

Dukhobors in Georgia:
A Study of the Issue of Land Ownership
and Inter-Ethnic Relations in Ninotsminda *rayon*
(Samtskhe-Javakheti)

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Table of Contents

I. INTRODUCTION.....	4
II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DUKHOBORS IN GEORGIA	5
1. <i>The Origin of the Dukhobors</i>	5
2. <i>Dukhobors during Soviet Times.....</i>	9
3. <i>The Demographic Change and the Fight for Houses.....</i>	11
4. <i>Dukhobor Traditions Today.....</i>	15
III. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION IN NINOTSMINDA RAYON	21
1. <i>Local Power Structures</i>	26
IV. THE PROCESS OF LAND PRIVATISATION IN GEORGIA	29
1. <i>Background on Land Reforms in Georgia</i>	29
2. <i>The Dukhoborets Contract.....</i>	31
3. <i>The Privatisation Process.....</i>	32
4. <i>The Privatisation Process in Gorelovka Village.....</i>	35
5. <i>The Tax Debt</i>	37
V. THE DIFFERENCE IN PERCEPTIONS	39
1. <i>Resettlement to Russia.....</i>	41
IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	43

I. INTRODUCTION

This working paper is the result of a fact-finding fieldwork mission conducted in August, September and October 2006 in the Ninotsminda *rayon* (district), in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia.¹ It is based on 70 interviews with local inhabitants, authorities and other related parties as well as legal documents and analytical articles. The intention of the paper is to analyse the current situation in the multi-ethnic *rayon* of Ninotsminda. Special attention is given to the conditions of the Dukhobors², a Russian ethno-religious group that has inhabited the Ninotsminda *rayon* since the 1840s. Currently, the future existence of the Dukhobor community is in jeopardy. This paper will work to explain why. A background to Dukhoborian history in Georgia will be provided, as well as a short socio-economic overview for readers who are not familiar with Samtskhe-Javakheti in general and Ninotsminda in particular. In addition, a number of acute problems that have recently arisen for the Dukhobor community in the village of Gorelovka will be accounted for. The paper will also provide recommendations for future actions.

¹ Interviews were also conducted in Dmanisi rayon and in Tbilisi.

² Dukhobors are sometimes spelled 'Doukhobors' (French transliteration).

II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DUKHOBORS IN GEORGIA

1. The Origin of the Dukhobors

The Dukhobors are ethnic Russians that today reside in Russia, the Caucasus and Canada. The word 'Dukhobor' means 'Spirit Wrestler' and the name was originally given to them by an Orthodox Archbishop in the Russian town of Ekaterinoslav in 1785. The Archbishop and the Orthodox Church believed that the Dukhobors were wrestling against the spirit of God because of their opposition to the church institution.³ Today, Dukhobors say that they are wrestling with their souls in order to fulfill the Ten Commandments. Traditionally, Dukhobors reject all types of religious and secular authority. According to Dukhobors, all true guidance comes from inside, through hard work, honesty and adherence to the Ten Commandments where 'Thou shall not kill' has been one of the most important commandments. Hence, mankind does not need any intermediaries (priests) between themselves and God. Religious symbols such as churches, crosses, liturgics or icons are not necessary since they are constructed by mankind. God is an incomprehensible essence – an inner light – that exists in every individual who expresses love, and therefore, all human beings are by definition equal. Sin is not inherited in Dukhobor belief, and every person has to repent the sins he or she commits.

In Tsarist Russia during the late 18th Century, sects of religious dissenters such as the Dukhobors, Molokans, Staroveri (Old Believers) and Subbotniks were pariahs. The Russian rulers were concerned that they would spread their heresies and seduce 'true' Orthodox believers. Paul I first persecuted the sectarians and also exiled some of them to Siberia. On their return in 1801, they were resettled in 'New Russia' (in the settlements of Molochna, Melitopol, Ekaterinburg and Irkutsk). In the 1820s, Tsar Nicolai I concluded that the sectarians were destabilising the foundations of modern Russia: They denied the authority of religious and secular leaders by refusing to do military service, paying taxes and challenging serfdom. In addition, the demand for the sectarians' quite substantial land holdings in 'New Russia' had increased. Consequently, in 1839 an ultimatum was given to the sectarians: Convert to Orthodoxy or leave for the newly conquered Caucasus region. Most of them decided to go into

³ Koozma J. Tarasoff, 'Dukhobor Survival through the Centuries', *Canadian Ethnic Studies*. October 1995.

exile. Once the sectarians were in the Caucasus, the Tsarist government also hoped that the pacifist Dukhobors would have to take up arms to defend themselves against Ottomans and mountaineers – a hope that eventually was fulfilled.

In 1839-1845 Dukhobors settled in the two Georgian regions of Javakheti and Dmanisi (Dmanisi *rayon* is situated in our days Kvemo Kartli province, and was formerly known as Borchalo), Kedabek in today's Azerbaijan and Kars in today's Turkey. In Ninotsminda *rayon* 8 villages were Dukhobor: Bogdanovka (now Ninotsminda), Gorelovka, Tambovka, Orlovka, Spasovka, Troskoye or Kalinino (now Sameba), Yefremovka and Rodionovka.⁴ In total 495 families comprising 4,097 Dukhobors settled in Javakheti⁵, and up to a thousand people settled in today's Dmanisi *rayon*. In Dmanisi the Dukhobors lived in five villages: Dmanisi, Kirovisi, Vake, Gantiadi and Ormasheni.⁶

Settling in the Caucasus had some advantages for the Dukhobors and other sectarians: they were freed from religious persecution, got exempted from tax duties and military prescription. Nevertheless, the resettlement in Javakheti was difficult. During the six month travel and the first years of settlement hundreds of Dukhobors died from starvation, epidemics and economic destitution. The climate was harsh, there was often a lack of potable water and the relations to local settlers were initially extremely tense. Highway brigandage, murder, horseback attacks or partial serfdom was common from the local 'Tatars' (Azeris), while conflicts with the Armenians who had largely arrived from the Ottoman empire a decade earlier mainly took place over land usage. The Russian settlers were often given better and more lands than the already established Armenians.

From 1840s to 1880s the Dukhobors, as hard working settlers, became well organised and able to develop carting, milling, stagecoach and postal services and taverns for services for the Russian Empire. The sectarians also provided necessary transportation, housing and food supplies for the Russian troops in the Crimean war (1853-1856) and the Russian-Turkish war (1877-1878). The perception of the Dukhobors by the Russian administration thus gradually changed. The Dukhobors were no longer seen as disloyal sectarians but as outstandingly loyal colonizers. While adapting to the new conditions the Dukhobors for the most part shifted from

⁴ Nicholas Breyfougler, *Heretics and Colonizers Forging the Russian Empire in the South Caucasus*. (Cornell University Press, London, 2005) at 118.

⁵ Melikishvili, Lia, *Latent Conflict in Polyethnic Society*, Caucasian Centre for Peace and Development, 1997, 36 at <http://www.cipdd.org/cipdd/MELIKISHVILI/contents.htm>.

⁶ Author's interview.

agriculture to cattle-breeding. They lived in separate homesteads, but within compact villages where pasture was held in common, and land was regularly redistributed depending on the needs of families. If someone died, or if another family got a new child they shared the lands accordingly. This was called a *mir* (communal) system. If a Dukhobor ran into trouble e.g. during harvest, the collective grain storage was at their disposal. If needed, families could also get interest free loans from the collective fund that had accumulated since the 1840s.

When it came to neighbourhood problems the formerly pacifist Dukhobors found themselves creating armed militias to protect themselves, just as the Tsar had hoped. By the end of the 1880s the interrelations between the different settlers around Ninotsminda had calmed down. On economic and practical levels the Dukhobors started interacting more with other settlers, especially with the Armenians. The different groups, however, kept separate social structures and remained relatively isolated. There were, for example, very few intermarriages and cross-religious ties.⁷

At the same time internal relations within the Dukhobor villages deteriorated. The Kalmykova family had governed the Dukhobor community for generations, and the Dukhobors believed that the Kalmykova leaders were descendants of Messias. Therefore they were the undisputed leaders who could make divine decisions. But by the mid 1880s the Kalmykova family was heirless. Lukeria Kalmykova took over the leadership after her husband died, but since they had no children the Dukhobor community was left without a leader when she died in 1886. After her death, a power struggle therefore broke out between her brother (Mikhail Gubanov) and her secretary (Peter Verigin). By 1887 the Dukhobors divided into the so-called Minor Party headed by Gubanov and the Major Party headed by Verigin. The latter was proposing a return to pacifism, communalism and spiritual purity through living a simple life, rejecting the consumption of meat, alcohol, tobacco, tea and even sugar.

The Minor party followers were mainly living in Gorelovka, and had control over Kalmykova's home, the *Sirotskiy dom* (the Orphan Home). At the *Sirotskiy dom* Dukhobor elders and orphans were accommodated. In addition it functioned as the main storage for seeds and the rather impressive collective funds that had accumulated during their work for Russian authorities since the 1840s. Leading the Dukhobor community also meant taking care of the collective fortunes. While the disagreement between Minor Party and Major Party Dukhobors

⁷ Breyfogle *Heretics and Colonizers...* 174-213.

intensified the parties started splitting up herds, lands, houses and even families. The Major Party supporters moved out of Gorelovka, while Minor Party supporters moved from other villages to Gorelovka and soon Gorelovka was only inhabited by Minor Party followers. The dispute also spread to the other Dukhobor settlements in Kars, Kedabek and Dmanisi, while the quarrel on the ownership of the *Sirotskiy dom* and its assets continued. Eventually the ownership dispute was settled by the court in Tbilisi in favour of the Minor Party. Both sides tried to make local authorities intervene in the conflict, but as the Major Party became increasingly radical, the authorities sided with the Minor Party. Moreover, the authorities took the extreme measure of exiling Verigin and some of his closest allies to Siberia in 1887 in an effort to calm the Dukhobors down.

At the same time the tsarist authorities started imposing a standardised administrative system which registered the Dukhobors in metrical books, and demanded that they contribute to a communal grain storage system and to participate in a mandatory military service (that they previously had been exempted from).

The forced exile of the Major Party leader Verigin, and the stronger administrative measures introduced by the Russian authorities radicalised the Major Party further. Verigin's followers started giving away excessive belongings, land and cattle to be able to follow their beliefs better. In 1895 Major Party Dukhobors collectively refused to swear alliance to Tsar Alexander III by arranging a religious protest ceremony outside Orlovka village where they burned their arms. (Arms were also burned in Kars and Kedabek but with less dramatic consequences.) The response from the tsarist authorities was harsh: around 300 young Dukhobors who were previously enrolled in the army were put in disciplinary battalions; Cossacks were occupying the Major Party villages, stealing products, randomly beating and sexually abusing the population to punish them for not complying with the official demands. More than 4,000 Major Party Dukhobors were exiled to other Georgian villages in Ossetia, Kakheti and Imereti. Many of these died from heat, hunger or malnutrition. Meanwhile, the exiled Major Party leader Verigin had found an ally in Lev Tolstoy, who managed to draw international attention to the plights of Dukhobors. Hence, in 1899, 7,400 Dukhobors went into exile to Canada.

