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## THE QUESTION OF JAVAKHETI

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Armenians are the second largest ethnic group and the most numerous ethnic minority in Georgia. Mainly they live in Tbilisi and also in Javakheti - a province in the southern part of Georgia, lying against the borders with Turkey and Armenia, where Armenians make up over 90% of the population. Beginning from the early 90's, when Georgia became engulfed in total chaos, problems have emerged in the relations between the authorities in Tbilisi and several of the political organisations in Javakheti. To this day, jurisdiction of the centre is considerably limited in Javakheti, yet following the experiments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the central authorities prefer to refrain from any radical actions in this region. The situation is made more complex by the presence of the Russian military bases in Javakheti and the problem of Meskhetian Turks seeking to repatriate to Meskheti(1), from where they were forcefully deported in 1994. The future of the province will most probably be determined by the (now developing) new geopolitical order in the South Caucasus, the major determining factors of which are the new communication routes and pipelines.

### Introductory notes

Historically, Armenians in Georgia were engaged chiefly in commerce and craftsmanship and, respectively, lived predominantly in the cities, principally in Tbilisi. According to the results of the 1897 census, Armenians made up 18.7% of the population in the Tiflis province, 25% in the Tiflis district and almost 75% in the city of Tiflis(2). In those days, Armenians owned the largest enterprises and wholesale storages warehouses, and also the biggest capital. Besides, they played an important role in the city's cultural life, which at the end of the last century, before Baku oil boom began, was Transcaucasia's busiest and most important centre.

Armenians have compactly resided in Southern Georgia for almost 170 years. When after the war with Turkey (1828-1829) Russia obtained the Black Sea coast from the Kuban to Poti and the largest portion of the

Georgian provinces of Meskheta and Javakheti, the Armenians living on the Turkish territory began to massively resettle to the territories of the Russian empire. It was during this process that Armenians settled in the Akhalkalaki district (Javakheti), where they soon outnumbered indigenous Georgians; in 1903, the majority of 54,816 people living in 150 villages of the district were Armenian). After 1829, 2,536 Armenian families resettled to the neighbouring Meskheta (centre-the city of Akhaltsikhe) from Erzerum, while smaller groups of their compatriots had lived there earlier as well; in 1913, 41,873 Armenians lived in the Akhaltsikhe district (16,499 in the city, the rest in 16 Armenian villages). On the eve of the Bolshevik coup, Armenians amounted to as much as 82% of the entire population of the Akhaltsikhe district.(3)

Under the Soviet rule, the share of ethnic Armenian population in the Georgian SSR slowly, albeit systematically declined, forming the average of 10% (still maintaining the second place numerically after the Georgians). In 1926, Armenians made up 11.5% of the population of the Georgian SSR, 11% in 1959 and 9% in 1979. Armenians constituted 34.1% of the population of Tbilisi in 1926, 21.5% in 1959 and 12% in 1989. (4) According to the 1989 census, 437,211 Armenians lived in Georgia (8.1% of the total population). Their majority (roughly 150 thousand, i.e. 12% of the city's population) lived in Tbilisi and also in Abkhazia (about 75 thousand, i.e. 14.6% of the population of the Abkhaz ASSR).(5) The largest group, however, ( about 200 thousand) lived in Javakheti (over 90% of the population) and Meskheta (about one third of the population).

Administratively, Javakheti is divided into two districts - Akhalkalaki (covering 1,235 square km and home to the population of 69,103) and Ninotsminda (covering 1,353 square km and the population of 37,895) (6). On the whole, the province with 2% of the country's population, occupies 3.7% of the country's entire territory. The city of Akhalkalaki has 15,192 inhabitants and the city of Ninotsminda (former Bogdanovka)- 6,944. In the past eight years since the last census, the region's ethnic composition has altered - the number of ethnic Russians living in some of the villages in the Ninotsminda district close to the Armenian border declined (these were Old Believers, chiefly Dukhobors and Molokans whose ancestors settled in the Transcaucasus way back at the beginning of the 19th century; some of them decided to return back to Russia). In terms of ethnic composition, Javakheti remains a purely Armenian region - even the most reserved Georgian sources estimate the number of Armenians at 91.3% of the population(7), while Armenians themselves claim that this figure is as high as 97%.

Meskheta is divided into four districts: Akhaltsikhe (covers 1,010 square km and has 54,822 inhabitants), Adigeni ( 799.5 square km and 21,282 inhabitants ), Aspindza ( 825.3 square km and 13,432 inhabitants), and Borjomi ( 1,189 square km and 38,973 inhabitants). The province (of Meskheta) occupies 5.5% of Georgia's entire territory and accounts for 2.4% of its population. The population of the district centres is as follows: Akhaltsikhe - 24,650, Adigeni - 1,239, Aspindza - 3,783, Borjomi - 17,764. A number of Russians left Meskheta in the recent years, as did approximately 700 Ossetians after the conflict broke out between Georgians and Ossetians(8). Armenians make up one third of the

Meskheta population. Their number in the Borjomi district, however, is lower than in the Akhaltsikhe district. On the whole, Armenians constitute approximately 40% of the population in Meskhet-Javakheti.

In the night November 14-15, 1944 Meskhetian Turks(9) , more than 115 thousand people, were deported from South Georgia, predominantly from Meskheta(10) (man, who fought in the war shared their fate later). All of them were forcibly transferred to the Central Asia, chiefly to Uzbekistan. Later, unlike many other deported peoples, Meskhetian Turks were not allowed to return home The explanation the Soviet authorities offered was the absence of the technical means to arrange the repatriation, and those who returned spontaneously to Meskheta were sent back. Even those who tried to visit their native lands as tourists were denied the right to do so.

