup> Author's Interview, Nairi Iritsyan, United Javakh, Akhalkalaki, May 21, 2007.

<sup>81</sup> Author's Interview, Tbilisi, May 2007.

<sup>82</sup> Author's Interview, David Rstakyan, Virk, Akhalkalaki, June 14, 2005.

<sup>83</sup> Author's Interview, Marina Elbakidze, Tbilisi, May 4, 2007.

<sup>84</sup> Author's Interview, Vahag Chakalian, JEMM, Akhalkalaki, May 21, 2007.

and are shared by both moderate civil society representatives<sup>85</sup> and local officials.<sup>86</sup> The views expressed by these actors generally regard the promotion of the state language in the region as necessary, although it is also pointed out that the envisioned timeframe for doing so is unrealistic and that incentives for learning Georgian have hitherto been very weak.<sup>87</sup>

Furthermore, respondents from all camps in Akhalkalaki believe that employment and representation in state structures is not only dependent on language skills. It is frequently mentioned that Armenians in Tbilisi, who often have a good knowledge of Georgian, are also underrepresented in central administration structures. This is taken as evidence that language knowledge is only a secondary reason behind the difficulties minorities face in acquiring public posts, and that the fundamental problem is ethnic discrimination. Existing MPs of Armenian origin are, moreover, viewed as serving the interests of the central government rather than those of Georgia's Armenian community.<sup>88</sup>

A common denominator in voiced grievances by Javakheti organizations is that the problems encountered in the region, ranging from poor socio-economic conditions to implications of government language policy, tend to be viewed in an ethnic context. Georgian language policies, in combination with the perceived lack of protection of the Armenian language, are often perceived as attempts to assimilate the Armenian population. Some also view the region's difficult socioeconomic situation, the loss of jobs due to the Russian base pullout, the resettlement of ethnic Georgians to areas populated by Armenians,<sup>89</sup> administrative and teaching posts occupied by ethnic Georgians, and the disproportional outmigration of Armenians as deliberate attempts to alter the region's ethnic composition in order to marginalize Armenians.<sup>90</sup> Such perceptions indicate that apart from the language

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<sup>85</sup> Author's Interview, Armen Darbinyan, Javakheti Citizen's Forum, Akhalkalaki, May 21, 2007.

<sup>86</sup> Author's Interview, Chairman of Akhalkalaki Sakrebulo, Akhalkalaki, May 22, 2007; Author's Interview, Akhalkalaki Gamgebeli, Akhalkalaki, May 22, 2007.

<sup>87</sup> Author's Interviews, Akhalkalaki, May 2007.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Reference in this regard is usually made to Tsalka in Kvemo Kartli.

<sup>90</sup> See Niklas Nilsson "Threats to National Community: A Minor Field Study on Threat Perceptions and National Identity in Georgia," Lund University, Department of Political Science, 2006.



problem, which is specific to regions densely populated by minorities, problems common to most other Georgian regions also provide a basis for mobilization on an ethnic basis in these regions. Thus, both the region's isolation and socioeconomic predicament, and the government's state building policies (including especially language policies and reestablishment of territorial integrity), contribute to the region's conflict potential.

Kvemo Kartli Azeris rarely voice their concerns as openly as Javakheti Armenians, and have been considerably less politically organized. As an effect, national integration issues in Kvemo Kartli have attracted significantly less attention than has been the case in Javakheti. The region did see a certain degree of interethnic tension during the Georgian liberation process. In 1990, the Geyrat movement was founded, mainly with the purpose of preventing the forced outmigration of Azeris during Gamsakhurdia's rule. While Geyrat for a period did advocate autonomy for the Azeri-dominated parts of Kvemo Kartli, along with raising demands for a larger representation of Azeris in local administration and increased teaching of the Azeri language in schools, the organization nevertheless sought to safeguard the interests of the Azeri community through dialogue with the Georgian national movement.<sup>91</sup> During the period 1992-1995, large parts of Kvemo Kartli fell under the control of criminal gangs, mainly the *Mkhedrioni*, and Geyrat played an important role in providing security for local Azeris. As the Georgian state reestablished control over the region in 1995, the organization gradually lost its importance as many Geyrat members were co-opted into administrative structures and the ruling party.<sup>92</sup> Kvemo Kartli currently has a weak civil society, consisting of a few NGOs which are nevertheless lacking the capability for either political mobilization on any larger scale or channeling the concerns and interests of local Azeris.<sup>93</sup> Demonstrations have nevertheless occurred in Kvemo Kartli and local Azeris have protested mainly against practices in land privatization, which have favored ethnic Georgians rather than Azeri farmers. These demonstrations have on occasion turned violent. The most frequently mentioned case is the

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<sup>91</sup> Svante E. Cornell, *Autonomy as a Source of Conflict*, pp. 212-213.

<sup>92</sup> Jonathan Wheatley, "Obstacles Impeding the Regional Integration of the Kvemo Kartli Region of Georgia," European Centre for Minority Issues, ECMI Working paper #23, February 2005, pp. 13-14.