The anti-institutional, pacifist Dukhobors were, however, unable to live in peace according to their beliefs in Canada for a long time. Just like during the Tsarist persecution of the

Dukhobors, the Canadian authorities did not accept the communal, rather anarchistic Russian-speaking Dukhobors who refused to put their children in normal schools. Many Dukhobor children were thus forcibly put in boarding schools without any contact with their parents. The Dukhobors were also forced to move to new provinces since they were not allowed to have collective farms. The Dukhobor responded by demonstrating naked (as a sign of purity) and of burning down their individual farm houses.⁸

Some of Verigin's followers decided to stay in the Caucasus. In total, including the Minor Party Dukhobors, there were about 10,000 Dukhobors in Javakheti at the end of the 19th century.⁹ The Minor party Dukhobors continued to live in Gorelovka, while most of Verigin's followers stayed in the other 7 villages. In spite of the repressive measures, the remaining Dukhobors were the richest settlers in the Transcaucasus in 1899. According to Russian statistics at that time 16 percent of the population in the former Akhalkalaki district (which is roughly today's Javakheti region) were Dukhobors but they owned 35 % of the lands, 20 % of the cattle, 43 % of the sheeps and 70 % of the horses. While the average land holding *per capita* was 2,32 desiatiny (one desiatina is equivalent of one hectare) the Dukhobor average was 5,07 desiatiny.¹⁰ In 1921-1923 Verigin's son also helped to resettle 4,500 Dukhobors from Ninotsminda *rayon* to Rostov-on-Don in the Russian Federation.¹¹ Today the Dukhobors in the Rostov region however seem unaware of the historical split that created their resettlement.¹²

2. Dukhobors during Soviet Times

During the Soviet collectivisation process in the 1930s, the Dukhobor communal *mir* system of redistributing agricultural lands was destroyed. However, the Dukhobors were used to working on collective lands, and most of them were able to adapt to the Communist system. Given the strong work discipline of the Dukhobors their *kolkhozes* turned into one of the most profitable

⁸ On the situation for the Dukhobors in Canada see Eli Schuster, 'Public School, Private Grief'. *Report/News magazine Canada*. 8 October 2001; Julie Rak 'Doukhobor Autobiography as Witness Narrative', 24(1) *Biography*, Biographical Research Center, Canada, 2001. Svetlana Inikova 'Doukhobors of the USSR at the end of the 1980s', 27(3) *Canadian Ethnic Studies*.; Tarasoff, 'Dukhobor Survival Through the Centuries...

⁹ Melikishvili, *Latent Conflict in Polyethnic Societies...* at 18.

¹⁰ Breyfogle *Colonizers and Heretics...* at 118.

¹¹ Inikova, 'Doukhobors of the USSR'.... See also Philip Marsden's travel book from 1999, *The Spirit-Wrestlers and Other Survivors of the Russian Century* (Flamingo Books) where he meets Dukhobors in Rostov and in Gorelovka.

¹² Author's interview with a Dukhobor born in Rostov-on-Don that currently lives in Tbilisi.

kolkhozes in the entire Soviet Union, and specialised in cheese. Their villages were still predominantly Dukhobor, in some villages a few Armenian families were residing. Even though the Dukhobors could not perform their religious practices from the 1930s, their ethno-religious group remained self-isolated in these eight villages. There were no official leaders emerging within the Dukhobor community, but believers secretly met on Sundays to pray. The outspoken Dukhobor believers were deported. According to one respondent 18 Dukhobors were deported only from Gorelovka village in the 1930s. The *Sirotskiy dom* in Gorelovka was used as grain storage for the *kolkhoz*. In Gorelovka, the head of the *kolkhoz* and other official structures were Dukhobors, but in villages such as Orlovka, Efremovka and Spasovka the chairpersons of the *kolkhozes* were chiefly Armenian.¹³ This is an indicator of the fact that the community in Gorelovka was more united and protected even during Soviet times.

By the late 1980s a new wave of resettlement took place, this time to the Russian Federation. One of the main initiators of this resettlement process was Maria Uglova, who was chairperson of the Spasovka *kolkhoz*. The Dukhobors who left with Uglova resettled in Tul'skiy *oblast*. Generally, the Dukhobors mainly moved to Tul'skiy and Rostov'skiy *oblasts*, as well as to Stavropol *krai*. From 1979 to 1989 the Dukhobors in Ninotsminda decreased from 3,830 to 3,165. In Dmanisi the Dukhobors had decreased from 691 to 571.¹⁴ The majority of these totally 785 Russians resettled in Russia during the Perestroika years. By the mid-1990s about 1,400 Dukhobors remained in Georgia, about 50 of them in Dmanisi.¹⁵

There were several reasons why the Dukhobors left for Russia. During the last part of the Perestroika years and the collapse of the Soviet Union Georgia was in turmoil. In addition, Georgian ethno-nationalist politics was on the rise, with leading politicians such as Zviad Gamsakhurdia propagating a policy based on ethnic exclusion and chauvinism. One indicator of the process of 'Georgianization' was how previously Russian toponyms became Georgian; Bogdanovka turned into Ninotsminda ('Holy Nino's town') and Trotskoye became Sameba ('Trinity' in Georgian). As civil wars erupted within Georgia the attraction of a life within the Russian Federation grew, and the majority of Dukhobors were not at ease with remaining in

¹³ Author's interviews.

¹⁴ This data is from the Soviet census of 1979 and 1989, it is assumed here that the 'Russians' in the census are Dukhobor.

¹⁵ More concretely, the main Dukhobor settlements in Russia are Archangelsk village in Chemskiy *rayon*, Tula *oblast*, Stavropol *krai* and in the Tselina *rayon* in Rostov *oblast*. See www.dukhobors.narod.ru for a contemporary list of the different Dukhobor communities in Russia.

Georgia. At the same time the Armenian, then paramilitary, organisation *Javakh* took *de facto* control over the Javakheti region.

Another important factor was the interest shown from the Russian Federation. Ethnographers and Russian nationalists showed up in Dukhobor villages to promote the advantages of resettling.¹⁶ In some cases, Dukhobors were invited to see the villages where they could resettle. One organisation called *Rodina* (Homeland) provided transportation and housing in the new settlements. The resettlement, however, was poorly organised and the new homesteads were often of a worse quality than the existing ones in Javakheti. Moreover, these villages were situated in the southwestern part of the Russian Federation, and affected by the high radioactive fallout from the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. Because of the poor conditions several families returned to Georgia.¹⁷ In the case of the Dmanisi Dukhobors they were migrating individually to Russia. They were not encouraged to resettle from the Russian Federation, and did not resettle compactly.

3. The Demographic Change and the Fight for Houses

Already by the early 1990s, 7 out of 8 villages were no longer mainly Dukhobor. A respondent describes the population change in the village of Efremovka like this:

“In Soviet times we were about 72 Dukhobor families here. There were also some Armenian families living in the village. But we didn’t really make a distinction between us back then. In August 1990 the Dukhobors that were leaving put their houses on sale. There were two foundations that wanted to buy the houses, one Georgian [Merab Kostava Foundation] and one Armenian [probably Parvana]. These organisations started competing on who could buy the most houses. Within two weeks all houses were sold. The Georgian foundation bought about 30 houses, and the Armenian about 24. The ‘Georgian’ houses were often old and in bad conditions, so the families that settled had a tough time. They were not used to the climate, and most of them did not even know how to feed a cow. By 1993 the Georgians had left Efremovka, only one family stayed. The Armenians were used to how life is here. So they settled more easily. I remember this time as very difficult and tense. Now the situation here is calmer.”

¹⁶ Aleksei Krindach, ‘Soul Fighters from Javakheti’ 14/11/2001 at <http://religion.ng.ru/>

¹⁷ Author’s interviews.

This description could also be applied to the other former Dukhobor villages of Efremovka, Kalinino and Orlovka. The Merab Kostava Foundation was working under a nationalist credo. Its money was donated from patriotic Georgians to help resettling Georgian families ‘in need’ – either vulnerable families or ecologically displaced persons.¹⁸ But their arrival caused tension. “When we arrived in 1989 in Spasovka many of the Dukhobors had already left. We were a big group of people from Ajara. The Armenian population met us with arms. The Georgian police had to come and calm the situation down here. Most of the Ajaran families left immediately, but nine families stayed.” as one Ajaran described their arrival in Spasovka. The arrival of Georgians was not popular among the Armenian population, who saw the influx of Georgians as a government attempt to alter the demographic situation in the region. Therefore informal organisations were set up to support Armenians establishing themselves in the former Dukhobor dwellings. The two biggest organisations were called *Javakh* and *Parvana*. Young ethnic Armenian families were resettled from remote villages in Ninotsminda *rayon* such as Poka, Satkhe, Patara Arageli, Didi Arageli and Gandza.¹⁹ In most cases these families were able to get lands and later on lease contracts for these lands. Initially the relations between the Dukhobors and the new settlers were tense. The Armenians were often better at protecting their interests, while the Dukhobors were bewildered by the new Post-Soviet chaos.

In the case of Ninotsminda town, the Dukhobors and Armenians had co-existed for a longer period of time, but gradually the Dukhobors left and were replaced by ethnic Armenians. Rodionovka, Tambovka and Sameba are quite isolated villages, and since the Dukhobors left they have become more or less depopulated. The Georgian eco-migrants from Ajara and other ethnic Georgians resettled here could not cope with the climate in Javakheti, and most of them left within a year. The social tension that occurred upon their arrival also made it less attractive for them to stay. Spasovka is the only former Dukhobor village that has a compact settlement of Georgians. These people come from Khulo *rayon* in Ajara and are eco-migrants, i.e. they got resettled after landslides in Ajara. In the other former Dukhobor villages there are a few Georgian families, who settled with help from the Merab Kostava Foundation and decided to stay. In other cases the Merab Kostava Foundation houses were destroyed, sold or simply taken

¹⁸ Another organisation was the Society for the Revival of Javakheti that was active in social rehabilitation of the resettled Georgians.

¹⁹ Author’s interviews.

over by Armenians. However, the selling of houses was illegal since the Merab Kostava Foundation had provided the houses on the condition that they could not be sold.