After the Soviet Union fell apart, the bid of the Meskhetian Turks to return home was obstructed by the authorities of the independent republic. The new Georgian Government under Zviad Gamsakhurdia offered Meskhetian Turks to either register as Georgians or settle elsewhere outside the region (other than Meskheta). This testified to the official policy of „Georgianisation of the state(11). Today Georgian authorities declare their readiness to resolve the problem, yet point to several pertinent issues. In July 1996, pursuant to the decree by President Shevardnadze, the state commission on the matters of the Meskhetian Turks was created. The then National Security Minister Shota Kviraia stated that return of the Turks to the lands bordering with Turkey and Armenia would give the „interested parties with their own strategic interests in the Caucasus an opportunity to use the „Meskhetian card . Kviraia also linked the question of the Meskhetian Turks with the increasing propaganda of Islam in Georgia(12). Official Tbilisi is apparently mindful of the unpredictable reaction of the Georgian Armenians to the repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks.

Geographical conditions distinguish Javakheti and Meskheta from the rest of the country. Because of the harsh climate, the former is often called „Georgia's Siberia : in winter the temperature here drops to minus twenty degrees and snow may not melt for six months. Javakheti sits on an elevated mountain plateau surrounded by extinct volcanoes and the region is often shaken by earthquakes. The city of Akhalkalaki is situated at the altitude of 1,750 above sea level, while several villages in the Ninotsminda region are located above the altitude of 2,000 metres. In the 19th century Javakheti was a place of exile. The largest part of Meskheta - the cradle of Georgia's statehood - is located in the Akhaltsikhe hollow whose slopes are covered with apple trees, vineyards, and wild forests. Further up, as in Javakheti, there are alpine plains. For permanent residence Javakheti and Meskheta are not very popular in Georgia.

### **Javakheti during Perestroika and Gamsakhurdia's rule (1985-1991) and the beginning of Shevardnadze's rule.**

Javakheti is the least invested part of Georgia. There are too few roads and railways and the existing ones are in poor repair and the city infrastructure is underdeveloped. One of the reasons for this, apart from the huge discrepancies between the centre and the peripheries typical for

all former Soviet Republics, was the expansion at the end of the 50's of the frontier zone along the Turkish-Soviet border to 78 kilometres into the country (in other places this zone was 7 to 27 kilometres wide). The special heightened regime of control in the frontier zone (where the visa to enter was only issued to those invited by the residents of the zone), with the exception of part of Javakheti, was exercised on the entire territory of Meskheti up until the beginning of Perestroika(13). The local Armenians perceived this also as a policy designed to limit their contacts with Armenia. Only in the second half of the 80's when tensions began in the Nagorno-Karabakh, the Government of the Georgian SSR adopted a program of the social and economic development of the population in Javakheti. This, perhaps, was an attempt to prevent possible turbulences in Javakheti against Tbilisi.

The events in Nagorno-Karabakh catalysed the creation of the Armenian national movement in Javakheti. The two regions have much in common: they are located in the republics neighbouring Armenia, close to the Armenian border, where Armenians represent an overwhelming majority of the population. When the first armed clashes occurred in Karabakh, many volunteers from Akhalkalaki and adjacent villages hastened to help Karabakh Armenians (first volunteers went there as early as in March,1988). Filaret Berikyan, who for the period of four years was in charge of Karabakh issues on behalf of the Government of Armenia, notes that Armenians in Javakheti have a keen sense of national identity: „There were many of them in Karabakh, they even created their own units (14). Along with the increase in the number of volunteers, a large number of weapons was supplied to Javakheti. These weapons remain there in private possession to this day. Some argue that the province is the most heavily armed part of Georgia after Abkhazia.

In 1988 the national-popular movement Javakhk (the Armenian for Javakheti) was created whose influence rapidly grew among the local Armenians. The official goals of the organisation was the preservation of Armenian cultural heritage, science and history of Armenia in local schools, protection of national institutions and also the development of the region. According to David Rstakyan, one of the Javakhk leaders and Chairman of the Coordinating Council of the public and political organisations of Javakheti, initially Russians, Georgians and Greeks too were among the Javakhk leaders. Only after Gamsakhurdia came to power, did the organisation assume the role of a protector of the rights of the region's Armenian population „frightened by the threats on the part of the Georgian nationalists (15). From the very beginning, however, the goal of Armenians in Javakheti was at least to obtain autonomy, if not to unite with the region with Armenia.

The centrifugal aspirations of Armenians (as well as Abkhaz and Ossetians) had from the very start been supported by Moscow. The aim of their policy was to maintain control over Georgia which then resolutely strove to gain independence, yet being weakened by those centrifugal movements, was forced to seek help in the Kremlin. In its turn, Yerevan tried to quell the secessionist aspirations of Armenians in Javakheti. Armenia wanted to avoid fight on two fronts and realised that in the event of conflict with Georgia, it would find itself virtually blockaded (the borders had already been sealed by Azerbaijan and Turkey). Both

processes (Russia's support of the centrifugal trends in Javakheti and opposition of these trends by Armenia's official leadership) intensified in the subsequent years.