<sup>93</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, p. 17.

killing of an Azeri woman during a demonstration in Marneuli in December 2004 by unidentified perpetrators.<sup>94</sup> More recent protests have ended in clashes with local police,<sup>95</sup> and Georgian authorities have imprisoned several Azeri activists.<sup>96</sup>

Socioeconomic problems faced by Kvemo Kartli Azeris are largely the same as those encountered in Javakheti, the most frequently mentioned problems in this regard including poor infrastructure, a lack of suitable drinking water as well as for irrigation, and electricity shortages. Also, the language barrier is just as severe in Kvemo Kartli, resulting in the isolation of the Azeri community from the Georgian state, an inability to acquire information on developments in the country through media, and a poor understanding of Georgian legislation.<sup>97</sup> A recent study disclosed that Kvemo Kartli Azeris are in general positive towards learning the Georgian language, and are increasingly so. However, many also believe that the government's education policies, and the way these are implemented, risk becoming *de facto* discriminatory to the Azeri population, and that increased teaching of Georgian risks endangering the Azeri language. The report also notes a growing estrangement between ethnic Georgians and Azeris in Kvemo Kartli, as the declining significance of Russian and a slow process of teaching Georgian reduce the possibilities for communication between these communities.<sup>98</sup> Concerns expressed over government language policy are similar to those in Javakheti, citing risks of assimilation and potential discrimination of state employees. An additional grievance is the vast underrepresentation of Azeris in local administration.<sup>99</sup>

While occasional protests have been staged against unfair land distribution and occasionally against the above-mentioned efforts of limiting cross-border

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<sup>94</sup> Wheatley, "Obstacles Impeding the Regional Integration of the Kvemo Kartli Region of Georgia," p. 35.

<sup>95</sup> See for example "Police, Protesters Clash in Kvemo Kartli Region," *Civil Georgia*, February 23, 2006.

<sup>96</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, p. 6.

<sup>97</sup> See Wheatley, "Obstacles Impeding the Regional Integration of the Kvemo Kartli Region of Georgia," p. 33ff.

<sup>98</sup> See "Conflict Potential Related to the Problems of Language and Education in Georgia's Kvemo Kartli Province," German Organization for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, 2006.

<sup>99</sup> Wheatley, "Obstacles Impeding the Regional Integration of the Kvemo Kartli Region of Georgia," pp. 37-38.

trade, Georgian state-building policies have not been met with opposition in this region to the same extent as in Javakheti. However, the situation in the region and grievances of local Azeris are quite similar to those of Javakheti and may well lead to increasing friction with the center, provided organizations emerge which are capable of mobilizing local frustration on a larger scale.

## Conclusions

The perspectives from the center and the regions accounted for above clearly demonstrate the dilemmas associated with the state-building process in a multinational Georgia. It is perhaps impossible to avoid a certain level of tension while conducting a much-needed strengthening of the state in a country with a history such as Georgia. However, the reactions to the state-building process also signal that certain components are missing in the central government's approaches to building a functioning state and unifying nation. It seems quite clear that large parts of Georgia's national minorities have not felt part of the Georgian national project, and the prevailing skepticism toward the intentions of the central government demonstrates a failure so far to reinforce the civic elements in Georgian national identity to sufficiently appeal to national minorities. For many minority representatives, while the preconditions for belonging to the Georgian nation may now be based to a *lesser* extent on Georgian ethnicity than was the case in the past, they are nonetheless still based on Georgian ethnic markers, such as a good command of the Georgian language.

The main deficiencies in government national integration policies lie not in the measures applied *per se*, however. In the long run, in order to build a unitary Georgian state to which belonging is determined by citizenship rather than ethnicity, it is necessary for Georgia to promote Georgian as a common language. It is also necessary to strengthen the Georgian state and extend its functions across the state's territory. Deficiencies, rather, lie in the simultaneous scarcity of measures aimed at easing the friction created by controversial aspects of the state-building process.

Such measures would ideally include, first, a proper and coherent communication of the government's intentions regarding the state-building process and the development of civic nationhood. In this regard, speeches by

the president and other high officials do serve a purpose, but are hardly sufficient. Rather, the government needs to develop an ambitious strategy for communicating these ideas to both its minority population and the Georgian majority, within the education system and through other public institutions. This strategy should seek to emphasize the civic features of nationhood, breaking down ethnic stereotypes and seek to communicate a national identity based on citizenship.

Second, the national integration process must, to a much larger extent than is currently the case, be accompanied by confidence-building measures which address the concerns and tensions associated with the state-building process. Minority populations need reassurances that especially the promotion of the state language will not imply the demise of minority languages, or result in the exclusion of minorities from public life. In this regard, it is vital that ways of implementing international minority rights legislation are found, which are acceptable both to the government and national minorities. As a first step, the government needs to recognize the psychological role of minority rights in integration processes, rather than viewing them as undermining national unity. In order to change this latter perception, the institutions responsible for implementing minority rights principles must enhance their efforts to conceptualize international standards in the Georgian context. At present, of particular relevance is deciding on an appropriate definition of a national minority that is as inclusive as possible, as arbitrary definitions that selectively give privileges to certain groups and not others may result in increased tensions in the state-minority relationship and potentially also between different minority groups. Naturally, agreeing on a definition also constitutes an essential step in implementing international minority rights conventions, and thus in Georgia's honoring of its international obligations. Clarifying that minority rights should ensure rights for individuals of minority groups, but do not automatically translate into collective rights entailing the right for autonomy of minority groups, seems crucial in this respect.

Furthermore, the implementation of language legislation needs to be coupled with measures to ensure both that minorities are provided with a suitable timeframe and the necessary resources to master the language, and that minorities are not subjected to *de facto* discrimination in the process. Also,

current incentives for learning the Georgian language are insufficient and need to be provided to a larger degree through opportunities of social interaction, business opportunities, and employment. The government, at all levels, should design and communicate these confidence building approaches through broad and long term dialogue processes with national minority communities. In turn, this requires enhanced coordination among all state institutions involved in the national integration process, underlining the importance of a continuous internal dialogue between these bodies.

Third, the process of national integration needs, obviously, to be treated as a long term undertaking. While Georgia is only at the very initial stages of this process, there is a tendency within the government to pursue what are complex and long term objectives through quick and often ill-planned political measures. Government initiatives have since the Rose Revolution generally been pursued on an *ad hoc* basis, with little or no attention paid to communicating the benefits of government policy, or anchoring decisions at the grassroots level. This is one reason for the current incoherencies and lack of coordination in national integration policies. Rather, the implementation of the national integration process must be allowed to take time, and needs to be accommodated within the overarching and more abstract goal of developing a civic national identity, capable of including all Georgian citizens, regardless of ethnicity. Political developments during the fall of 2007, as well as the Presidential elections in January and the Parliamentary elections in May, marked the end of Georgia's post-revolutionary era. To govern in the currently much more polarized political climate, especially after the August war, the government will need to develop its abilities for long-term planning, communicating with the electorate, and striving for political agreements across party boundaries.