In 1997 there was another wave of migration from Javakheti. Lyuba Goncharova, the new chairperson of the Gorelovka *kolkhoz*, arranged a resettlement of around 300 people to Bryanskiy *oblast*. From 1997 to 2006 Dukhobor families have been migrating individually, approximately half of the remaining Dukhobor community has left so far (600 persons). “Often we do not know that people are applying for Russian citizenship. We get to know only when they pack their stuff and leave,” as one respondent explained it. Currently, another collective resettlement is being prepared. One of the stakeholders is again Lyuba Goncharova, who is now working for the Committee on the Issues of Compatriots Abroad at the Russian State Duma.

The resettlements during the 1990s thus changed dramatically the demography in the Dukhobor villages. It has been impossible to trace the change in exact numbers, since the Georgian Department of Statistics does not have data on national minorities at village level, neither is it possible to trace the official data on the Armenian inter-village migration, but with figures provided by one of the most active Dukhobor community members the shift in population can still be understood. (See table 1 and Table 3 for the statistics on the overall increase of Armenians vice versa the decrease of Russian Dukhobors.)

By the end of the decade, the Russians were now in a minority in seven of the eight Dukhobor villages. Today, the situation has however stabilised, and the interactions between Armenians and Dukhobors have calmed down in these seven villages. Gradually the ratio of Dukhobors in Gorelovka also changed; from an absolute majority to a situation where the Armenian population is bigger than the Dukhobor. Today there are about 504 Dukhobors, 551 Armenians and 31 Georgians in Gorelovka. The relations in Gorelovka will be further elaborated below.

Table 1: Dukhobor population statistics in Ninotsminda rayon 1990-2006*

Year	1990	1995	2000	2002	2006
Gorelovka	1,667	883	586	599	432
Orlovka	378	195	132	125	101
Spasovka	332	63	49	46	19
Efremovka	227	29	19	18	18
Sameba	327	13	10	10	8
Ninotsminda	150	133			58
Rodionovka	300			7	5
Tambovka	300			11	9
Total	3,531	1,316	796	816	700**

* Note that the figures 1990, 1995 and 2006 are estimated by local Dukhobor community members. The Georgian Department of Statistics does not have data on national minorities separated on village levels, except for 2002. In the villages that have no data there was no reliable information on the actual Dukhobor inhabitants. Therefore the total numbers of Dukhobors from 1990-2002 is incomplete.

** In 2006 around 50 Dukhobors live on the military base in Akhalkalaki. These are not incorporated into the village statistics, but are included in the total amount in the table.

Table 2: 2006 Statistics from Gorelovka *sakrebulo*

Village	Russians*	Armenians	Georgians	Others	Total
Gorelovka	504	551	31	1	1,087
Orlovka	108	166	6	2	282
Efremovka	18	118	8		144
Spasovka	19	77	282	5	383
Zdanovkan		501			501
Sameba	10	46	16		72

* Note that the *sakrebulo* statistics are not coherent with the data provided from the Dukhobor community.

Totally, there are about 800 Dukhobors in Georgia. About 50 Dukhobors live in Dmanisi *rayon*²⁰, mainly in the city of Dmanisi; two Dukhobor families also reside in Vake village. There are a few families who live in the rest of Georgia, such as Tbilisi and Bolnisi.

The average age of the Dukhobor population is high. Often the young adults are working in Russia, while the elderly parents stayed behind. In the formerly Dukhobor villages in Ninotsminda *rayon*, the demographic structure of Dukhobors and Armenians differ markedly. The Armenian newcomers are for the most part young families. This means that the Armenian population will continue to increase, irrespectively of if the Dukhobors decide to stay in Georgia or not. For example, even though the overall balance of the population in Gorelovka village is half Dukhobor and half Armenian there are only 67 children in the Russian school (plus 7 Georgians that take evening classes) compared with 160 in the Armenian school. Several of the Russian children come from the Dukhobor families that live in other villages. In Orlovka the situation is even more extreme. According to *sakrebulo* statistics there are 166 Armenians and 108 Russians in Orlovka, and about 90 Armenian children of school age but only 7 Dukhobor children. Five of these go to the Armenian school, while two of them go to the Russian school in Gorelovka.

4. Dukhobor Traditions Today

During the Soviet period Dukhobor traditions were not actively upheld. Nevertheless, some of the traditions were remembered by the older generation. Historically, psalms provided Dukhobors with spiritual guidance.²¹ In 1909, the ethnographer Vladimir D. Bronch-Bruevich managed to transcribe these oral psalms in the 'Book of Life of Dukhobors'.²² This book is used by Dukhobors in Canada, and to a lesser extent in Georgia. Before the Stalinist repressions this book existed among Georgian Dukhobor families, but the copies disappeared during the 1930s. Often they were destroyed by the Dukhobors themselves, who were scared of getting caught with illegal books. Therefore, the Dukhobor traditions in the former Soviet Union continued to be based on the living word of mouth and are in constant transformation. The people that attend the

²⁰ Taken mixed families into consideration, there are approximately 90 Dukhobors in total in Dmanisi.

²¹ See Julie Rak 'Doukhobor Autobiography as Witness Narrative', 24(1) *Biography*, Biographical Research Center, Canada, 2001.

²² However, this book seems to be of greater importance for the Canadian Dukhobors than the Georgians, since the latter had to destroy their books during Communist times. In addition there are differences in belief between the Canadian Dukhobors and their brethren in the Caucasus.

collective Sunday prayers in the *Sirotskiy dom* actively sing or recite approximately 40 psalms out of more than 100 psalms. They are about 10-15 people. Their average age is high; none of them is younger than 40 years of age. They are dressed in traditional clothes. The women stand in the right part of the room, while the men stand to the left, although today most of the active worshippers are women. An important part of the religious ceremony is a ceremonial bowing. All worshippers bow three times to each other, in order to cherish the Holy Trinity inside of mankind. The persons that normally attend the prayers also sing psalms during funerals or other religious occasions.

Even though few Dukhobors attend the service, many claim that they are believers. While discussing Dukhobor traditions, the younger generation however prefers to refer to old women instead of talking themselves. As said by a young Dukhobor: “I really don’t know these things, but I can take you to my grandmother. She knows everything.” Still, everyone is aware of the importance of being honest, generous and hard working. Most of them also refer to the Ten Commandments. In addition it is common to refer to prophecies made by former Dukhobor elders. Social rules specific to Dukhobors are often taken into account (for example to do laundry only on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays). When it comes to funerals and weddings, Dukhobor traditions seem to be upheld.

Something several Dukhobors mention if asked about their Dukhobor identity is a quite macabre legend. Allegedly, an Orthodox priest forcibly conducted a Dukhobor funeral in early 19th Century Russia. He also wanted money from the family. As a protest against the Orthodox Church and what the Dukhobor considers its hypocrite priests, the Dukhobors buried the priest with the coffin. In general the respondents refer to this act with pride. It is symbolising that Dukhobors do not need any intermediaries between their soul and God. “We don’t use our hands to build churches; we only fight with our soul to fulfill God’s wishes.” as one religious respondent explained.

Gorelovka is the most preserved Dukhobor community, not only in Georgia but also in the Former Soviet Union.²³ Families are volunteering to take care of the *Sirotskiy dom*, the necropolis of their former leaders and other places that are considered to be holy. As of today these places, unfortunately, do not have the status of ‘cultural heritage’ in Georgia. If the

²³ See Svetlana Inikova, ‘Doukhobors of the USSR at the end of the 1980s’. 27(3) *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 1995.

remaining Dukhobors leave for Russia, there is a significant risk that these monumental sites will be destroyed all together.

Some of the Dukhobors in Dmanisi still meet for prayers. They also established a cultural NGO, the Centre for Russian language and Culture (ISKRA). Dmanisi is a multi-ethnic district, and the Dukhobors are well-integrated. Intermarriage is common, and the Azeri, Armenian, Dukhobor and Greek children go to Russian schools together (although there are very few Dukhobor children left). Most of the Dukhobors are pensioners whose main source of income is the state pension, 38 GEL per month (approximately 20 USD). They have garden plots, but do not keep independent farms. The majoritarian MP from Dmanisi has helped establishing a charity canteen where most of the Dukhobors go to eat lunch. In Dmanisi the main concern of the Dukhobors is the destitute socio-economic situation and the fact that many elderly needs to be taken care of. They also nurture a wish to open a museum where they can exhibit traditional clothes, photographs and furniture.

Approximately 50,000 Dukhobors live in Canada and 100,000 in Russia.²⁴ Occasionally these Dukhobors come to visit their fellow Dukhobors in Georgia. Especially the Canadian Dukhobors are active, and assist financially for example in keeping the *Sirotskiy dom* intact. They also publish a journal, ISKRA, where the Georgian Dukhobors contribute with letters. The historical conflict between the Major Party and the Minor Party seems to have been forgotten by the Georgian Dukhobors and their brethren in Canada. But still there are big cultural differences between the Canadian pacifists that preach vegetarianism and absolutism and the Georgian Dukhobors who conduct Georgian military service, like hunting and drink alcohol. Living in completely different ideological state systems and under diverse socio-economic conditions has created a significant social distance between them. One religious Dukhobor woman referred to a meeting with Canadian Dukhobors like this: “Canadians have different traditional clothes, and when they eat one person prays with a loud voice at the dinner table. We all pray silently together, without a leader. They say that they do not drink or eat anything. Still they drank alcohol and ate everything we put on the table when they were here. But they didn’t dare to drink our water even though it is fresh water from our holy springs.”

The Georgian Dukhobors could be considered a diaspora from Russia since they were forced to leave in the 19th Century. But they often identify with Georgia. Surely, they are

²⁴ The two biggest web sites are <http://www.doukhobor.org/> and <http://dukhhobors.narod.ru/>

Russians, but not *Russian* Russians. The landscapes around the Dukhobor villages are their main points of identification. This is the place where their ancestors lived and fought against ill-willing ‘tatars’; where they protested against the tsar by burning arms, and here is the *Sirotskiy dom* and the grave of their most influential leader, Lukeria Kalmykova. Some Dukhobors refer to four mountains around the Ninotsminda *rayon*, and note that this is the mental demarcation of their Dukhobor homeland: Dukhoboria. These mountains are called the Svitoi Kurgan (Holy Kurgan), Sinii Kurgan (the Blue Kurgan), Ivanisov Kurgan and Didi Abuli. According to some, Abraham is buried on top of Svitoi Kurgan. Each summer some Dukhobors honour this grave.