During Gamsakhurdia's rule, Javakheti was beyond the jurisdiction of the centre. The most serious conflict between Tbilisi and Akhalkalaki concerned prefects (the position introduced by the president. The borders of the prefectures coincided with those of regions): Armenians refused to accept three consecutive prefectural candidates sent from the capital because they were Georgian. This was done in the following manner - the armed crowd gathered in front of the administrative building in Akhalkalaki, and did not let candidates from Tbilisi into the building. The protests were organised by Javakhk. David Rstakyan offers the following explanation: „Prefectures were introduced in the period of transition from totalitarianism to democracy, but we considered that they led to dictatorship as they consolidated the executive power. We attached critical importance to the nationality of the prefect since in a non-democratic state with no civil society and where no fair rights and freedoms are guaranteed by the Constitution, the fate of a nation is contingent upon individuals serving in this position. We did not trust the central authorities and therefore wanted an Armenian to be their representative in Akhalkalaki. Georgia to this day remains a non-democratic state, although a certain positive signs have appeared(16).

Before Tbilisi agreed to make some concessions, the Provisional Council of Representatives governed the region. According to Tigran Karakhanyan, Secretary of the Akhalkalaki City Assembly and member of the Javakh movement „The Council was set up in the conditions of a political vacuum that emerged after we rejected the prefects imposed by Tbilisi . In February 1991 each of the 64 villages of the Akhalkalaki region elected their representative and eight representatives were elected by the city. Of these the Council (of Representatives) of 24 people was created. The Presidium of seven (among whom one Georgian was a beau geste to Tbilisi) was the working body of the Council. David Rstakyan: "The Council of representatives was not a constitutional organ, but the existing law did not allow us to safeguard our own interests. The Council of Representatives was to function until the office of the prefect was fully manned (all the vacancies filled)". Rstakyan and Karakhanyan do not conceal that the Council which declared itself dismissed on November 15, 1991 when the man at last accepted by the Armenians became the prefect was under full control of Javakheti(17).

At that time, several incidents took place in Javakheti which could have resulted in armed clashes: the armed residents of the Akhalkalaki region did not allow the National Guard to enter their territory, disarmed the unit loyal to Zviad Gamsakhurdia that intended to return to the capital via Javakheti after having accompanied the president fleeing to Armenia after the coup in Tbilisi. One of the meetings of the Council of Representatives voted on Javakheti's independence, however, the idea failed to receive the majority vote in the Council(18). According to the Javakh Armenians, all their actions were purely defensive in nature and were a response to Tbilisi's faulty policy vis a vis ethnic minorities.(19)

During Gamsakhurdia's presidency the question of the frontier zone re-

emerged. Under the new law, the zone was 21 km in width along the entire border. The law, already as a legal act of the independent Georgia was approved by the State Council. According to Tigran Karakhanyan this was against the interests of the Armenian population: „In the frontier zone embracing a large part of our region to the city of Akhalkalaki, building of houses is prohibited. Imagine a family which lives on the border with Turkey and which has five or six children. We have families with many children. Where will they live once the children grow up? This law has nothing in common with international norms (20) According to Filaret Berikyan, Gamsakhurdia intended to settle Georgians in the frontier zone, he encouraged the Georgian population to settle in Meskheta and Javakheti, including the places where the Old Believers in the Ninotsminda district with the aim of creating a Georgian buffer between Armenia and Armenian-populated Javakheti.(21)

On March 10, 1992 the Military Council governing Georgia was transformed into the State Council and Eduard Shevardnadze became its chairman. During the first four years of his rule the centrifugal trends in Javakheti did not diminish (the most serious crisis occurred in 1994 when the Head of State sent his representative to Akhalkalaki). Due to the weakness of the centre, the region remained virtually independent from Tbilisi.

The war in Abkhazia exacerbated the situation in Javakheti: first, most Armenians living in Abkhazia supported the Abkhaz which provoked anti-Armenian sentiments in Georgia. Second, Russia that supported the Abkhaz and Ossetian separatism, could instigate analogous conflict in Javakheti. According to Mamuka Areshidze, Chairman of the Parliamentary Commission on the Matters of the Peoples of the Caucasus, Russia did attempt to incite an armed conflict in Javakheti: such an attempt presumably took place in the autumn, 1993 at the most difficult time for Georgia after the defeat in Abkhazia and Zviad Gamsakhurdia's return to Georgia (22). The Javakh leaders, however, deny this allegation, although they admit their close collaboration with the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki (many Armenians of Javakheti work at the base). David Rstakyan asserts that if outside forces had attempted to enter Javakheti then, they would have encountered the adequate response. He may be referring to the Mkhedrioni fighters who in 1993-94 terrorised Georgia, yet they had never crossed the border of the Akhalkalaki district. In 1995, after the parliamentary and presidential elections in Georgia, the situation in the region began to stabilise.

In the elections of November 5, 1995 Javakheti voted for Eduard Shevardnadze's Citizens Union, Aslan Abashidze's Union of Revival and also for Jumber Patiashvili, the communist candidate and Shevardnadze's main contender in the presidential elections. David Rstakyan who ran for the parliament and had his confidants in the polling precincts, alleges that Patiashvili won in the city as well as in rural areas, later however, the results were falsified and Shevardnadze emerged as a winner.(23)

### **On the Status of Javakheti**

The Constitution of Georgia adopted on August 24, 1995 states that the administrative-territorial arrangement of the country based on the

principle of the separation of powers shall be determined after the full restoration of Georgian jurisdiction on the entire territory of the state (Article 2, paragraph 3)(24). This has not been achieved yet. Though, for more than three years now, the new administrative arrangement of the country is being formed. Pursuant to Decree No 237 of 1994 of the Head of State, the institution of Representatives in the regions was introduced (this administrative-territorial unit is of a higher order than the regions remaining from the soviet system, corresponding to the historical provinces of Georgia).