Whereas the post-revolutionary government has taken some important steps towards strengthening the institutional framework for minority issues, such as establishing the Council for Civic Integration and Tolerance, initiatives continue to lack both consistency and sufficient ambition. The presence of more pressing issues in the state-building process continues to cloud the prospects of coordinated domestic approaches to national integration issues, resulting in patchwork initiatives. It is therefore essential that state funds are re-allocated to the institutions responsible for implementing national

integration policies, and that the activities of these institutions are properly coordinated. This will also have an important psychological impact, as it will demonstrate to minority communities the existence of domestic institutions with the purpose of protecting their interests.

As the government lacks both the resources and the capacity to address the impasses in the national integration sphere, it is clear that implementing the above-mentioned recommendations will require external assistance. The enforcement of minority protection measures in particular will require guidance by international, particularly European, experts in the minority rights field. It is particularly important that attention is paid to conceptualizing minority protection in the Georgian context, especially in the field of language, as a failure to do so will provide for a continual breach of Georgia's international obligations. External assistance should focus on re-directing the government's attention to the deficits in the national integration process, through facilitating dialogue and implementing activities combining capacity-building and coordination components.

# The Georgian State and Minority Integration: Progress Made and Progress Still to Come

Ekaterine Metreveli and Temuri Yakobashvili<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Ethnicity and citizenship figure as two key factors within the process of the nation building of the newly independent states following the dissolution of the old Soviet Empire. Within the former republics, the legacy of Soviet nationality policies, which still define the behavioral patterns of the constituent ethnic groups living therein, is in many cases becoming the basis for an increasingly unsettled relationship between the majority and minority populations. Georgia, as one of the successor states of the former *Soyuz*, has fully experienced the effects of these policies, which—further aggravated by the rhetoric of inexperienced politicians and the intervention by the region's larger neighbor in the early 1990s—have resulted in acquiring the two break-away regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and undefined relations with its ethnic minority communities.

The issues of minority communities in Georgia involve complex points and counterpoints which form the core of the debate even in Western democracies whose paths to democracy were trod long ago. The relationship between individual and group rights, power sharing versus state integrity, and ethnic or civic nationalisms are questions which are still waiting to be answered.

As Georgia seeks to join the ranks of all free and democratic countries, the state building process must be accompanied simultaneously by the building of a national identity that is rooted in citizenship and unified by common civic ideals. Without fortifying these bases that underpin the Western-type of nation-state model, Georgia will continue to falter as it seeks to strengthen and develop its state. Moreover, the lack of a shared vision for Georgia's

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<sup>1</sup> The authors wish to express special thanks to Jeff Morski for his input and assistance during development of the present work.

future amongst the country's diverse ethnic communities deprives all segments of the population of a valuable opportunity for democratic and economic progress. National unity, unfortunately, has not yet been achieved and the minority community representatives in Georgia still do not feel themselves as a part of the Georgian state, nor do they share or understand the approaches promoted by the government, but feel, rather, alienated, marginalized, and unintegrated in the mainstream of society as well as from its developments.

This study, *The Georgian State and Minority Integration: Progress Made and Progress Still to Come*, seeks to contribute to the existing debate about the relationship between the Georgian state and its ethnic enclaves and to identify and propose activities for further action. Despite the significant efforts and steps forward which have been taken by the country towards a greater integration of its minority citizenry and an overall stronger national unity, a challenge within remains given the absence of mechanisms on all levels able to promote and implement the integration of ethnic minorities. The background and conclusions of this study are formed from the work conducted by the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) over a four-year period on the topic of national minority issues in Georgia, a review of the Georgian Government's legislative basis as regards minorities in Georgia and data and information taken from selected analytical papers. Throughout its involvement, the GFSIS has been working closely with the ethnic Armenian, Azeri, and Greek minority communities within the framework of Foundation-based projects, programs, training sessions, and interactive workshops on topics of key governmental focus and national concern and further regional activities designed to identify and prioritize the challenges faced by Georgia's minority citizenry.

### **Before the Rose Revolution**

Historically, Georgia has always been a multi-ethnic country with ethnic minorities comprising nearly 30 per cent of the total population before the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> This number decreased significantly—by

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<sup>2</sup> Johanna Popjanevski, *Minorities and the State in the South Caucasus: Assessing the Protection of National Minorities in Georgia and Azerbaijan*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, September 2006, p. 25.



nearly half, falling to 16.2 per cent—as a result of the socio-political turmoil which Georgia faced at the beginning of the 1990s. The country’s 2002 national census cited the reason for the decrease in the number of minorities as not including Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the list and taking the migration of minorities to their historic homelands into account.<sup>3</sup> Of further relevance is the fact that many ethnic Georgians left the country in search of better economic conditions and so it is the overall population – and not only the share of minority representatives – which is significantly smaller. Currently, Azeris constitute the largest ethnic minority group at 284,600 or 6.5 per cent and is followed by the Armenians at 248,900 or 5.7 per cent of the country’s citizenry.<sup>4</sup> Table 1 shows the ethnic distribution of the population according to the 1989 and 2002 national censuses.