Since the Dukhobors were governed by Lukeria Kalmykova in the 19th century the Gorelovka Dukhobors has largely been headed by female leaders.²⁵ However, today the leadership of the Dukhobors is vague and unclear. In 1997 the former *kolkhoz* chairperson Lyuba Goncharova arranged a resettlement of about 300 Dukhobors to Bryanskiy *oblast* in Russia who then left Gorelovka. This created a reorganisation of the Dukhobor community, since Goncharova had been both the chairperson of the *kolkhoz* and the chairperson of the Dukhobor community. In 1997, Fyodor Goncharov was elected chair of the *Dukhoborets* cooperative, while Tatyana Chuchmayeva (a.k.a. Tatyana Tikhonova) was elected the leader of the Dukhobor community. She chairs a council with representatives from different villages. However, this council is quite weak and its leadership is disputed. Many Javakheti Dukhobors are bewildered by the fact that their leader, Tatyana Chuchmayeva refused to arrange a new collective resettlement to Russia. She wants to stay in Georgia, and does not want to take responsibility for the exodus of the last Dukhobors. Another influential Dukhobor woman in Gorelovka is Lyuba Deminova, who is the former head of the *sakrebulo* in Gorelovka. The lack of a distinct leadership is something many Dukhobors are worried about. “We need a strong leader, someone that can decide what to do now. Misha [Mikheil] Saakashvili is a strong leader. Maybe you could find someone in Tbilisi to lead us? It does not have to be a Dukhobor, just a person that knows what is right,” as one old atheist Dukhobor asked while being interviewed.

It is common that elderly Dukhobor people refer to Communist times with nostalgia: “We worked hard together in the *kolkhoz*. The collective working spirit was very good; we ate together and shared everything with joy,” was something many old Dukhobors commented. Communal farming is an important part of Dukhobor traditions. Before the collectivisation

²⁵ M. V. Beria and S.V. Beria, *Dukhobors in Samtskhe-Javakheti*. (Tbilisi State University: Department of Slavic Languages, 2004).

process started Dukhobors were living under the *mir* system (see above). They were allotted lands depending on the size of the families. Which lands they got were decided on the basis of a type of lottery that took place every fifth year. There existed a strong collective spirit: Work or perish.

Today Dukhobor farmers have their own lands, but the agricultural cooperative *Dukhoborets* provides the Gorelovka Dukhobors with a sense of collective security. The cooperative is weak and non-profitable, but still it provides a small sum of income to most of the remaining Dukhobor families in Gorelovka. It also functions as a social security institution for the entire community of Dukhobors. As one of the leading Dukhobors explains it, the credo of the cooperative is “to help the Dukhobor community”. Some elderly people get pensions and assistance with harvesting; other farmers can borrow a tractor for harvesting, or occasionally borrow a small sum of money.

In 1997 the cooperative had 700 workers, owned 1,700 cattle (cows and calves included), 2,500 sheep, 60 horses, 30 pigs and 500 chickens.²⁶ During the 1990s the cooperative was producing different kinds of dairy products, cultivating seeds, potatoes, wheat and barley (the barley was used for feeding the animals). Currently, the cooperative employs about 60 Dukhobors and has about 630 cattle (cows and calves). The machinery is old Soviet equipment, all in all eight functioning machines for harvesting plus six horses. The workers earn about 200 GEL per month (approximately 110 USD), but the salary depends on how productive they are. Milkmaids, for example, earn according to how many litres they milk per day. In addition there are tractor drivers, shepherds, one book-maker, one administrator and one chairperson. Today the cooperative only produces milk. The Dukhobors sell this milk for 0,40 GEL a litre (0,22 USD) to local cheese-producers. The expenses for petrol, seeds, pesticides and fertilisers are too high for making it profitable to sell any products in remote market places. This is, of course, a problem they share with most farmers in Ninotsminda *rayon*.

At present the future of the cooperative is challenged in three ways: the Dukhobors' lease contract is disputed by the local authorities, the cooperative's registration in the Entrepreneurial Registry is incomplete²⁷ and it has a tax debt originating from the *kolkhoz* times which leaves the cooperative on the verge on bankruptcy. If the cooperative closes most Dukhobors in Gorelovka

²⁶ Melikishvili, Lia, *Latent Conflict in Polyethnic Society*, Caucasian Centre for Peace and Development, 1997, 26 at <http://www.cipdd.org/cipdd/MELIKISHVILI/contents.htm>.

²⁷ The registry is located at the Regional Tax Department in Akhaltsikhe.

are likely to give up the struggle for making a living in Gorelovka and leave for Russia. To be sure, the absolute majority of them are already applying for Russian citizenship. If the cooperative continues to function, however, it will be considered a better choice for the Dukhobors to stay, since they are provided with a money income and still have a collective point of security. To be able to explain why the cooperative is threatened it is important to understand the situation in Ninotsminda *rayon*, the agricultural reforms that are taking place in Georgia and the interrelations between Armenians, Dukhobors and Georgians.

III. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION IN NINOTSMINDA RAYON

Ninotsminda *rayon* is part of the Samtskhe-Javakheti *mkhare* (province) situated in the southeast of Georgia. It borders both Armenia and Turkey. Ninotsminda *rayon* is, together with Akhalkalaki *rayon*, also known as Javakheti.²⁸ Ninotsminda *rayon* is situated in one of Georgia's poorest regions. The climate is harsh, and a significant share of its territory is covered by high mountains. Ninotsminda town, for example, is situated at 1,950 meters above sea level. During the winter months most villages off the main road are completely isolated from the outer world. Infrastructure, such as roads, medical facilities and housing is in a dire state. The electricity supply is, like in other remote parts of Georgia, highly unreliable. The same can be said about potable water. International organisations such as Mercy Corps and CHF have programs for improving the water quality in the villages, for example in Spasovka. Other villages have big water problems, such as Poka village near Lake Paravani. Most people are unemployed and are completely reliant on subsistence farming.

During Soviet times, a 78 km wide stretch of land constituted a closed border zone along the border with Turkey, i.e. the external border of the Soviet Union. The zone was one of two direct borders between the Soviet Union and a NATO country. The border zone covered the southwestern part of Ninotsminda *rayon* and was subject to strict travel limitations and was not prioritised in terms of socio-economic development. This is an important factor for the region's current isolation and lack of effective means of infrastructure.²⁹

However, the poor state of the roads to and within Ninotsminda *rayon* is now being addressed. Currently the road between Akhaltsikhe (the administrative centre of Samtskhe-Javakheti) and Akhalkalaki is being repaired by the Georgian government, while the rebuilding of the road from Ninotsminda to Tbilisi via Tsalka will start in 2007 as part of the American development program 'Millennium Challenge Georgia' (MCG).³⁰ In addition, an old one-track-railway connection between Tbilisi and Akhalkalaki via Ninotsminda had been restored by the

²⁸ The province of Samtskhe-Javakheti was created as part of an administrative-territorial reform in 1994 by merging the provinces of Samtskhe and Javakheti. Samtskhe has a majority of ethnic Georgian inhabitants, while Javakheti is dominated by ethnic Armenians. Often the inhabitants in Javakheti do not identify themselves with this territorial division, and the merger of Samtskhe with Javakheti is often seen by Armenians as a government attempt at gerrymandering.

²⁹ Øverland, Indra. 2003. *Defusing a Ticking Bomb? Disentangling International Organisations in Samtskhe-Javakheti*. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Paper 646. 2003 at <http://www.nupi.no/IPS/filestore/646.pdf>

³⁰ See www.mcg.ge/english/projects.htm.

summer of 2006, although it is scheduled to run only from May to October. The rest of the year the tracks are blocked by snow.

Overall, the population in Javakheti is predominantly ethnic Armenian. According to the 2002 census the total population living in Ninotsminda *rayon* is about 34,305 persons.³¹ In absolute numbers the total population decreased from 37,895 inhabitants in 1989 to 34,305 in 2002. The decrease in population is due partly to the Dukhobor migration to Russia, but also due to out-migration of Armenians. In Ninotsminda 29 of the 31 villages with election precincts are Armenian, while one village (Spasovka) is mainly inhabited by Georgians resettled from Ajara in 1989-1990 and one is mixed Armenian and Russian Dukhobor (Gorelovka). In 1989, at the time of the USSR census 90 % of the population in Ninotsminda *rayon* were Armenian, 1.2 % Georgian and 8.4 % Russian. From 1989 to 2002 the Armenian portion of the population has increased by 6 % and the Russian has decreased by 5.7 %. (See table 3.)

Table 3: Population Changes in Ninotsminda District 1989-2002

	1989 (numbers)	1989 %	2002 (numbers)	2002 %	+/- (numbers)	+/- (%)
Georgians	454	1.2	476	1.3	22	0.1
Armenians	33,964	90	32,857	96	-1,107	6
Russians	3,161	8.4	943	2.7	-2,218	-5.7
Others	316	0.4	29	0	-287	- 0.4
Total	37,895		34,327		-3,590	

³¹ See *The Results of the First National Population Census of Georgia of the year 2002*; (Tbilisi: State Statistical Department of Georgia; LTD 'Informational-publishing Centre' Book I., 2003).

Armenians have been living in today's Georgia since the early middle ages. Historically they were urban dwellers, mainly engaged in trade and handicrafts.³² However, the time of arrival of Armenians in Javakheti is disputed between Georgians and Armenians. The Armenians claim that there were always Armenians in Javakheti. Georgian historians, on their hand, largely claim that the Armenians arrived only after 1829. This disagreement surfaces for example in disagreements on the historical origin of churches in Javakheti. Several violent incidents have taken place between Armenian locals and Georgian Orthodox groups. Disputed churches exist in the villages of Kumurdo, Satkhe and in Samsari (in Samsari the dispute is over the remnants of a cave church). What can be stated beyond these different understandings is that the absolute majority of Armenians in Javakheti resettled there in the 19th century. The first major settlement occurred after the Russian-Ottoman war in 1828-1829. As a consequence of the war the territory was annexed by Russia, and approximately 30,000 Armenians, who were previously living in the Ottoman Empire, established themselves there. At the same time most of the Georgian Muslims in Javakheti – often called ‘tatars’ – resettled in the Ottoman Empire as they were exposed to Russian Christianization efforts. The second wave of Armenians was expelled from the Ottoman Empire after 1915. Mainly, they were refugees from Eastern Anatolia fleeing from Turkish massacres on Christians. Hence, Armenians make up the majority of the population in Ninotsminda *rayon* (as well as Akhalkalaki *rayon*). They largely belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church, while a minority are Roman Catholics.

The local economy in Ninotsminda *rayon* is dominated by small-scale agriculture. The farmers are mostly engaged in cattle breeding. During Soviet times the collective farms (*kolkhozes*) in Ninotsminda were renowned for their cheese. Some cheese was even exported to Moscow as “Swiss cheese”. Today, however, the large-scale manufacturing of dairy products has been disrupted, due to poor technology and problems of transportation. Most farmers produce only milk and sell to local small-scale cheese producers. In Orlovka, for example, most farmers sell to the cheese factory owned by the acting *gamgebeli* (*rayon* prefect).³³ The high production and transportation costs do not make it worthwhile to produce other cash crops. Pesticides and fertilisers are almost non-existent, which makes agriculture extremely weather sensitive. Thus land is used as pasture or for harvesting hay. There is also a lack of local factories to process

³² Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, Second Edition, 1994) at 86-87;202.