The territories settled by the Armenians were included in the region of Samtske-Javakheti (or Meskhet-Javakheti) embracing the historical Meskheti and Javakheti (six districts). Gigla Baramidze was appointed the State Representative. According to a member of the Javakhk movement, creation of the region within such borders is aimed at counterbalancing the Armenian majority in Javakheti, since in Samtskhe-Javakheti Armenians no longer represent the overwhelming majority.

Several days after the issuance of Decree No 237, T. Karakhanyan chaired the Akhalkalaki City Assembly session. At the session protests were voiced that the Decree threatened the rights of the Armenians, besides for even the most trivial things one would have to travel to Akhaltsikhe, the capital of Samtskhe-Javakheti. Dissatisfaction was also caused by the fact a Georgian was appointed as the State Representative which was reminiscent of the conflict involving the prefects. Many members of the Assembly believed that under such circumstances declaration of independence was the only alternative.(25)

D. Rstakyan argues that creation of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region is anti-constitutional. First, the Presidential Decree of 1994 provided creation of the institute of the State Representative(s) and not creation of the regions, and, second, the change in the administrative arrangement should be effected through a referendum.

In 1997, members of the Javakhk began to collect signatures under the document of the following content: „Dear Javakhks! The Coordinating Council of the public and political organisations of Javakheti, in accordance with Paragraph 1 of Article 67 of the Constitution of Georgia (no less than 30 thousand electors have the right of legislative initiative), (26) are organising the collection of signatures for the discussion in the Parliament of the following issues:

1. discontinuation of the process of creation of the anti-constitutional region of Samtskhe-Javakheti;
2. upon the passage of the chapter of the Constitution on the territorial arrangement of the country, to grant Javakheti the respective status of the administrative-territorial unit within the framework of the Georgian Constitution.(27)

According to D. Rstakyan, 12,000 signatures were collected before September 1997 in the Ninotsminda district and 30,000 in the Akhalkalaki district. D. Rstakyan alleges that the process of the collection of signatures was obstructed by police and special services. „There were cases when police went to the homes and threatened people, saying we

intended to use the signatures for other purposes abridging the text of the appeal. One representative of the special services came to me and said that indeed the Constitution provided the collection of signatures, yet a special permission was required for that. (28)

Leaders of the Javakh declare that their aim is not uniting Javakheti to Armenia or the independence of the region. „We will not follow suit of the Nagorni-Karabakh says D. Rstakyan and clarifies that the movement only aims to secure the rights for the local Armenians compatible with the rights of ethnic minorities in a „civilised world and also to provide guarantees that would ensure that these rights would be observed. Rstakyan considers the article of the Georgian Constitution on the „cultural autonomy and giving Javakheti a status of the subject of the future federation to be the best guarantor. The Georgian press, however, regularly writes about „the fifth column of Javakheti blaming the Javakh leadership in separatist aspirations. Although harshly critical in tone, these publications have historical foundation: apparently, the Javakhk did not altogether renounce the idea of the secession of the province from the centre and still sustain this idea as one of the alternatives for the future . (29) According to David Rstakyan, however, „an administrative-territorial unit within Georgia is only required in order to have Armenian schools and have conditions which would be conducive to pesuing the Armenian way of life. Georgia is a member of the UN and therefore the same standards of the protection of national minorities must be observed here as are accepted by other democratic nations. Of course, Georgia has its specificities and one can argue about the concrete forms in which the cultural autonomy shall be exercised: we could work out a draft and submit it to the Parliament for consideration. Unfortunately, at present the Georgian government is ignoring us, and this is not a normal situation. We do not oppose Georgia's political system, we do not call for war or strife, and yet we are prevented from the collection of signatures. This compels us to doubt the sincerity of attitude toward us. (30)

It cannot be ruled out that ignoring the demands of the Armenians by the Georgian authorities can lead to civil disobedience. The paramilitary organisation „Parvents (the Armenian name of lake Paravani in Javakheti) is a serious proof that Javakheti is preparing for different options. According to M. Areshidze, weapons that Parvents possesses initially belonged to the Russian base and were used in Nagorni-Karabakh.(31)

The existence of paramilitary organisations in Georgia are confirmed by the Deputy Minister of Defence General Guram Nikolaishvili: pursuant to the temporary agreement on the status of the Russian bases on the territory of Georgia (reference is to the first agreement which Russia did not ratify and the next agreement was not ratified by Georgia -V.G.) we agreed to the bases if Russia fulfilled three conditions: to guarantee Georgia's territorial integrity; to assist in the building of Georgia's national army; to disarm and dismantle the armed groups on the Georgian territory which were not part of either Georgian or Russian regular armies. None of these conditions have been met. Today we control Javakheti, but we encounter certain difficulties. (32)

The activities of Javakhk are supported by the majority of Javakheti's

Armenian population. Officially the movement has 5,000 members. There are differences within the movement regarding the strategy of activity, though this is concealed and the organisation pretends to be monolithic. The most radical members of the Javakh or those who are under the influence of the Armenian party of Dashnaktsutsyun demand that the province be united with to Armenia (officially this party does not exist in Georgia). There is also a pro-Georgian wing in the Javakhk represented by those close to the MP from Javakheti and his brother, the prosecutor of the region (in the Parliament elected in 1995, Armenian minority has four MPs one from each - the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts and two from Tbilisi elected by proportional representation through the party list of the Citizen's Union of Georgia) and also those from the entourage of the head of the region. According to M. Areshidze, representatives of the most extreme wings of the Javakhk do not play a significant part in the movement.(33) It must be noted also, that Russia and Armenia try to exercise influence on the Javakh.