Table 1: Ethnic Composition of Georgia (1989 and 2002 national censuses)

Ethnicity	1989 (‘000s)	2002 (‘000s)	% of the total in 1989	% of the total in 2002
Georgians	3787,4	3661,1	70,1	83,7
Armenians	437,2	248,9	8,1	5,7
Russians	341,2	32,6	6,3	0,75
Azeris	307,6	284,8	5,7	6,5
Ossetians	164,1	38,0	3,0	0,87
Greeks	100,3	15,1	1,9	0,35
Abkhaz	95,9	3,5	1,8	0,0008
Ukrainians	52,4	7,0	1,0	0,0016
<b>Total</b>	<b>5400,8</b>	<b>4371,5</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: State Department for Statistics of Georgia, *Major Findings of the First General National Population Census of Georgia in 2002*, Statistics Booklet, Tbilisi, 2002.

Of the minority populations, 224,600 of the total number of 284,600 Azeris and 113,300 of the 248,900 Armenians reside in the provinces of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti, respectively, which border Azerbaijan and Armenia. The remainder of the minority community representatives lives in less compactly merged settlements together with ethnic Georgians in cities and villages throughout the country. In these cases, this segment of the

<sup>3</sup> Gia Nodia, “The Poli-ethnicity of Georgia: Fact, Attitude towards the Fact and a Political Strategy”, *One Society, Many Ethnoses: Ethnic Diversity and Civic Integration in Georgia*, Tbilisi, 2003 (in Georgian), p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> State Department for Statistics of Georgia, “Major Findings of the First General National Population Census of Georgia in 2002,” Statistics Booklet, Tbilisi, 2002.

population is more integrated and, as such, the issue of language is not as serious a factor concerning national integration and state unity compared to more homogeneous and compactly settled areas. As a case in point, 94.3 per cent of the inhabitants of Akhalkalaki and 95.8 per cent of those of Ninotsminda, two districts within the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, are ethnic Armenians.

*Table 2: Ethnic Composition of the Samtskhe-Javakheti Region*

	<b>Total</b> %	<b>Georgian</b> %	<b>Russian</b> %	<b>Armenian</b> %	<b>Other</b> %
Samtskhe-Javakheti	207598 100%	89995 43.4%	2230 1.0%	113347 54.6%	2026 1.0%
Adigeni	20752 100%	19860 95.7%	101 0.5%	698 3.4%	93 0.4%
Aspindza	13010 100%	10671 82.0%	34 0.3%	2273 17.5%	32 0.3%
Akhalkalaki	60975 100%	3214 5.3%	157 0.3%	57516 94.3%	88 0.1%
Akaltzikhe	46134 100%	28473 61.7%	410 0.9%	16879 36.6%	372 0.8%
Borjomi	32422 100%	27301 84.2%	585 1.8%	3124 9.6%	1412 3.0%
Ninotsminda	34305 100%	476 1.4%	943 2.7%	32857 95.8%	29 0.1%

Source: State Department for Statistics of Georgia, *Major Findings of the First General National Population Census of Georgia in 2002, Statistics Booklet, Tbilisi, 2002*

The ethnic Azeri population makes up 45.5 per cent of the region of Kvemo Kartli and is most represented in the districts of Marneuli (83.1 per cent), Bolnisi (66 per cent), Dmanisi (66.8 per cent), and Gardabani (43.7 per cent).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, Europe Report Number 178, November 22, 2006.

Table 3: Ethnic Composition of the Kvemo Kartli Region

	Total %	Georgia n %	Russian %	Armeni an %	Azeris % <sup>α</sup>	Greeks %	Other %
Kvemo Kartli	497530 100%	222450 44,7%	6464 1,3%	31777 6,4%	224606 45,1%	7415 1,5%	4818 0,1
Rustavi	116384 100%	102151 87,8%	3563 3,1%	2809 2,4%	4993 4,3%	257 0,2%	2611 2,2%
Bolnisi	74301 100%	19926 26,8%	414 0,6%	4316 5,8%	49026 66%	438 0,6%	181 0,2%
Gardabani	114348 100%	60832 53,2%	994 0,9%	1060 0,9%	49993 43,7%	236 0,2%	1233 1,1%
Dmanisi	28034 100%	8759 31,2%	156 0,6%	147 0,5%	18716 66,8%	218 0,8%	38 0,1%
Marneuli	118221 100%	9503 8,0%	523 0,4%	9329 7,9%	98245 83,1%	296 0,3%	325 0,3%
Tetritskharo	25354 100%	18769 74,0%	689 2,7%	2632 10,4%	1641 6,5%	1281 5,1%	342 1,3%
Tsalka	20888 100%	2510 12,0%	125 0,6%	11484 55,0%	1992 9,5%	4589 22,0%	188 0,9%

Source: State Department for Statistics of Georgia, *Major Findings of the First General National Population Census of Georgia in 2002, Statistics Booklet, Tbilisi, 2002*

The first free and fair elections held in Georgia in 1991 did not turn the country into a functioning state let alone a working democracy. Georgia quickly collapsed into warfare amongst various factions based upon loyalties to particular regions or certain warlords as well as with the two break-away regions. In the early 1990s, Javakheti also came under the control of local paramilitary organizations and fell beyond the control of Tbilisi almost in its entirety. Although factors similar to those responsible for the armed conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were present, these did not push the population to rebellion.<sup>6</sup> From the mid-1990s, the Shevardnadze government managed to stabilize the situation and establish a *de facto* control over the region. Georgia's stability and "democracy" was based upon the then president's mastery of a personal network of patron-client relations and not upon a solid foundation of democratic institutions.<sup>7</sup> The country's visible

<sup>6</sup> Ekaterine Metreveli, "The Dynamics of 'Frozen Tension', The Case of Javakheti," GFSIS, Tbilisi 2004, pp. 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Snyder, *From Voting To Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict*, Norton Series in World Politics, 2000, p. 232.

stability was achieved by legitimizing local authorities through granting them high-ranking positions within the local administration bodies and giving parliamentary mandates in Tbilisi and not by establishing the rule of law, promoting integration policies, or disarming the local population.<sup>8</sup> As a result, even though stability was achieved and demands for autonomy have ceased to be on the agenda of the residents, Javakheti became completely detached from Georgia as a whole. Moreover, the existing clan-based politics within hampered all efforts at state building and has frozen the status quo in the minority-populated region.