³³ At the time of concluding this report the newly elected *sakrebulo* in Ninotsminda *rayon* had not appointed a new *gamgebeli*.

agricultural products. Most small-scale farmers do not have access to modern technology, and are totally dependent on renting machinery or simply on manual work.

Even though the Georgian Lari has become more widely-used in Javakheti since 2004 the most important currency still is the Russian rouble. In Ninotsminda *rayon* the hard currency inflow has mainly been related to seasonal work in Russia, or cash transfers from migrated relatives. Another important inflow to the local economy is Georgian pensions (38 GEL/month, approximately 20 USD). Since the early 1990s a significant share of the regions' male population were working in Russia as seasonal workers. Unfortunately, there are no official statistics on the numbers of seasonal migrants (many of them are illegal migrants), and how much they contribute to the local economy. A big share of the money transfers are also done unofficially. It can be said that in each Armenian family there used to be at least one man working in Russia seasonally. 5,000 people from Ninotsminda *rayon* are currently working seasonally in the Russian Federation, according to the Ninotsminda acting *gamgebeli*. When it comes to Dukhobors the seasonal work factor seems insignificant. The individuals that left have immigrated to the Russian Federation permanently.

In Akhalkalaki *rayon* the 1,500-2,000 man strong Russian 62nd Division Base is a corner stone of the local economy. A majority of the base's personnel were previously local Armenians. There are also Dukhobors stationed there (in total around 50 Dukhobors are stationed at the military base, these include also civil servicemen and -women). The monthly salary for local servicemen for military service is approximately 300 USD – a significant salary in local terms. In addition the base has employed local support personnel at the hospital, the school etc. Most locals are in one way or another dependent on the local service economy that has developed around the military personnel. The base has also added to a substantial shadow economy market and smuggling of gasoline, petrol and building material.³⁴ The base is a remnant from Soviet times, and has been a thorn in the flesh of the Georgian state ever since Georgia declared independence in 1991. In the Georgian understanding a presence of Russian forces on Georgian territory is undermining the country's territorial sovereignty. A deal on the withdrawal of all Russian troops on Georgian territory was struck in negotiations between the Russian Federation and Georgia facilitated by the OSCE in 1999. However, the decision to withdraw the base was postponed repeatedly by Russia, until in March 2005 the Georgian Parliament and Government

³⁴ See Ekaterine Metreveli. *The Dynamics of Frozen Tension – Case of Javakheti*. (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, Tbilisi, 2004).

took affirmative action. A parliamentary resolution on the closure of the base triggered three mass demonstrations in Akhalkalaki, but otherwise the withdrawal which was initiated in April 2006 has proceeded quite calmly.³⁵ The base is to be fully closed by the end of 2007.³⁶

Apart from being the main source of employment in Akhalkalaki, the base is seen by the local Armenians as a security guarantee. Armenians generally look to Russia for support as a result of memories of the genocide perpetrated against Armenians by Turkey in 1915 and the Nagorno-Karabakh war with Azerbaijan. The base dates back to the 1830's after the Russian conquest of the region from the Ottoman Empire and the Russians indeed established the base as a Christian outpost against the Turks.³⁷ Some of the Russian Dukhobors also see the base as a security factor.³⁸ The base, however, has played a less significant socio-economic role for the Ninotsminda *rayon* compared to the Akhalkalaki *rayon*.

Due to the current difficulties for Georgian citizens to obtain Russian visas, since Russia in 2000 imposed a visa regime on Georgian citizens, the seasonal migration trend have changed and transformed to an extent into permanent migration to Russia. Moreover, considering the dramatic deterioration of the relations between Russia and Georgia during September 2006, there is a risk that a large amount of migrants holding Georgian citizenship working unofficially in Russia might be deported from Russia. They will be refined to small-scale agriculture. The most severe consequence of the deteriorated Georgian-Russian relations is therefore that land ownership is becoming one of the most important sources of income for the remaining Armenian, Dukhobor and Georgian families in Ninotsminda *rayon*. This increases social tension around the land privatisation process that is currently taking place.

Some interviewees believe that entire families will now try to settle permanently in Russia, instead of maintaining the pattern of male seasonal labour migration. An option for ethnic Armenians in Javakheti to circumvent the strict Russian-Georgian visa regulations is to obtain Armenian passports. This is however a complicated procedure. Allegedly the black market price of obtaining an Armenian passport is 1,000 USD, to say nothing about the paper

³⁵ *Civil Georgia*, "Akhalkalaki Residents Rally against Pullout of Russian Base", 2005-05-13. at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=9329>. A small protest however took place when the first military hardware was supposed to be withdrawn in April 2006. See *Civil Georgia*, "Interior Minister Comments on Akhalkalaki Base", 2006-04-26, at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=12415>

³⁶ *Civil Georgia* "Georgia Ratifies Military Treaties with Russia", 2006-04-13, at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=12339>

³⁷ Øverland, Indra. 2003. *Defusing a Ticking Bomb? Disentangling International Organisations in Samtskhe-Javakheti*, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Paper 646. 2003 at <http://www.nupi.no/IPS/filestore/646.pdf>

³⁸ Author's interview.

procedures. In addition, men obtaining Armenian citizenship run a risk of being drafted for military service in case of armed conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh.³⁹

A major obstacle for the integration of national minorities into the wider Georgian society is the language issue. Ninotsminda *rayon* is compactly settled by national minorities, and very few of them are able to speak Georgian. During Soviet times the language of communication was Russian, but today Georgian language is needed, in principle, in all interactions with authorities and at institutions of higher learning. The minorities find it difficult to find jobs in other parts of Georgia without knowledge of the state language, and fluency in Georgian is a requirement for employees in the structures of public administration. Since 2003, however, many people claim that more and more Javakhetians would like to learn Georgian, but that they are not given the proper opportunities to do so. Also the local school curricula do not fully correspond with the Georgian one. Even though some books have been translated into Russian and Armenian recently (among them books in geography, history and chemistry) most schools still use material from Armenia and Russia.

The conditions in Javakheti schools at large also make it nearly impossible for the pupils to qualify for Georgian universities. Therefore the ethnic Armenians for the most part send their children to Armenian universities, while the Dukhobors turn towards Russia. The connections between Dukhobors and the Russian educational system are quite significant. Each year about 70 students from Georgia are able to attend Russian universities within a special study program provided by the Russian Embassy. In 2006 four of them were Dukhobors from Javakheti. In addition the Russian Embassy has sometimes provided humanitarian aid and small financial contributions to the Dukhobors.⁴⁰

1. Local Power Structures

Often the power structures in Javakheti are referred to as a ‘clan system’. This signifies that there are a few families/individuals that have some official political post and own some of the key economic resources in the region – mainly oil, gas, hotels and restaurants – which makes it

³⁹ Author’s interview

⁴⁰ Author’s interview.

possible for them to provide their relatives and friends with socio-economic security.⁴¹ In this way, there are 2-3 families that basically run Ninotsminda *rayon*. Patron-client relationships have developed between these power brokers and the local population. The ‘patrons’ would promise jobs, posts or infrastructure in exchange for votes or loyalty. Often but not always these relationships are based on kinship.

In the early 1990’s the central government had no control over Javakheti. It was run by a paramilitary organisation called *Javakh* (There are several organisations with the same name). By the mid-1990s Shevardnadze had managed to establish control over Javakheti by granting local authorities positions in local administration or helping them to obtain parliamentary seats in Tbilisi. If someone was outspokenly separatist a lucrative job, such as chief of police or parliamentarian was an easy solution to calm them down. This also allowed the main actors to further enhance their patron-client relationships and profit from the substantial shadow economy in the region.⁴²

Top posts in Javakheti at large are still held by ethnic Armenians (such as for example the *gamgebeli*⁴³, the district prosecutor and chief of police). In this way, the interests of local Armenians are taken into consideration by the central authorities. The Dukhobors, however, exert no regional power and, unlike the numerically superior Armenians, are not considered as a potential security threat. They hold no posts in regional or local authorities and are at large isolated from the political participation. Before the ‘Rose Revolution’ the leader of the Dukhobor community, Tatyana Chuchmayeva performed as a deputy *gamgebeli* in Ninotsminda, which enabled her to support Dukhobor interests at the *rayon* level. However, since October 2004, Chuchmayeva has lost this post, and thus the Dukhobors are no longer represented in the *gamgeoba* (district administration). Neither are any Dukhobors politically active on *sakrebulo* level.

When it comes to voting behaviour people generally vote in favour of the current government, since it is perceived to provide more stability. Thus it is not uncommon that the influential individuals that were previously active within Shevardnadze’s Citizens Union of Georgia, CUG, now are active National Movement supporters. In the local elections on 5

⁴¹ See Jonathan Wheatley ‘Obstacles Impeding the Regional Integration of Javakheti Region of Georgia.’ (ECMI Working Paper No.22, September 2004) at http://www.ecmi.de/download/working_paper_21b.pdf.

⁴² Ekaterine Metreveli, *The Dynamics of Frozen Tension – Case of Javakheti*. (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, Tbilisi, 2004).

⁴³ One deputy *gamgebeli* post is however held by an ethnic Georgian.

October 2006, the ruling National Movement was the only registered party in the Ninotsminda *rayon*.⁴⁴

For the purpose of this paper the differences between Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda are worth keeping in mind. In Akhalkalaki discussions are more politicized, and the organisations that sometimes raise claims for autonomy are all based in Akhalkalaki (such as United Javakh or Virk). Demonstrations against the Russian base withdrawal and Georgian educational reforms have taken place there⁴⁵, and not in Ninotsminda. Residents from Ninotsminda might participate in these demonstrations, but they are normally not organisers of such events. Locals are more concerned with the local power balance in Ninotsminda which is mainly related to land disputes and governed by a few power brokers (notably the local majoritarian MP and the *gamgebeli*). Another example of how Akhalkalaki is more politicized is how regional power positions are more contested there. From 1993 to 2004 the *gamgebeli* of Akhalkalaki was changed six times, while the same man, Rafik Arzumanyan, was *gamgebeli* in Ninotsminda during the entire period. After the Rose Revolution, however, Arzumanyan was dismissed and the former chief of police, Mels Bdoyan replaced him as ‘acting’ *gamgebeli*.

⁴⁴ Surprisingly, Akhalkalaki *rayon* was one of only two *rayons* in Georgia (Dusheti was the other) where an opposition party got more than 30 percent of the vote. However, the Akhalkalaki results seem more to do with discontent of the individuals on the list, rather than discontent with the National Movement at large.