The Georgia authorities have no definite idea as to „what must be done in Javakheti . Partially, this is due to the ongoing disputes regarding the model of the state. These disputes between the advocates of centralisation and federalisation have been underway ever since the declaration of Georgia's independence. The former, being the overwhelming majority, are prepared to accept a special „federative status of Abkhazia and Ajara alone (some also of the South Ossetia). They argue that federalisation threatens Georgia with dismemberment as it encourages other ethnic minorities (primarily Armenian in Javakheti and Azeris in the Marneuli region) and also such sub-ethnic groups as Mengrelians and Svans to seek autonomy from the centre. In their turn, the federalists argue that in the situation where Georgians only constitute about 70% of Georgia's population, national minorities are compactly settled and the provinces differ considerably from one another (Mengrelians and Svans speak their own languages), the only way to preserve the country's integrity would be to grant the provinces wide rights. Shevardnadze is apparently inclined to this latter conception. In September 1997 the President instructed M. Areshidze , supporter of federalism to prepare a draft law on the national minorities. Evidently, the passage of this law will not be smooth and painless for the supporters of centralism.(34)

The absence of concrete response of the official Tbilisi authorities to Armenia's propositions and the Javakhk activities can be explained by their desire to avert another secessionist war after wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia: having been confronted with Abkhaz and Ossetian separatism, Georgia „chooses to be cautious with regard to its southern part with the Armenian population, Russian military and a border with Armenia .(35) The impression is created that for tranquillity and peace, Tbilisi for the time being reconciles to the fact that it does not control part of its own territory (something similar is happening with regard to Ajara). But Tbilisi can only pursue such policy while the state structures are being strengthened on the one hand, and new transport communication routes are being developed on the other. Then these issues will have to be resolved.

### **Socio-Economic Situation in Javakheti**

In Javakheti there are still no signs of growth evidenced in Georgia's economy recently: privatisation has not begun, and not a single kilometre of the roads, the worst in the country, has been repaired, numerous industrial enterprises continue to be idle. The living standards in Javakheti are lower than in the rest of Georgia. In the 90's the province has been neglected, the necessary infrastructure is absent, unemployment is high. At the end of 1997 only 20% of the former employees worked in the local cannery.

Rstakyan and Karakhanyan claim that Tbilisi is intentionally ignoring the province. They blame the central authorities for removing equipment of the idle enterprises and allowing the looting of the property of bankrupt collective farms. According to them, not a single dollar from the credits and targeted financing received by Georgia has gone to Javakheti, and the ministry officials sent western investors to other parts of the country (especially Tbilisi and Rustavi). The province has no lobby in the capital as MPs from Javakheti occupied pro-governmental position.(36)

Despite the fact that Tbilisi continues to pursue the policy of non-interference in the affairs of Javakheti, and by doing so finds itself in a deadlock, as if conceding to the demand of the province's autonomy. Leaders of the Javakheti declare that when they achieve the status of a subject to the Georgian Federation for Javakheti, they would immediately attract investment and the life of the population would improve.(37) According to the federalists, in order to avoid tensions in the nearest future caused by dire material difficulties that the population is experiencing, the central authorities must invest in Javakheti as much and as soon as possible. It must be noted, however, that in the given situation of the absence of full control of Tbilisi over Javakheti, taking such steps entails great difficulties and requires extreme flexibility.

The population of Javakheti predominantly live cultivating private plots and shuttle trade with Turkey, some are engaged in supplying petrol to Armenia, others in the extraction of stone (which mostly ends in Turkey; apart from uncontaminated environment, the chief resources of the province are: marble, bazalt and construction stone). Few of the residents found jobs in small private enterprises: bakeries, filling stations, shops. (38) Officially, unemployment is low, but reliable data are absent. Unemployment benefit is eight Lari (approximately \$6.15), while a kilogram of pork on the food market in Akhalkalaki costs 4.5 Lari. The shortage of jobs compels many to go abroad, mostly in Russia. Many also leave for permanent residence to Armenia(39).

Along with Georgian Lari, Russian rouble is also in circulation in the province. Roubles are supplied to the market by the military from the Russian base that are paid in roubles. In most of private shops and restaurants Lari is accepted with reluctance. These difficulties in the circulation of the Georgian national currency is evidence that the military base is the largest and most important „enterprise in Javakheti. In summer of 1997, the Georgian president signed Decree No 348 „on the circulation of the national currency Lari on the territory of Georgia and on urgent measures to establish Lari as the only legal payment tender (40). The Decree directed ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence to agree with relevant bodies of the Russian Federation the issue of payment of the

salaries to the military serving on the Russian bases in Georgia in Lari. The Representatives in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli (with the Azeri majority) were instructed to create special commissions monitoring the circulation of the national currency in their respective regions.