The Azeri population of the province of Kvemo Kartli, on the other hand, has been less politically active and less mobilized than the ethnic Armenians due to a number of specific factors in Javakheti—the presence of a Russian military base and the geographical isolation of the region—as compared to Kvemo Kartli. Although most of the high-level positions in Kvemo Kartli were held by ethnic Georgians, the governance principles of the Shevardnadze period were the same in every region.

### **The Soviet Legacy and its Impact on Majority-Minority Relations in Georgia**

Whilst examining majority-minority relations in Georgia, it is important that the environment in which the country operates is taken into consideration. Although the Soviet system no longer exists, its legacy continues to influence the nationality policies of titular as well as minority groups. As Rogers Brubaker argues, the Soviet regime institutionalized territorial political and personal ethno-cultural models of nationhood as well as the existing tension between them. The ethno-cultural nationhood did not depend upon the existence of national republics and, at the same time, the national republics depended upon the existence of ethno-cultural nations. This organizational model was completely incompatible with the organizational model of the nation-state.<sup>9</sup> This legacy of a Soviet-style federal arrangement, which was not at all directed towards integration but,

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<sup>8</sup> The Akhalkalaki-based Russian military station supplied arms to the local population as well as to volunteers from Javakheti who participated actively in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

<sup>9</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 23-25.

on the contrary, by institutionalization of the categories of nationality and nationhood versus citizenship and statehood, assisted the segregation and self-identification of various national groups notwithstanding their place of residence. Non-titular nations had no need to study a republic's language as the language of social mobility was Russian. As Jack Snyder emphasizes, whilst the Soviet legacy left behind an ethnicized bureaucracy and a culturally aware local elite, it did nothing to develop an institutional framework for popular political participation along ethnic or any other lines.<sup>10</sup>

The republics of the former Soviet Union have undertaken various paths of development throughout the course of their individual histories. While Belarus, Estonia, and Latvia had never been independent states before 1918, and with Ukraine having existed merely as an idea of a nation rather than as a distinct ethno-political entity, Georgia, together with Armenia, had a legacy of independent statehood long before the first Russian state was formed.<sup>11</sup> An essential part of the national consciousness of Georgians throughout their history was the sense of a continuous existence which was especially emphasized in the revived studies of national history and literature in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The grounds for Georgian independence were already laid by the end of the nineteenth century, when the country reached a stage of economic development resulting in the growth of population, an increase in literacy, and a flourishing literature and art under the Russian Empire.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, Georgia became the political center for the whole of the Transcaucasus – which was the name the Russians used to refer to the South Caucasus as.<sup>13</sup> Tbilisi was not only the capital of the short-lived Transcaucasian Federation

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<sup>10</sup> Snyder, *From Voting to Violence*, pp. 222, 224.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, "The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union," Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> Paul B. Henze, "Was Georgia Ready for Independence?," *Caspian Crossroads*, vol. 3 no. 4, 1998, available at: <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/HOME/PAGES/USAZERB/343.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> The term "Transcaucasus" means "beyond the Caucasus" in the Russian language (*Zakavkazia*) and reflects well its geographical position. For more information see Natalie Sabanadze, "International Involvement in the South Caucasus", ECMI Working Paper No. 15, February 2002.

after the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks,<sup>14</sup> but it was also the site where all three South Caucasian countries – Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan – declared their independence in May 1918.

The formation of Georgian national identity throughout the medieval centuries was marked by the inclusion of other ethnic groups within its polity with the peaceful coexistence of different nationalities. Despite the existence of conflicts with neighboring countries, they were not ethnically motivated.<sup>15</sup> Up until today many Georgians are proud of having Georgian, Armenian, Jewish, and Muslim places of worship in close proximity.

The basis for the developments of the early 1990s concerning majority-minority relations filled with ethno-nationalistic rhetoric, therefore, should be explained not by a so-called theory of “ancient hatred” but, rather, within the reality of the Soviet policies of nationalities and their favoritism of one group over another, massive deportations designed to mix and weaken ethnic populations, and the creation of artificial administrative divisions. This, coupled with the political immaturity of the Georgian elite in the early stages of independence, was well manipulated by Russia and resulted in two break-away territories and unsettled relations with the main minority groups within the country.

Because of its Soviet legacy, Georgia faces a “minority problem” which differs from the conventional problems experienced when minorities are not able to speak their language or practice their culture or religion.

- The granting of citizenship to the population residing within the country did neither depend upon the origin of the individual nor upon the knowledge of the state language. Herein, Georgia differs from some other post-communist states, such as the Baltic countries, where language was held up as a necessary precondition for obtaining

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<sup>14</sup> The Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR), known in Russian as *Zakavkazskaya Demokraticheskaya Federativnaya Respublika* (ZKDFR) and also as the Transcaucasian Federation, existed between February and May 1918.

<sup>15</sup> The conflict between Georgia and Armenia was over Lori, Borchalo, and Javakheti in December 1918.

citizenship.<sup>16</sup> As a result, people of all nationalities were granted citizenship simply upon the declaration of independence.