⁴⁵ *Civil Georgia*, “Protesters Raid Court, University in Akhalkalaki.” 2006-03-11, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=12044>

III. THE PROCESS OF LAND PRIVATISATION IN GEORGIA

1. Background on Land Reforms in Georgia

During Soviet times all agricultural lands were owned by the state; lands were cultivated by *kolkhozes* and *sovkhoses* but ultimately owned by the state. Following Georgia's independence, all lands in Georgia, therefore, were owned by the newly formed Georgian state. Only eight days after the civil war ended in January 1992 an interim Cabinet of Ministers issued a decree that redistributed land from the former collective farms to private owners. The decree stipulated that all Georgian rural homesteads should get a maximum of 1.25 hectare (ha) of land for free. Individuals that had not been working in *kolkhozes* or were urban dwellers could get a smaller amount of land. This land redistribution process made it possible for people to grow food for their own families. Local commissions were established to redistribute the available lands in the *rayons*, including Ninotsminda. The process was only completed in 1998, due to the turmoil in the Georgian regions.⁴⁶

In Gorelovka village, however, the land commission decided that no lands would be privatised. Dukhobors were in majority in the village, and at that time they had no wish to own private land; they preferred to continue the existence of the *kolkhoz*. With Georgian independence and after several decades of Soviet rule, the Dukhobor community now had a new central point of reference for the community. While the *Sirotskiy dom* used to be the most important point of identification of the Dukhobor world, the agricultural cooperative had by 1992 become their hub. One of the strongest propagators of keeping all land within the *kolkhoz* was the Dukhobor leader and *kolkhoz* chairperson, Lyuba Goncharova. However, as a result the Georgians and Armenians that by then resided in Gorelovka had difficulties in feeding their families. Hence, the exclusionary politics exerted by the Dukhobor community in Gorelovka discriminated the Armenian and Georgian newcomers. They were only allocated a household

⁴⁶ One homestead was one family, and land was therefore not distributed to individuals. The distribution process was also dependent on how much land that was made available, and the quality of the land. See *Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Georgia* #48 as of 18 January 1992. See also Resolution #128 as of 6 February 1992, #290 of 10 March 1992, #39 of 16 January 1993 and The Law on the Ownership of Agricultural Land of the Parliament of Georgia of 22 March 1996. An analysis of the situation was compiled for ECMI by the 'Association for Land Owners Rights Protection' called "Legal Analysis of the Rights of National Minorities and Eco-Migrants in Land Tenure Issues". This report can be provided from the ECMI upon request.

plot, i.e. a small parcel of land attached to their houses. If they were provided with work at the *kolkhoz* they were forced to sign contracts where they promised to refrain from claiming any land for their private usage.⁴⁷ The Dukhobors claim that the newcomers were able to join in on the cooperative, but then they had to pay an initial share, a 'pie'. However, no Armenians or Georgians did this. In the Armenian understanding, they were not invited at all. This situation remained until 1996, when Eduard Shevardnadze's government decided that all remaining state *kolkhozes* should be abolished, and that *kolkhoz* lands should be leased.

Just like in the rest of Georgia the dissolution of the *kolkhozes* in the other former Dukhobor villages continued in a dubious and non-transparent way. Machinery and cattle was stolen, taken away or sold to pay different debts. The final outcome was that a few powerful persons had lease contracts for the majority of the lands, while the majority of the former workers were left with small parcels of land, sometimes only the 1.25 ha that were redistributed based on the 1992 decree. This was, for example, the case in Orlovka where one influential local Armenian family was able to rent more than 600 ha of the former *kolkhoz* lands.⁴⁸ In most cases unpaid debts or taxes still belong to the abolished *kolkhoz* structures. According to the local tax authorities, out of the former 30 *kolkhozes* and 2 *sovkhoses* in Ninotsminda *rayon* only 4 have been properly liquidated.

The case of Gorelovka was different. Instead of taking apart the former *kolkhoz* structure the Dukhobors in Gorelovka decided to keep the communal structure. Thus, they reformed the old *kolkhoz* to a new agricultural cooperative called *Dukhoborets* that was made the legal heir of the old *kolkhoz*. The cooperative is however not properly registered in the Entrepreneurial Registry. According to the Regional Tax Department in Akhaltsikhe the registration of the cooperative in 1997 was incomplete, and if the cooperative is not properly registered by the end of 2006 the tax inspection will liquidate the *Dukhoborets* cooperative. To legalise the cooperative a small 'pie' (share) must be deposited on the cooperative bank account.⁴⁹ From 1997 to 2002 the *Dukhoborets* cooperative was utilizing most of the former *kolkhoz* lands without any formal contract with the *gamgeoba* (district administration). According to the

⁴⁷ Melikishvili, Lia, *Latent Conflict in Polyethnic Society*, Caucasian Centre for Peace and Development, 1997, 23 at <http://www.cipdd.org/cipdd/MELIKISHVILI/contents.htm>.

⁴⁸ Out of which 110 ha was arable lands, 311 ha hayfields and 200 ha pasture

⁴⁹ In particular, information is lacking on the founders, members, the authorized capital of the cooperative and the initial share payed by the members. Article 3,5,65 and 66 on the Law on Entrepreneurs has according to the tax inspection been violated.

chairperson Fyodor Goncharov this was because the local authorities had refused to sign contracts with the *kolkhoz*. The procedure of signing contracts with local farmers was an immense source of unofficial income for local authorities all over Georgia. Sometimes farmers with little income or bad connections were refused to sign lease contracts all together. Most private farmers eventually managed to set up lease contracts for their lands with the Ninotsminda *gamgeoba*. The Dukhobor families from other villages in the region for the most part signed private contracts. In Spasovka, three out of the four remaining families have a common rent contract on 12 ha that they harvest together. Some of the respondents also confirmed that they had had trouble with getting proper lease contracts. Since they largely do not trust the local authorities they try to be extremely law-abiding so that there are no loopholes for delegitimizing their contracts.

2. The Dukhoborets Contract

In 2002 the then *gamgebeli* Rafik Arzumanyan agreed to sign a lease contract with the *Dukhoborets* cooperative in Gorelovka. According to the contract the cooperative is leasing 4,290 ha out of the 7,700 ha that the Soviet *kolkhoz* had had.⁵⁰ Back in 2002 there were about 700 Dukhobors in Gorelovka, out of which 504 remained in 2006. However, this contract has now become a disputed document. The proper procedure for establishing a lease contract is that the land department of the Ninotsminda *gamgeoba* should first decide on leasing the lands, and then the *gamgebeli* signs this administrative act. After this internal procedure the *gamgebeli* signs a contract with a leaser. Within this contract it must be specified what lands that will be leased (with a map) and during which period. Finally, this document has to be signed by the *gamgebeli*, the leaser and the head of the *gamgeoba* land department and registered by the land department.⁵¹ However, the *Dukhoborets* contract falls short of both the initial lease decision made by the *gamgeoba*, and a proper map delineating exactly what lands are leased. It also lacks a proper signature of the Public Registrar and a registration number from the Public Registry. It seems that none of these mistakes can be blamed on the cooperative. Rather these mistakes fall

⁵⁰ 1,700 ha arable lands, 1,225 ha hayfields and 1,365 ha pastures.

⁵¹ Today this department does not exist anymore; it is replaced by the Public Registry.

under the concept of ‘administrative trust’,⁵² meaning that the responsibility for creating a legal lease document lies on the authorities and not on a private person or entity.

This situation is far from unique. The legality and the registration of the contracts emanating from this period are often questionable. Even a quick glance at the lease contracts in the Public Registry archives in Ninotsminda *gamgeoba* shows that most contracts from this period are in disorder, half completed and with more or less understandable maps. Even according to the employees themselves, the staff of the previous regional administration simply did not know how to register or archive lease contracts. Their explanation as to why the *Dukhoborets* contract lacked proper registration and signature was that “probably they did not pay enough pocket money“. Since 2003 the procedures at the Public Registry have been somewhat improved.

3. The Privatisation Process

In 2005 the Georgian parliament adopted a resolution on privatization of agricultural lands owned by the Georgian state. Some lands are exempted from privatisation: pastures, cattle driving routes, lands of water funds, lands of forest funds, recreational land, and lands protected for historical, cultural, religious or ecological reasons.⁵³ When it comes to privatising agricultural lands that is in a 500 meter range from Georgia’s external borders, special permission is needed from the Ministry of Economic Development. The criteria that are used to determine whether such special permission is granted remain somewhat obscure. The personnel at the land department in Ninotsminda work on the understanding that a 500 m range applies on the borders with Armenia and Turkey.

According to the Ninotsminda acting *gamgebeli* Mels Bdoyan, there are 24,500 ha agricultural lands in Ninotsminda *rayon*, 8,800 ha of which are already under private ownership. This was the result of the 1.25 ha reform from the 1990s. 6,700 ha are on lease contracts while 9,000 ha are not officially leased. Included in these 9,000 ha are the 1,700 ha leased by the *Dukhoborets* cooperative for cultivation. As of September 2006 only 125 ha of land in Ninotsminda *rayon* have been privatised on the basis of the 2005 Law on Privatisation of

⁵² See Article 9 in *The Administrative Code of Georgia* (On Promises by Administrative Bodies).

⁵³ See Law of Georgia, *On Privatisation of Agricultural Land Owned by the State* as of 8 July 2005.

Agricultural Lands according to the *gamgeoba's* land department. 60 ha of these were privatised by the *gamgebeli* himself. The first auctions are planned to be held in December 2006. In theory all lands are owned by the state (the Ministry of Economic Development), but in practise the absolute majority of the agricultural lands are at the district *gamgeoba's* disposal. Therefore the privatisation process for the most part is conducted at *rayon* level.

In the privatisation process priority is given to the persons who are already leasing lands. They are offered to buy their contracted lands at a cost based on the current land taxation system. For example, if the land tax is 17 GEL per ha per year the leaser has to pay the tax cost times ten. In this example the cost per ha is $17 \times 10 = 170$ GEL (82 USD). If the buyer wishes, the payment can be extended over a period of maximum nine years. Initially only 20 % must be paid. In addition, the buyer has to pay for a cadastral map of the lands. This map, which has to be bought from a private company, often exceeds the price for the land.

If the leaser does not want to buy the lands, or if it is not leased it can be sold on an auction by the *gamgeoba*. Initially a special auction is conducted, where only individuals that are registered in the *sakrebulo* can participate. This auction is conducted by the *sakrebulo*. Because of the ongoing local governance reforms and restructuring of the Georgian *sakrebulos*, however, it is unclear who will be invited to the auctions – if it will be only the villagers from the abolished *temi* (village cluster) *sakrebulos*, or the new *sakrebulo*, i.e. the entire population of Ninotsminda *rayon*. If the land is not sold to the locals, an open auction will be held at the *gamgeoba*. In an open auction any Georgian citizen can make a bid (foreigners cannot own Georgian agricultural lands). The information about what lands will be privatised, and when the auction will be held has to be publicly announced one month in advance. According to the Georgian legislation on privatisation of agricultural lands two thirds of the income will end up in the *sakrebulo* budget, and the rest in the central state budget. Due to local governance reforms in Georgia it is however unclear how the auctions will be conducted, and where the revenues will end up. Probably the revenues will go directly to the newly formed *sakrebulos*.

