

Resolving the Grievances of the Armenians of Samtskhe-Javakheti

FACT SHEET

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The six districts of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region (province) of Georgia and the adjacent Armenian majority Tsalka district



Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti

Samtskhe-Javakheti is one of 12 administrative regions (provinces) in Georgia. A region of 6,400km², it is located in the southern part of the country, bordering Armenia and Turkey. Armenians are 55% of the the total population of Samtskhe-Javakheti (207,600 according to the 2002 census). In its six districts, Armenians are 98% of Ninotsminda, 94.3% of Akhalkalaki, 37% of Akhaltsikhe, 17.5% of Aspindza, 9.64% of Borjomi and 3.4% of Adigeni. Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki are generally considered to form the historical Armenian territory of Javakhk. Located on a high rocky plateau, with (until recently) extremely poor road links, it has been isolated from the rest of Georgia, also because it was a zone of restricted access during the period of Soviet rule, due to its shared border with Turkey.

The solution to their grievances

Grievances are increasing. Demands of Samtskhe-Javakheti Armenians include:

- a) autonomous territorial unit status (with its own directly elected assembly) for Samtskhe-Javakheti and the adjacent Armenian majority Tsalka district within a federal Georgia;
- b) use of the Armenian language in public administration in those municipalities—such as Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda—in which Armenians make up a majority;
- c) an end to social engineering by the settlement of ethnic Georgians from other parts of the country in Samtskhe-Javakheti; and
- d) improved Armenian representation in state institutions.

However, the Georgian government rejects the first two ideas, arguing that to grant autonomy to Samtskhe-Javakheti would risk the disintegration of the country, while giving any kind of official status to the Armenian language would undermine the process of national integration.

Federal Georgia

Armenians' strongest grievance is the inability to use their language in public life. The government's new language policies are a source of strong resentment. Another concern is that the Armenian population is dwindling, putting into question preservation of their identity. Armenians believe they are victims of a policy to shift the region's demographic balance, citing settlement in 1997-2006 of thousands of ethnic Georgians in Tsalka and government plans to allocate funding to buy houses for 220 non-Armenian migrant families. Many believe the government leaves only two unsatisfactory alternatives: to emigrate or accept "Georgianisation."

Dissatisfaction with their position in Georgian society pushes Armenians overwhelmingly to support autonomy as the best guarantee for preserving their ethnic and cultural identity. They argue that federalism can save Georgia from further ethnic conflicts. Furthermore, they believe that political autonomy is the best solution for both Javakheti and Georgia. It would dissolve all the tensions and provide Armenians with the possibility to fully integrate as loyal citizens of Georgia on the one hand, and to preserve their national identity and feeling of security on the other.

Poor representation in all levels of government

National minorities in Georgia are represented poorly in central levels of government and only marginally better in regional ones, though such representation and participation is vital for forging loyalty to the state and "integration of diversity within the state." Many believe state-sponsored discrimination is responsible, that only ethnic Georgians are trusted in influential posts, and they have virtually no chance of getting a job if a Georgian also applies. Minorities complain that ethnic Georgians from elsewhere in the country are increasingly brought in to fill posts previously held by minorities, including Armenians.

The creation of the Samtskhe-Javakheti administrative region in 1995 united Armenian-dominated districts with Georgian majority ones. This, together with the selection of Georgian majority Akhaltsikhe as the administrative capital rather than Armenian-dominated Akhalkalaki, created minority dissatisfaction. Most state ministries' regional departments are now in Akhaltsikhe.

The governors are appointed by the president. Samtskhe-Javakheti has never had a governor of Armenian origin; the governor's Armenian deputy has largely had cosmetic functions. Only three of the governor's 26 staff are Armenians (11%). The same is true for the territorial departments of different ministries. For instance, only sixteen of 82 staff (19.5%) of the tax department in Samtskhe-Javakheti are Armenians.

1. After the creation of appropriate conditions and formation of the bodies of local self-government throughout the whole territory of Georgia, two chambers shall be set up within the Parliament of Georgia: the Council of Republic and the Senate. [...]

3. The Senate shall consist of members elected from Abkhazia, the Autonomous Republic of Ajara and other territorial units of Georgia [...].