- Despite opposition by certain nationalistically-oriented politicians, official documents in Georgia state only a person's citizenship which is seen not only as a break from the former Soviet-style of identity registration policy but also as a step forward towards building a civic space.
- There have been no cases of forbidding minority community representatives from receiving education in their own language or exercising their religion in Georgia, that is, with the exception of certain non-traditional confessions such as, for example, the Jehovah's Witnesses. The government has taken the responsibility to fund non-Georgian language schools for minority communities which means that 16.2 per cent of the population receives an education in its native language. In all, 456 Russian, Azeri, Armenian, and Ossetian language schools are paid for by the Georgian government.<sup>17</sup>

Some argue that it is precisely the existence of the non-Georgian language schools, which were a part of the former Soviet educational system, that now form the basis for the disintegration of minority communities from the state. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this same approach to the educational system was maintained in Georgia but the unifying element of the overarching language and the overarching ideology disappeared. The resulting vacuum was not filled with an *overarching* Georgian civic identity, however, and the goal of raising "Georgian" citizens as such was not set, with text books in Armenian and Azeri schools being routinely supplied from Yerevan and Baku, respectively. Although the linguistic and cultural rights of the minorities have been protected, the teaching in non-Georgian schools has continued to follow the patterns of the old educational system and, even more, this has served to strengthen the ethnic identity patterns of the minority communities, thereby being contrary to the interests of the state. These schools have been preparing emigrants rather than citizens of

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<sup>16</sup> David D. Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998, pp. 8-9.

<sup>17</sup> Bela Tsipuria, "State Language and Minority Language Education in Georgia," Presentation by the Deputy Minister of Education and Science, Ms. Bela Tsipuria, GFSIS, June 2006.

Georgia and, with such policies, graduates of Georgian and non-Georgian schools were prepared to operate in different socio-cultural spaces which until today serves to cause a divergence in their perception of realities.<sup>18</sup> As a result, these two communities have a difficulty in operating in one common space; that is, the Georgian state. As a result, the most acute minority problem in Georgia is the lack of socio-political integration of the country's minority groups.

The absence of integration is seen in all spheres of public life, such as:

- Minorities are not adequately represented in the state apparatus. Although most of the local governmental positions in Javakheti are held by ethnic Armenians—unlike the situation with the Azeri representation in Kvemo Kartli—they are not present in the central government. The trend is the same for other minority representatives with even those living in larger cities and other urban centers and speaking fluent Georgian still under-represented in the public service sector.
- Minorities are not adequately represented in the country's political parties. Georgian legislation bans parties founded along ethnic or regional lines and, as a result, there are no ethnic-based parties represented in the political space.<sup>19</sup> Whilst it is true that minorities have traditionally been included in the governing parties, their role is mostly nominal and they do not represent their community per se. In addition, given the fact that most of the minority Members of Parliament do not speak Georgian, their presence in the Parliament is not visible.
- Although civil society organizations have mushroomed in the minority-populated areas, their focus is based upon either ethnic or regional dimensions and they are not part of the nation-wide non-governmental organizations.<sup>20</sup> Typically, their activities include youth centers and community development organizations which are geared towards conflict mitigation and conflict prevention. Their agendas are

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<sup>18</sup> Ghia Nodia, "The Poli-ethnicity of Georgia...", p. 92.

<sup>19</sup> Law on Political Associations of Citizens, Article 6.

<sup>20</sup> A recent GFSIS study showed that there are 74 minority organizations in Kvemo Kartli and 91 in Samtskhe-Javakheti.



more donor- than locally-driven and, as such, lack an overall sustainability.

A major impediment to the socio-political integration of Georgia's ethnic minority communities is identified as a lack of knowledge of the Georgian language. At the same time, this reality also has its consequences within the informational vacuum faced by the minorities which further limits their knowledge about nationwide developments in the country and only contributes to their inadequate understanding and interpretation of contemporary governmental and societal realities.<sup>21</sup> As the Georgian state functions in the Georgian language and given the fact that it is also the language of social mobility, career opportunities available for the minority population remain limited as a direct and natural result. Not knowing Georgian is, at the same time, a reason and a result for the existing situation. At a recent Tbilisi-based conference, an ethnic Armenian civil activist posed the question, "Why should my children study Georgian for integration into Georgia? In this era of globalization, it makes more sense for them to study English."<sup>22</sup> This statement aptly shows that some representatives of ethnic minority communities not only do not see the incentive to study the state language, but also lack a common vision for the common future of the titular and minority communities. The separate "operational" spaces create an alienation that has a negative impact upon the overall process of state-building in the country.

### **Strengthening the State**

With the coming to power of the new and energetic Saakashvili government in 2004, all of the existing status quos and arrangements in the country were shattered. The state started to assert its power actively and the government introduced a number of reforms aimed at strengthening institutions and consolidating its power whilst announcing a fight against corruption, abolishing the former traffic police, cracking down on customs officials, and closing commercial enterprises accused of tax evasion. The reform of the

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<sup>21</sup> The ethnic minority population, especially in Javakheti, often expresses its protests against the construction of the Akhalkalaki-Kars railway and Georgia's goal to join NATO.

<sup>22</sup> Conference on "Minorities and the Georgian State", CACI-SRSP & GFSIS, June 29, 2006.

traffic police, in particular, put a country-wide end to the violations on the roads and motorways and facilitated communication between the center and the regions. The discrimination of minorities by the traffic police, who were notorious for soliciting bribes and other cash payments, was especially acute in the cases of the ethnic Azeri and Armenian populations. The state also launched national anti-drug and anti-smuggling activities that resulted in the closure of Kvemo Kartli's Red Bridge and Sadakhlo markets, which were important sources of income for the local Georgian, Azeri, and Armenian populations. These activities, which were widely publicized and aimed at asserting the power of the state, were met with opposition in minority-populated enclaves and were often interpreted through ethnic lenses.<sup>23</sup> Often, minority communities perceived these anti-corruption and anti-smuggling activities as direct and personal challenges.