In this privatisation process there seems to be a noteworthy difference between legislation and implementation. The central authorities have few mechanisms to control how transparent, fair and adequate the process proceeds at *rayon* level. In the case of Ninotsminda *rayon*, local officials have limited knowledge of Georgian legislation, and often less incentive to inform the local inhabitants or act according to the books. Most local officials only speak Armenian and

Russian, and do not understand the official information/ legislation in Georgian. The local population is even less informed about the legislation in force and practically lives in an information vacuum. Hence, there are many ways for local officials to take private advantage of the fact that local farmers mostly do not know anything about land privatisation processes. One way is to speed up the privatisation process by telling the contractors that the *gamgebeli* will cease their contract immediately. If the farmer is unable to buy the land he leases, and he is not informed about the possibility of extending the payment over nine years, he may turn down the privatisation offer. Then the land is put on auction and gets privatised by someone else. If the small scale farmers are not aware of their rights they are likely to give up their right to buy the land they currently lease. Another possible major infringement on the rights of the local farmers is not properly informing about what lands that will be available for auctions.

In many cases the lease contracts are not in order, like in the case of the *Dukhoborets* cooperative. As mentioned, in some cases the local authorities even leased lands to several users at the same time. This confusion can be another way to turn down a farmer's wish to privatise his lands. However, according to the Georgian legislation even incomplete contracts give the farmers the right to privatise their leased lands. A popular comment from local officials is "Well, this problem occurred before the 'Rose Revolution'. So it is really not our fault, and we cannot do anything about it." However, according to Georgian legislation the current regional administration is responsible for the mistakes conducted by their predecessors.

It is not the purpose of this paper to outline all the different possibilities for inventive local officials to violate the legislation on privatisation of lands, but there are numerous. Here, it is important to understand that the rights of small scale farmers without influential friends can easily be violated in this process. If the farmer does not speak Georgian, and live in such remote *rayons* such as Ninotsminda this is an imminent problem.

Since the signing of lease contracts was often completed in a non-transparent manner, the large-scale farmers that profited from the *kolkhoz* dissolution can now profit from the land privatisation process. With their lease contracts in order and money in their pockets they can buy lands at favourable prices. The small scale farmers often cannot afford to speak up against this, since they are dependent on the big scale farmers or the regional power brokers for income. Either the wife is working as milkmaid for the bigger farms in the village, or the husband is

giving a handout during harvesting, or they are dependent on selling milk to big scale cheese producers.

One Armenian respondent who was upset about this injustice had taken things into his own hands. He persuaded a rich farmer in Ninotsminda to give him the right to redistribute 200 of his 1,000 ha. His plan is to divide this land among local villagers that he and his companions had identified as the people most in need. However, newcomers and non-Armenians were not considered. The details of the plan were quite intricate, and will probably be carried out so that each beneficiary gets 0.08 ha. This Robin Hood initiative evidently has its advantages, but unfortunately it still works within the existing exclusionary patron-client system. None of the actions are conducted in a transparent and legal way.

4. The Privatisation Process in Gorelovka Village

Already in 2002 the Armenian farmers were upset that the *Dukhoborets* cooperative managed to sign a contract for the lion's share of the village lands. Since then the head of the Gorelovka *sakrebulo* has shifted from a Dukhobor to an Armenian, and the local and regional authorities have gradually become more on the side of the newly-arrived Armenians who now make up the majority of the village population. To make matters worse, for the moment the *de facto* land usage in the village is unclear. The *Dukhoborets* cooperative was not utilising all of the leased hectares that was on their contract. Local Armenians argue that the Dukhobors were using or subletting most of the lands, while Dukhobors claim that since 1997 they have continuously let the local *sakrebulo* administer a significant share of their lands, in order to let Armenian villagers use it. According to the chairperson of the *Dukhoborets* cooperative the Armenian farmers could dispose of 800 ha arable lands already by 1997, and by the end of 2005 Armenians were disposing of more than 1,200 ha of arable lands.

Following the July 2005 Law on Privatisation of Agricultural Lands, the Armenian farmers, and the *sakrebulo* and *rayon* authorities have been trying to void the lease contract of the *Dukhoborets* cooperative. According to the contract they lease the land until 2012. In May 2006 the *gamgebeli* Mels Bdoyan sent a letter to the President's Plenipotentiary Representative for Samtskhe-Javakheti in Akhaltsikhe where he explained that the contract was illegal, and that the Armenians needed the land more than the Dukhobors did. Since the Dukhobors had only 500

milk cows and the Armenians had more than 3,000 cows he was arguing that the lease contract had to be invalidated. In addition, the *gamgebeli* noted that the *Dukhoborets* cooperative was subletting some of its lands to farmers from Kakheti, so therefore they had more land than they needed.

However, the *gamgeoba* never sent an official letter to the *Dukhoborets* cooperative to terminate their lease contract. Instead, a public meeting was arranged in the village of Gorelovka in the early summer of 2006. About 30 people were present when the Public Registrar informed them that it was of utmost importance to start a redistribution of lands and a consequent land privatisation. After this meeting a commission was formed. Originally there were three Armenians and three Dukhobors in the commission, but the Dukhobors left the commission after they had just initiated the work. “We could not influence the process, so there was no point in being part of the commission,” as one of the Dukhobor commission members said. First a list was made on what lands each farmer had from before, then the farmers could request how much lands they wanted. After this, the commission went on to redistribute the lands that the Dukhobor cooperative had been leasing from the *gamgebeli*. However, there were no clear criteria for the distribution of lands. Sometimes it was depending on family size and sometimes on request. Initially the *Dukhoborets* cooperative was trying to keep 800 ha, then they reduced their claims to 600 ha but in the end they were entitled to dispose only of around 450 ha. The rest of the lands have been distributed among the Armenian, Dukhobor and Georgian families in Gorelovka. The majority of farmers in Gorelovka now believe that the redistributed land plots are theirs to keep. But they have received no official papers on land leasing, and have no legal rights to this land. Neither are they aware of how a formal privatisation process should take place. The former local *sakrebulo* is claiming that they will conduct a special auction where the farmers will be able to buy their allotted lands, but there are no legal guarantees that these farmers will actually get the land. In addition, according to Georgian legislation the *Dukhoborets* cooperative still has the legal right to dispose of these lands.

In the village most farmers - Armenians, Dukhobor and Georgian – are discontent with the redistribution. While the commission members claim that the Dukhobors got lands first, the Dukhobors deny that this was the case. “People that were close to the people in the commission got the most lands, and we Dukhobors did not get more or better lands than anyone else. Rather the opposite is true,” as one Dukhobor commented on the situation. The commission has so far

not made any list public of who got what lands. After insisting the author of this paper was shown a scabbled text book where it was impossible to see who got what lands and why. The head of the commission admits that people got lands depending on how persistent they were. This complete lack of transparency increases the tension between the Armenians and Dukhobors, who all feel left out from the best lands, gossiping about neighbours that might have gotten many hectares since they are cousins of the people in the commission, etc.

The tense situation is also worsened by an exceptionally bad hay harvest this year (2006). On average the farmers were only able to harvest one tonne of hay per ha. The hay prices have increased markedly, from 100 USD to 150 USD. Sometimes one ha can generate up to three tonnes of hay. Approximately 2.5-3 tonnes of hay are needed to feed one cow per winter. Normally, one cow is worth 700-800 USD but since the hay costs so much many farmers have to sell their milk cows. They simply cannot afford to pay for the hay. The chairperson of the *Dukhoborets* cooperative estimates that they have to sell almost half of their milk cows to survive the winter. This has, of course, led to a point where the price of a cow is approximately the same as it costs to feed a cow for one winter, 400-500 USD. During harvesting there were also several incidents when Armenians and Dukhobors started fist-fighting over what lands they could dispose of. The chairperson of the *Dukhoborets* cooperative claims that they managed to harvest only 380 ha out of the 600 ha they were initially promised. The Dukhobors even called for the police several times, but the police did not intervene. According to the police the lands were not at the *Dukhoborets* cooperative's disposal, and therefore they could do nothing.

Since the documentation is in a mess it is at this point impossible to analyse to what extent the officials in charge of the redistribution were really giving their relatives or friends privileged access to the lands. It also seems impossible to get a complete overview of who was actually using what lands before Summer 2006.

5. The Tax Debt

The general disorder also existed when it came to registration and payment of taxes. Due to ignorance, poor management of the registration process and corrupt practises of the local authorities the majority of the farmers paid incomplete taxes from 1991 to 2004. Before the 'Rose Revolution' the *Dukhoborets* cooperative was functioning within the framework of this

largely corrupted system characterised by a *laissez faire* attitude of the local administrations. According to the Ninotsminda tax department, however, the Dukhobors were the most honest tax payers in the region. Since 1996 they have been paying more than 300,000 GEL in taxes (approximately 165,000 USD).⁵⁴ In 2004, the Georgian tax authorities started more fervently to collect unpaid taxes dating back from the early 1990s. The period 1991-1996 was chaotic and most *kolkhozes* did not manage to pay taxes at all. Today these *kolkhozes* have either been liquidated or simply have no property or assets to pay their debts with. In contrast, since the *Dukhoborets* cooperative is the legal heir of the Gorelovka *kolkhoz* it is legally obliged to pay these debts. It would have been possible within legal realms for the Dukhobors to create a new legal entity that did not inherit the debt, but this was not done. Therefore, in principle, the *Dukhoborets* cooperative is obliged to pay debts from the early 1990s that now has grown to more than 4 million GEL according to figures provided by the regional tax department in Ninotsminda. ECMI has not been able to investigate the accuracy of this amount. There is no doubt that if the claims for payment of the tax debt are made, the cooperative would go bankrupt. In addition, the tax debt makes it futile for the Dukhobor cooperative to legalise their lease contract and their registration at the entrepreneurial registry.

It is possible for the *Dukhoborets* cooperative to complete the registration of the cooperative and to legalise the lease contract so that the leased lands of the cooperative could be privatised. But since the cooperative still has a major tax debt these actions would serve no real purpose. Both a proper registration of the cooperative at the Entrepreneurial Registry and the privatisation of the leased lands demands that assets must be reallocated to the cooperative account and that the land will be registered as revenues. Hence these assets would disappear into the bankruptcy of the cooperative. Therefore the combination of the tax debt, the disorder of the registry and the disputed lease contract creates a deadlock for the *Dukhoborets* cooperative.