Armenians from Javakheti do not speak Georgian, but Georgians there speak fluent Armenian. Leaders of the Javakheti consider that this has to do with the ethnic composition of the provinces and doubt the success of the state program of teaching the state language to the non-Georgian population(41). Most of the children in Javakheti go to Armenian schools. The Ministry of Education of Georgia approved that the history of Armenia be taught there, and the text-books for this purpose are sent from Yerevan on the basis of inter-governmental agreement. After leaving school, young people as a rule continue higher education in Yerevan's universities and other institutes of higher learning and some study at the Armenian faculty of Tbilisi Pedagogical Institute. A branch of Yerevan University opened in Ninotsminda, Akhalkalaki receives Armenian TV and the newspaper *Javakheti* is published occasionally. According to Filaret Berikyan, Javakheti's Armenians enjoy full cultural autonomy(42), however, Rstakyan indicates that the number of Armenian schools is inadequate and emphasises the absence of the guarantees for the protection of the rights of Armenians.(43)

### **Javakheti in the Context of Regional Policy**

Ever since regaining independence, Georgia has striven to play the role of a bridge between the west and the former soviet Central Asia and serve as a transport corridor for the transportation of the Caspian oil and gas and be a factor of stability in the Region. The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh enhanced Georgia's role: when Armenian-Azeri border remains sealed, overland communications of Armenia with Russia and Azerbaijan with Turkey are carried out through Georgia. Striving towards independence from Russia and western orientation have been the priorities of Georgia's foreign policy. Following the defeat in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia was forced to join the CIS and agree to have Russia's military presence. Under the new circumstances, Shevardnadze's aim became to maintain balance in the contacts with two groups of states: Turkey, Azerbaijan, Ukraine and the West, on the one hand, and Russia, Iran and Armenia on the other. Georgia managed to preserve good relations with all these countries(44). An agreement was reached between the EU and the governments of France, Georgia and Armenia on the rehabilitation of the road Poti - Khashuri - Borjomi - Akhaltsikhe - Akhalkalaki - Gyumri - Yerevan - Megri (a town on the Armenian-Iranian border). The Minister of Transport and Communications of Armenia Genrik Kochinyan informed the Parliament of Armenia on this on September 11, 1996(45). Georgia simultaneously pursued the policy of integration with the West. Shipping Caspian oil is linked with western investment which would allow her to conduct policy independently from Moscow. In 1996 Georgia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine signed an agreement on the cooperation in the field of construction and exploitation of the transport corridor between them in close cooperation with Uzbekistan and with the view of creation Tashkent-Baku-Kiev axis. The construction of the Eurasian corridor and also the rail-link Kars-Tbilisi(46) are additional signals of the weakening of Russia's control over the region. Investment in oil

requires political stability, but Russia may attempt to destabilise the situation.

Russia has already exerted pressure on Georgia through supporting the separatists and also by imposing its own military presence. From time to time, Russia used these two methods by placing Russian military bases in the places of compact settlement of ethnic or religious minorities. This is the case in Ajara where the Russian Army has a base and leases a military port. The situation is similar in Javakheti (base in Akhalkalaki and Russian border guards on the border with Turkey). If Kremlin decides to preserve South Caucasus in the zone of its influence at any expense, it would try to trigger a conflict in Javakheti. Such conflict would seriously damage Tbilisi's transport plans and would potentially lead to the cooling of relations between Georgia and Turkey.(47)

Events involving Russian base in Akhalkalaki (base No 62 is part of the Group of Russian Troops in the Transcaucasus)(48) proves that such option is acceptable for Russia. Irakli Batiashvili, former head of Georgia's national security service alleges that the motorised infantry division positioned on the base helped in 1994-96 in the illegal shipment of Russian weapons to Armenia through Georgia.(49)

The majority of military at the Akhalkalaki military base are local Armenians who adopted Russian citizenship (various sources estimate their share at 70-90%). The base in Javakheti is, perhaps, the most important employer for the local population. In addition, part of the population earns their living from trade with the military. D. Rstakyan stresses the excellent relations between the command of the base and the Javakh movement (there exists a position of the Deputy Commander in the field of work with the local population which has no analogy in other Russian units neither outside, nor within Russia).(50)

According to Rstakyan, if the Georgian Government demands the withdrawal of the Russian Army from Georgia, the local population would protest, as the base for them is a guarantor of their security. „We are afraid of Turkish aggression. Turks have at every opportunity assaulted us. It was them who in 1915 exterminated 1.5 million Armenians. Georgia is a small country which cannot insure our protection from the Turks. We would agree to the withdrawal of the base only when the world community provides guarantees of protection from the Turks and even in that case we would prefer that the Russian stay since we, the Armenians are Russophils. According to Karakhanyan, the Akhalkalaki military base is strategically more important than the base of Gyumri in Armenia, as it is a counterbalance against Turkey - the NATO member and therefore it is a factor of stability in the region. Karakhanyan notes that Javakhks are in a sense hostages of Moscow and Russia uses us as a bargaining chip, but we have no other option .(51)

Yerevan does not support the idea of Javakhk separatism, despite the fact that Armenians are involved. At any price, it tries to quell the situation in Javakheti, as the conflict in the province would put Armenia in a difficult situation: damaging of the relations with Georgia - the only neighbour apart from Iran whose border is not sealed - would mean shutting off of overland communications via Georgia to the Black Sea and would also

put hundreds of thousands of Armenians living in Tbilisi and other parts of Georgia in a difficult situation. Armenia confronted with Azerbaijan and blockaded by Turkey, cannot afford this. Yerevan is also against the idea of Javakhk that the region of Javakheti must be a separate entity under Georgia's new administrative division and prefers Samtskhe-Javakheti region. This region (specifically its Meskheti part) borders with Ajara with which Armenians have exceptionally good relations (according to some Georgian politicians, better than between Batumi and Tbilisi). Any other administrative division would hamper Armenia's access to the sea.