Apart from the anti-corruption measures implemented across the country, Mikheil Saakashvili announced from the very first days of his presidency that people across the territory of Georgia—regardless of their ethnicity—are equal citizens and expressed a commitment to building a civic nationhood. This new trend was emphasized even during his presidential inauguration both in speeches as well as in symbols. The new government has certainly started to work in this direction and has implemented a number of reforms in order to reach the goal of bringing the minority populated areas closer to Georgia proper. The state has launched several infrastructural initiatives for these regions such as Javakheti, for example, which are aimed at supporting regional integration with the rest of the country. The Millennium Challenge Georgia Fund (MCGF) and the Government of Georgia have allocated US\$ 102 million and US\$ 25 million, respectively, for financing the Samtskhe-Javakheti Roads Rehabilitation Project which is designed to better connect Tbilisi with the region as well as with Armenia and Turkey.<sup>24</sup> This initiative

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<sup>23</sup> Protests occurred against replacing the ethnic Armenian staff at the customs office at the Georgia-Armenia border in December 2005. For more information see International Crisis Group, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>24</sup> The Millennium Challenge Georgia Fund has allocated US\$ 102 million for the construction of the Tbilisi-Ninotsminda motorway (through Tsalka), the Akhalkalaki-Ninotsminda motorway (to the Armenian border crossing point), and the Akhalkalaki-Kartsakhi motorway (to the Turkish border crossing point) as well as rehabilitating the Khertvisi-Vardzia section of the Akhaltsikhe-Akhalkalaki motorway. In tandem, the Georgian Government has allocated a further US\$ 25

also envisages building a road to the Turkish border at Kartsakhi and to open a customs terminal which, together with the plan to build an Akhalkalaki-Kars railway line, will further contribute to the economic growth of the region.

As a result of the state policies aimed at strengthening the Georgian state, there is a perceived change in the demands and requests coming from the minority communities. The usual issues connected with infrastructure, for example, have been replaced by questions connected with education and language. More precisely, language and education have been subject to special emphasis within minority communities since 2004, which is entirely understandable given the fact that both of these issues are essential components for state building policies as well as maintaining the ethnic identity for a particular group.

The discussions about the need for integration and the need to make the state language mandatory for all persons willing to participate in the socio-political life of the country have come onto the national agenda, and the state has started to undertake subsequent measures for the fulfillment of the latter goals. As the educational system is the basis for integration, a special emphasis has been placed on educational reform. Herein, the government is working in two directions as it started to enforce laws which were adopted during the previous administration as well as introducing a number of new regulations having an impact on the use of the Georgian language and on the educational system in the country.

Such a goal, however, is difficult to accomplish within the reality of the separate “operational” spaces despite the commitment and declaration of the government to the creation of a Georgia as a civic state with inclusive nationalism for all ethnic groups living in the country. Civic nationalism for one group can be easily seen as an ethnic nationalism for another with state building nationalism emerging as the cause of a peripheral nationalism.<sup>25</sup> The same trend can be observed in Javakheti where language and education

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million for the rehabilitation of the Samtskhe-Javakheti motorway. For further information see International Crisis Group, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, p. 2, and “Saakashvili: New Roads to Put an End to Javakheti's Isolation,” *Civil Georgia*, April 19, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> For further information see Michael Hechter, *Containing Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

policies undertaken by the central government have overshadowed most of the positive developments and decisions that the government has undertaken – such as opening of passport desks, the undertaking of road rehabilitation, and the plans to promote regional integration projects like the opening of a customs terminal at the Turkish border of Kartsakhi or the construction of the Akhalkalaki-Kars railway, all of which will lead to the improvement of life in Javakheti. Instead, demands for granting official status to the Armenian language in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, alongside Georgian, as well as increased self-governance for the region, are now often heard at rallies or in publications devoted to this region. Such an emphasis on increased self-governance or on the official status of the Armenian language is unprecedented throughout this “peculiar” relationship between the center and the minority populated region.<sup>26</sup>

#### *Language in Public Administration*

As there was no need to speak the Georgian language during the Soviet era and during the Shevardnadze government, the language of administrative proceedings in the minority-populated regions, as well as the communication between the regions and the centre, was conducted in languages other than Georgian (Russian, Azeri, and Armenian) which is a violation of the Administrative Code of Georgia (1999)<sup>27</sup> and the Law on Public Service (1998). According to the latter, the lack of knowledge of the state language can be a reason for dismissal from employment as all persons applying for

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<sup>26</sup> The third conference in the “Integration but Not Assimilation” cycle took place in Akhalkalaki on September 23-24, 2005 on the specific topic of “The Status of Javakheti within the Georgian State System.” Following a meeting, a resolution was adopted on September 26 which sets out the demands of a group of regional organizations to the central government in Tbilisi to award federal status to the province and include its adjustment of the territory of neighboring Kvemo Kartli which is also populated by ethnic Armenians. On March 9, 2006, the statement elaborated at the rally in Akhalkalaki requested a review of the Georgian Law on State Language and to turn Armenian into a state language in Samtskhe-Javakheti with a status equal to that of Georgian. Moreover, advocating increased self-rule is seen in the works of Armenian political scientists; namely, Sergey Mynasyan, author of “Georgia’s Ethnic Minorities,” who argues that giving Javakheti asymmetrical autonomy will assist in its further and deeper integration into the socio-political life of Georgia.

<sup>27</sup> According to the Administrative Code of Georgia, the official language of administrative proceedings must be Georgian. The Law on Common Courts (1997) says that the adjunction should be in the official language although the state should provide an interpreter should it be necessary.

public posts and posts in local self-government offices must speak the state language. The amendment to article 92, Paragraph 1 of the Unified Election Code of Georgia of August 14, 2003, in preparation for the next Parliamentary elections scheduled for 2008, states that anyone elected to the Georgian Parliament should know the Georgian language. The legislation was ignored during the period of the previous administration and not taken seriously – neither by the minorities nor the central authorities – which has only reinforced the isolation of and assisted in the “ghettoization” of the minority communities of Georgia. The new government, however, is more determined to enforce the laws than the previous administration and, should they be successful, this will preclude all ethnic minorities who do not speak Georgian from holding relevant governmental posts.