⁵⁴ Author's interview.

III. THE DIFFERENCE IN PERCEPTIONS

As Dukhobors continuously have left for Russia since 1990, more houses were made available and the inflow of Armenians increased. There were several reasons: Gorelovka village is situated along the main road in Ninotsminda *rayon* and is therefore more easily accessible also during the winter months compared to the remoter villages of the region. In addition, Gorelovka has some of the best agricultural lands in the district. The Armenians immigrating to Gorelovka often came from remote, mountainous villages that are more isolated from the central road, where the water situation is bad, or the lands are not as productive as in Gorelovka. However, these Armenians were not able to work on the Dukhobor cooperative, and were not given extra lands. The initial resentment on the part of Dukhobors towards Armenians in the beginning of the 1990s created extra tension between the Dukhobors and the Armenian settlers in Gorelovka. While the tension has been defused in other formerly Dukhobor villages, the situation has been worsening in Gorelovka.

The origin of the current tension between Dukhobors and Armenians in Gorelovka village is clearly related to access to agricultural lands. But it is reinforced by different perceptions and social differences. At the social level there is almost no interaction even though Dukhobors and Armenians live next door to each other. Dukhobor families are less traditional than the Armenian families. Throughout Soviet times Dukhobor women often held high positions in the *kolkhoz*. Today, the two leading Dukhobors are both women. The Armenian families have a more traditional structure. Men are breadwinners, and women stay at home. Social life is highly regulated. Women should not smoke or drink in public or be alone with men to whom they are not related. At the same time the Armenians are less passive in the local politics and are taking independent initiatives, for example by opening shops in Gorelovka or starting cheese factories.

According to the perception of many Armenians the Dukhobors have managed to keep a dinosaur Soviet *kolkhoz* alive against all odds. They do not consider the *Dukhoborets* cooperative a new legal entity, nor do they think that the Dukhobors have any special rights to keep these agricultural lands. In their view the state owns the lands, and it should be privatised without benefiting the Dukhobors further. As the former head of the Gorelovka *sakrebulo*

expressed it: “I don’t understand why they want this cooperative anyhow. It is not even profitable.”⁵⁵

In order to give newcomers access to agricultural lands, local Armenians have pushed the *Dukhoborets* cooperative to give them more lands. They are convinced that the Dukhobors will leave for Russia in the near future, and mostly have little regrets about trying to guarantee lands for their families and relatives. They are less upset about the situation than the Dukhobors, and tend to see it more like a transitory phase.⁵⁶ At the same time, some Armenians fear that if the Dukhobors houses are emptied, the Georgian government will settle ethnic Georgians in these villages in order to change the demographic balance in Javakheti. For them the worst case scenario would be if Meskhetian Turks are compactly resettled in the *rayon*.

The Dukhobors, for their part, often see the Armenian newcomers as intruders on their ancestral lands. A typical comment is “I had no problems with Armenians before, but these *Pokatsi* [ie. People from Poka - a mountainous village that many of the resettled Armenians came from]...do not care about any laws, they steal our lands and our hay, and they insult our girls when they are walking in the village.” For the Dukhobors the cooperative is an essential part of their Dukhobor identity. It is a communal institution created by Dukhobors. Since the relevant positions in the local administrations are mostly occupied by Armenians and Dukhobors are unrepresented in the local government bodies, the Dukhobors seek to protect their own interests by maintaining the *Dukhoborets* cooperative. They believe that the fact that many of their members have left throughout the 1990s does not make their cooperative a less legitimate leaser of the *gamgeoba* lands. When Armenians settlers try to put pressure on them to give away lands, they have often reacted negatively. They claim that they own this land. During collectivisation their parents gave away their ancestor’s lands that were “bought with gold in the 19th century”. “Now that the *Pokatsi* keep on coming here, helping their cousins and uncles to get lands we don’t feel safe anymore, and we know that the local authorities are on their side.”

The Armenians rather stress the internal strives and the passiveness within the Dukhobor community. “Dukhobors complain that we, *Pokatsi*, destroy their community. But I think they are to blame themselves, by fighting internally and by migrating to Russia. The Armenians that have arrived in the village have done good things for this place. Before we came there were no shops, for example.” During the 1990’s the Armenians used to be the underdogs in Gorelovka

⁵⁵ Author’s interview.

⁵⁶ Aleksei Krindach, 'Fighters for Soul from Javakheti', 14/11/2001 at www.religion.ng.ru

village. By 2006 they have managed to establish farms and small agricultural businesses so that they are on the level of the Dukhobor families. They are better integrated into local structures, and participating in the local political processes, while the Dukhobors are for the most part isolated from the local authorities in the *rayon*.

As mentioned above, one external factor that affects the interrelationships negatively between Armenians and Dukhobors is the decline in agricultural productivity. According to local farmers, the productivity of the lands is only about one third of what it was during Soviet times. Since the farmers cannot afford to diversify their crops, or to use fertilisers or pesticides, the land has gradually become less fertile. This feeds suspicion and envy; farmers assume that someone else got 'the good plots' instead of concluding that the lands are less productive. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has, within its Samtskhe-Javakheti Development Programme, somewhat improved the situation by rehabilitating the irrigation systems in the main villages of Ninotsminda *rayon*.

1. Resettlement to Russia

As mentioned, currently more than 500 Dukhobors are on a collective list applying for citizenship to the Russian Federation. The Russian authorities are preparing a substantial resettlement program where transportation and settlement in different regions of Russia are taken care of. The recipient regions are divided into three different categories depending on their level of socio-economic development. The Dukhobors that choose to resettle in less attractive regions will also receive social assistance. Resettlement is planned to start by 2007.⁵⁷ If this collective resettlement of an absolute majority of the remaining Dukhobors will take place it will be another weapon for the Russian Federation in the propaganda war that is currently taking place between Russia and Georgia.

However, most Dukhobors are reluctant to leave for Russia. If asked, respondents tend to say "I don't want to go and leave our ancestor's graves behind, but if everyone else is going I will leave too." As Gorelovka Dukhobors have a strong sense of collective identity the idea of

⁵⁷ A special inter-departmental commission is created to carry out this decree. See *Decree of the President of the Russian Federation on the Voluntary Resettlement of the Nationals, who are abroad, to the Russian Federation*. 2006-06-22. Decree Number 637. at <http://document.kremlin.ru/doc.asp?ID=034305> and <http://document.kremlin.ru/doc.asp?ID=034999> on the composition of the inter-departmental commission.

being left behind in, according to their perceptions, a hostile Armenian environment frightens most Dukhobors. A majority of them seem to nurture a hope that a strong leader will once again materialise to take the necessary decisions about their staying or going. Currently, the community is in a restless waiting mode. However, it might be well worth noting that apocalyptic prophecies on the future of Dukhobors are often raised. Already in 1832 or in the 1960s there were researchers concluding that the Dukhobor identity would perish in the near future.⁵⁸ While saying our goodbyes to one middle aged Dukhobor couple, the woman said “You know, we say each year that we will leave for Russia. But then we always stay.”

⁵⁸ See Svetlana Inikova, ‘Doukhobors of the USSR at the end of the 1980s’. 27(3) *Canadian Ethnic Studies*. 1995.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The most important asset in Ninotsminda *rayon* is agricultural lands. Up until now, the privatisation of land has not been a transparent and fair process. Given the extreme socio-economic and inter-ethnic situation in the *rayon* it is of utmost importance that this process continues in a more accountable way. Currently, the local population is living in an information vacuum when it comes to privatisation matters. To respond to the lack of information, ECMI is now developing a project addressing land privatisation matters, supporting local stakeholders with legal advice and information and monitoring land privatisation auctions. The aim of the project is to increase effective public participation and public awareness of privatisation requirements and obligations. The project will be carried out by ECMI in co-operation with Javakheti Citizen's Forum and the Georgian Young Lawyer's Association.

In Gorelovka, the privatisation process is increasing social tension between Dukhobors and the newly arrived Armenian farmers. So far, the actions taken by regional and local authorities have been non-transparent and not according to Georgian legislation. It is of utmost importance to assist in clarifying the current non-transparent and confused situation in the village. The developments in Gorelovka also threaten the future existence of the *Dukhoborets* cooperative and put at stake the future of the Dukhobor community in Gorelovka.

A major threat to the *Dukhoborets* cooperative is a tax debt of more than 4 million GEL (approximately 2.2 million USD). The total assets of the cooperative are at most 1,200,000 GEL (approximately 660,000 USD), so if it is forced to repay these debts the cooperative will have to sell everything and be declared bankrupt. The origin and the validity of this debt however need to be clarified. This tax debt also makes it futile to register the cooperative properly, and privatise a share of their lands. Therefore it is of utmost importance to abolish the tax debt so that the *Dukhoborets* cooperative can continue to exist.

The *Dukhoborets* cooperative is put on a list of insolvent debtors by the Samtskhe-Javakheti regional tax authorities. This list will be presented to a special commission under the Ministry of Finance that will have the authority to abolish debts. As of November 2006 the tax authorities in Samtskhe-Javakheti have yet to provide the central tax authorities with the necessary documents for proving the cooperative's insolvency and consequently send the documents to the Ministry of Finance. ECMI recommends and urges the tax authorities to

continue with this process. ECMI also urges the Minister of Finance to abolish this debt and thereby support the future existence of the Dukhobors in Georgia.

The cooperative's rights to its leased lands have also been violated by regional and local authorities. If the cooperative is liquidated, it seems likely that the majority of the remaining 504 Dukhobors living in Gorelovka will emigrate permanently to Russia. Even if a few elderly Dukhobors remain the emigration will represent a death blow to the last compactly settled Dukhobor community in Georgia.

The tension between Armenians and Dukhobors is amplified by the decline in agricultural productivity in Ninotsminda. In order to find sustainable solutions it is necessary to increase the agricultural productivity in one of the most impoverished *rayons* in Georgia. Therefore it would be advisable for the Georgian government and international donors to start some type of micro-credit program for the farmers in Ninotsminda *rayon*.

In order to protect the religious places of the Dukhobors it is necessary to give the *Sirotskiy dom*, the place where they burned their weapons and the Dukhobor necropolis the status of cultural heritage. Thereby, these locations would at least enjoy a minimal type of protection regardless of whether the Dukhobor community would choose to emigrate to the Russian Federation. Currently there are no proper documents on the ownership of the *Sirotskiy dom*. ECMI therefore recommends that the status of the house is clarified.

A collective choice of the Dukhobors to apply for Russian citizenship would be another trump for the Russian Federation in the ongoing dispute between Georgia and Russia. Supporting the Dukhobors would be a positive act by Georgian authorities showing that Georgia respects their national minorities at large, including their Russian minorities.