In late spring 1997 presidents of Georgia and Armenia, Shevardnadze and Ter-Petrosyan met in Javakheti. The joint communiqué stated that the right of local Armenians for cultural autonomy are observed and there are no problems with regard to national schools. The Armenian leader emphasised that attempts to destabilise the situation in Javakheti would not be supported by Yerevan.

The Dashnaktsutyun party is one of the most influential political forces in today's Armenia (the party was established in Tbilisi 1890). After the Bolshevik coup, the Dashnaks worked in emigration and they have great influence among the Armenian diaspora.

Uniting Javakheti with Armenia is in the program of Dashnaktsutyun: „Armenian lands indicated in the Sevr Agreement (the peace agreement of August 10, 1920 -V.G.), also Nakhichevan, Akhalkalaki and Karabakh regions should be part of the united Armenia.(52) Activists and co-thinkers of the Dashnaks are among Armenians of Javakheti, although no one officially admits this.

It is quite likely that comments in the Georgian press regarding Javakhk separatism are inspired by the official Tbilisi: being cautious about radical steps in the province and knowing Yerevan's position (under Ter-Petrosyan), Tbilisi wants to resolve the situation in the country's south with the hands of Armenians. Two years ago after the Congress of the Javakhk, Tbilisi newspapers wrote that the Dashnaks dominated the leadership of the movement. Since Dashnaktsutyun was an opposition party in Armenia, these publications could have been aimed at prompting Yerevan to exert pressure on the Javakhk. Perhaps with this goal in mind, one of the Georgian newspapers reported in August, 1997 about Rstakyan's meeting with Levon Ter-Petrosyan where, reportedly, the date for holding a referendum in Akhalkalaki on the independence of Javakheti was set. According to Rstakyan, he has never met Ter-Petrosyan.

All that is related with the return of Meskhetian Turks to Javakheti will affect the situation in Javakheti. So far, however, this question remains purely theoretical.(53)

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## NOTES:

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1. Under the current new territorial arrangement of Georgia, Meskheti and Javakheti are united in

one region of Meskhet-Javakheti. The other name of the region is Samtskhe-Javakheti. These territories were formerly part of the Samtskhe-Saatabago principality.

2. The same census established that Armenians made up 2.3% of the population in the Kutaisi province (The Russian empire divided Georgia into two provinces - the province of Tiflis and the province of Kutaisi). Overall, Armenians accounted for 9.2% of the entire Georgian population. Refer to: B. Baranowski, K. Baranowski, *Historia Gruzii*, Wroclaw, 1987, pp.170-173; Y.D. Anchabadze, N.P. Volkova, *The Old Tbilisi, the City and its Dwellers in the 19th Century*, Moscow, 1990, p.33.
3. Mirosława Zakrzewska-Dubasova, *Historia Armen*, Wroclaw, 1990, pp.168-179; The Issue (Case) of Armenia. Enciclopedia. Edit. K.S. Khudaverdyan, Yerevan, 1991, A.Melkonyan, article "Akhalkalak", pp 67; A. Melkonyan, article "Akhaltaska", pp 67-68
4. Refer to Anorzej Maryanski, *Przemiany Ludnosciowe w GSRR*, Warszawa -Krako, 1995, pp.185-191
5. According to the census of 1989, 76,541 Armenians (14.6% of the population) lived in Abkhazia
6. Data for 1989
7. Newspapers *Eri* (in the Georgian language), April 10,1991 and the Russian language *Panorama Nedeli* (panorama of the week), No.32, 1997 cite 2.5% of Georgians in Javakheti
8. Information on the refugees from Georgia's regions. Official note of August 15,1996 of the acting Chairman of the Migration Service of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania
9. Meskhetian Turks - a mystery for ethnologists. The present article does not deal with the theory of their origin, yet it must be noted that they are mentioned in the works of Herodotus and Strabo and both Turkish as well as Georgian elements participated in the ethnogenesis of this people. According to the census of 1989, 207.5 thousand Meskhetian Turks lived in the Soviet Union. Refer to: The Peoples of Russia, *Enciclopedia*, edit. V. Tishkov, Moscow, 1994, article Y. Broiso, I. Prokhorov "Turk-Meskhetians", pp.342-344
10. Refer to Vadim Tutunik's "Turks from Meskhetia: Yesterday and Today. This is How it Was." *National Repressions in the USSR. 1919-1952. Repressed Nations Today*. Edited by Svetlana Aliyeva. Vol. III, Moscow, 1993, pp. 145-163.
11. IBIDEM.
12. Nodar Broladze, "Meskhetian Turks are awaiting the opportunity to return. Propaganda of the ideology of islamic fundamentalism is preventing the repatriation." *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, No. 135, July 25, 1996.
13. Meskhetian Turks consider that the 78 km. frontier zone was created with the aim of preventing their return to the native land. Refer to V. Tutunik p. 155.
14. Interview with F. Berikyan. Interviewer V. Guretski. Yerevan, August 28, 1997.
15. Interview with G. Karakhanyan. Interviewer V. Guretski.
16. Interview with G. Karakhanyan. Interviewer V. Guretski.
17. IBIDEM.
18. According to D. Rstakyan, voting on the independence of Javakheti was a response to President Gamsakhurdia's statement during his visit to Akhaltsikhe that Armenians are guests in Georgia. This statement was regarded in Javakheti as the official policy targeted against ethnic minorities. Rstakyan claims that with the exception of this incident, independence was never mentioned "even at rallies"
19. Rstakyan maintains that bloodshed was averted by the "Javakh" which at that time was in full control of the situation in the province. According to Rstakyan,, the conflict would have occurred if the Georgia units had crossed the border of the Akhalkalaki district (this is how war was unleashed in Abkhazia)
20. Interview with Rstakyan and Karakhanyan
21. Berikyan maintains that the Merab Kostava Foundation tried to persuade the Old Believers to leave Georgia and purchased their houses
22. V. Guretski's interview with M. Areshidze, Tbilisi, August 15,1977