### *Education*

The new government went even further in its reforms and introduced laws aimed at strengthening Georgian as a state language in the educational system of the country. The new Law on General Education, adopted in 2005, states that the language of study institutions of general education must be Georgian (with the exception of Abkhazia) although citizens of Georgia whose native language is not Georgian have the right to receive a complete general education in their native language despite the requirements of the law stating that Georgian language and literature, the history and geography of Georgia, as well as “other social sciences” be taught in Georgian by the academic year 2010-11 at the latest. The Law on Higher Education (2004) states that “the language of instruction at an institution of higher education is Georgian and, in Abkhazia, also in Abkhazian.” The same law establishes national entrance examinations for all state-accredited institutions of higher education and identifies four topics in which these exams will be held; namely, Georgian language and literature, a general abilities test, foreign languages (English, German, French, or Russian) and Mathematics. Minorities have expressed their alarm at such a requirement and have complained that the instruction in schools is currently inadequate for passing the new nationwide exams.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Only three ethnic Armenians from Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda and 17 ethnic Azeris from Kvemo Kartli succeeded in enrolling at a university in 2005. In 2006, with

A further topic of timely importance concerning educational issues is the planned instruction of Georgian history and geography in the Georgian language in non-Georgian schools by 2011. Minority communities believe that the teaching of Georgian history might pose a threat to the ethnic identity of their children. At the same time, the same law does not prohibit that minority language and the culture and history of minority populations be taught in non-Georgian schools. Minorities perceive educational reforms as a threat to their ethnic identity and are fearful that the Georgian state uses language as a means of assimilating them.

There is much debate regarding the recent decision of the Ministry of Education and Science to change the status of the Akhalkalaki branch of Tbilisi State University to a College.<sup>29</sup> The definition of the college has hitherto not been adequately explained and has resulted in misperceptions and additional fears from the Armenian community of Javakheti. Such a step, however, is part of the overall policy of the Ministry of Education and Science for making the accreditation of higher educational institutions stricter as well as abolishing the large number of Tbilisi State University branches in their entirety or, alternately, turning them into independent educational institutions.

Although the overall goal of the Government's educational reforms is to obtain a higher level of education in the state language, which, no doubt, is an attractive goal for the long run, it meanwhile limits the access of minorities to institutions of higher education and creates a serious impediment to the process of national integration.

In order to promote Georgian as a language of public administration, the new Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration was opened in Kutaisi in December 2005. Whilst the School also admits ethnic Georgians to its program of study, it is mostly designed for ethnic minorities and includes a three-month course in public administration together with a parallel course in the Georgian language. Most of the non-Georgian students were able to

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the Ministry of Education and Science having made the system somewhat easier for minority candidates, 31 ethnic Armenians and 25 ethnic Azeris enrolled in Georgian universities. For more information see International Crisis Group, *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, p. 29.

<sup>29</sup> Television news programme *Kurieri*, Rustavi 2, July 31, 2007.

overcome the language barrier after six months and demonstrated the success that the School can achieve. This was only one side of the problem, however, as the graduates of the School, even with a knowledge of Georgian, were not able to get into the public service.<sup>30</sup> If the Government has tackled the supply side of the Georgian speaking minority public administration-trained cadres, the demand for this group of personnel is still lacking. It is imperative that mechanisms should be in place that would ensure the enrolment of Kutaisi School graduates into the Georgian public service. Without these measures, these individuals will join the minority representatives and residents of major cities who speak Georgian but who are not part of the state apparatus.

### **Conclusions**

Whilst minority issues as a general topic of focus and concern in Georgia have become further fixed within the national political agenda – especially as concerns the ethnic Armenian community in Javakheti – progress has been made but there is still progress to come. As this needs assessment study has shown, the initial and demonstrated efforts of the Georgian Government in the integration and further inclusion within the Georgian state of ethnic minority populations remains handicapped in its insufficient mechanisms for the efficient and successful implementation of its activities. Progress, however, is hitherto evident. Horizontal contacts between Tbilisi and the Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions are increasing as a result of improved motorway connections, opportunities for minority community representatives to work, study, and train in the capital, and there is an increased circulation of the Georgian national currency and a greater number of Georgian banks in the region. The recent withdrawal of the Russian military station has also assisted in dismantling the myth that it was a source of potential unrest in the region. The success of the program of study designed at the Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration in Kutaisi shows that positive results can be achieved.

To quote the popular aphorism “a rising tide lifts all boats,” it is precisely this focus of initiating improvements at the macro level which will have a positive effect on society in general. To this end, there must be two parallel

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<sup>30</sup> Ekaterine Metreveli, field interviews, Javakheti, June 2007.

processes in place in order to achieve a successful integration of minority communities within the Georgian state. First, there is a need for a more general process focusing on an overall and country-wide reform aimed at the further democratization of the country which, subsequently, will result in economic growth and better governance practices which include the engagement of all citizens. Second, specific assistance for the minority communities should be rendered in parallel which will help representatives of those communities traverse and accomplish the democratic transition as smoothly as possible given the reality that those communities have not participated in the building of the new Georgian state since the 1990s and have been left behind. Specific policies and mechanisms should be elaborated and implemented in order to assist minority representatives in becoming closer to and an active part of the processes taking place in the country. It bears repeated emphasis that the overall democratic governance and engagement of Georgia's minority groups within this process is the greatest guarantor of their integration, without which the hitherto sporadic interventions within these communities will not bring about any serious change.

Specifically, we propose the conceptualization, organization, and implementation of a high-level working session for governmental officials working on the issue of ethnic minority integration in Georgia. Within the format of an interactive working session and with the participation of external experts, specialists, and members of the international research community, the points of key focus, priority, and concern can be discussed and debated with the aim of producing a set of policy recommendations designed to improve and augment the mechanisms for further forward activity.



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