23. Interview with Rstakyan and Karakhanyan
24. The Constitution of Georgia adopted August 24, 1995. "Svobodnaya Gruzia", November 7, 1995
25. Interview with Rstakyan and Karakhanyan
26. Under the Georgian Constitution, the right of legislative initiative is vested in the president, members of the Parliament, parliamentary factions and commissions, supreme representative bodies of Abkhazia and Ajara or 30,000 electors
27. Leaflet "Dear Javakhs"
28. Interview with Rstakyan and Karakhanyan. Karakhanyan says that despite the region's "unconstitutional" nature, the formation of its governing bodies is underway where predominantly ethnic Georgians are employed. He claims that most of them, including the drivers are from Tbilisi which increases budget expenditures. According to Karakhanyan, the total salary of the employees of the regional (local government) structures amounts to 40 thousand USD, which is almost equal to the pensions fund of the Akhalkalaki district.
29. Interview with M. Areshidze
30. Interview with Rstakyan and Karakhanyan
31. Interview with M. Areshidze
32. Interview with G. Nikolaishvili. Tbilisi, September 7, 1997.
33. Interview with M. Areshidze.
34. IBIDEM
35. A. Kukhianidze "Armenian and Azeri Minorities in Georgia. On Georgia's Internal and Foreign Policies", *Ethnic and Regional Conflicts in Eurasia. Book I. Central Asia and Caucasus*. (Edited by A. Malashenko, B. Coppiters, D. Trenin). Moscow, Ves Mir Publishing House, 1997, p. 180; The following excerpt from Revaz Sakvarishvili's article should be quoted: "A new conflict is looming in the south of Georgia. Armenian population of the region is demanding autonomy"; The *Segodnya* newspaper reported on September 6, 1996 that "The Georgian leadership does not want to admit the problem (Javakheti-V.G.). Apparently with two unresolved conflicts, Georgia fears the third one".
36. Interview with Rstakyan and Karakhanyan.
37. According to D. Karakhanyan, joint Georgian-Armenian and Georgian-Russian enterprises could operate in Javakheti, using the equipment from the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki. For obvious reasons, the Georgian authorities have no interest in such "joint-ventures".
38. Many local Armenians work at the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki.
39. According to Areshidze in addition to the absence of jobs, excessive population of Javakheti due to the overpopulation represents one of the major reasons for emigration.
40. *Svobodnaya Gruzia*, August 12, 1997.
41. Refer to Givi Inasaridze's "teaching Georgian will be enhanced in Samtskhe Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli", *Svobodnaya Gruzia*, September 6, 1997.
42. Interview with Berikyan.
43. Interview with Rstakyan and Karakhanyan.
44. Georgia is closer with Azerbaijan due to the Transcaucasus transportation corridor and similar problems related with the loss of part of their territories. Because of this Georgia and Azerbaijan both give priority to the principle of "territorial integrity" over the principle of "the right of nations to self-determination." On the other hand Georgia tries to maintain good relations with Yerevan and it managed to remain neutral vis a vis the Karabakh conflict.
45. Refer to the *Lragir* newspaper, September 14, 1996; Transcaucasian Media Project. Annotated Daily Headlines of the Transcaucasian press. - Compiled by the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) in collaboration with the VERTIC-IWRP Media Resource Center in Tbilisi. September, 1996

46. This railway, besides the motorways through Batumi and Akhaltsikhe, is a response to the increase in the trade with Turkey, currently the largest trading partner of Georgia; it would also have great significance for Armenia.
47. Jacek Cichocki, "Rosyjskie zaangażowanie militarne na Zakaukaziu", *Analizy, Ośrodek studiów wschodnich*, No 19, 16.06.1997. The author writes that "Russia's military engagement in the Transcaucasus will in the first place depend on the results of the fight between the power elites in the Kremlin who uphold different conceptions of the policy of the state regarding foreign investment. In the event of opening up of the post-Soviet "geopolitical space" to foreign investors, the role of the military factor in the policy of Russia with regard to the states of the South Caucasus would probably be weakened. If the Russian elite recognises keeping the CIS countries in the zone of Moscow's influence to be its principal aim, Russia would attempt to undertake a number of military actions in the region"
48. One can say that there is no legal basis for the presence of Russian troops in Georgia. During the visit of the then Minister of Defense Pavel Grachev to Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze agreed to the Russian bases, but the agreement with Russia has not been ratified by the Georgian Parliament
49. Giorgi Dvali, "Georgia corrects the geopolitical list. For this Shevardnadze travelled to Armenia", *Komersant -Daily*, May 6, 1997. On the shipments of the Russian weapons to Armenia, refer to: Jacek Cichocki
50. Interview with M. Areshidze
51. Interview with Rstakyan and Karakhanyan
52. *Programme of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation "Dashnaktsutyun"*
53. The Turkish press often writes about the Meskhetian Turks, emphasising that their return home would lead to the escalation of anti-Turkish sentiments among Armenians in Georgia and heightening of tensions in the region. Refer to: "Javakhk Union President's Comments on Article of Turkish Newspaper", *Yerevan Times*, 21 August, 1997

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