Article 4, the Constitution of Georgia

Armenians are well represented in the two municipalities where they are the overwhelming majority. The municipality heads (*gamgebeli*) in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda are ethnic Armenians. Before the 2006 local elections, in Akhalkalaki they were 84% of the municipality staff. Representation is a greater problem in Akhaltsikhe and Aspindza, where ethnic Georgians are the majority. In Akhaltsikhe, where 37 % of the population is Armenian, only one was in the administration. In Aspindza, with 17% Armenians, there were none in local executive state bodies and only one was in the municipal council (*sakrebulo*). In Tsalka only one Armenian worked in the municipal administration even though Armenians are 55% of the population.

In Samtskhe-Javakheti, six of 63 patrol policemen (9.5%) are Armenian. Of 284 criminal police, 72 are Armenian, mostly in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda. The head of the Akhalkalaki police is Armenian but ethnic Georgians hold all other key positions, including the first deputy head of the police, and head of the criminal investigation department. There are no Armenian police in Tsalka and Aspindza and no licensed Armenian lawyers in Samtskhe-Javakheti. Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda each have two Armenian judges, but all judges in Akhaltsikhe, Tsalka and Aspindza are Georgian. In the prosecutor's office, six of 32 (19%) staff are Armenian.

Local observers point out that Georgians also hold the key positions for regulating distribution of wealth and property: for instance, in Akhalkalaki the head of the registration department of the tax office; the department head of the state property management committee, tasked with privatisation issues; and the head of the state registry, responsible for certifying any property sale.

Violation of equality of suffrage

The recent laws on local self-government did not reform municipal borders, which remain as they were defined in 1921. The population and size of municipalities vary greatly; more important, perhaps, the individual electoral units within each municipality are similarly variable in size. In the Akhalkalaki administrative district the ethnic Georgian villages of Ptena (204 voters), Chunchkha (218 voters) and Kotelia (298 voters) are each separate electoral districts which elect one representative. In the Armenian-majority town of Akhalkalaki, 7,052 voters likewise choose one representative, as do 3,246 voters from the six Armenian villages in the Kartikami constituency. In Akhalkalaki seven Georgian villages share five electoral districts, while 58 Armenian and mixed settlements share the remaining seventeen. There is one representative for every 670 Georgian inhabitants, compared with one for every 3,382 Armenians. This delimitation of electoral districts violates equality of suffrage with negative effect on minority representation. Georgian officials reject any allegations of discrimination, but the argument that these are historical electoral boundaries is not a good justification. The issue has been raised in numerous protests in Samtskhe-Javakheti; Armenians cite Tbilisi's reluctance to modify the electoral districts as proof of its intention to limit minority representation in government.

“Georgia’s political culture and attitude towards its minorities is largely characterised by a relatively high and lingering level of ethnic nationalism.... President Saakashvili’s talk of restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity and sovereignty is sometimes also accompanied by nationalistic rhetoric, supported in some cases by a tacit alliance with the Georgian Orthodox Church that has awakened worries of a nationalistic backlash among minority groups.”

NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Sub-Committee on Democratic Governance

Economically lagging behind the rest of Georgia

Increases in the economic output of Samtskhe-Javakheti have failed to keep up with the rapid growth of the economy in the capital city, Tbilisi. This is a reflection of a more general trend observed throughout most of the first decade of the twenty first century in which an economic boom has occurred in the capital, but rural areas have failed to keep up. In 2007, annual turnover per capita in Samtskhe-Javakheti stood at 22.0% of the national average, compared with 35.5% in 2003. A similar picture emerges when we consider production value per capita; this has fallen from 47.9% to 25.7% of the national average in the four years between 2003 and 2007 in Samtskhe-Javakheti. If we rank eleven regions of Georgia (the nine rural provinces, the city of Tbilisi and the autonomous republic of Adjara) according to these two indicators, we see that Samtskhe-Javakheti has held on to eighth place (above only Guria, Kakheti and RachaLechkhumi/Kvemo Svaneti). Given the fact that the overall income in Samtskhe-Javakheti is boosted by industrial enterprises such as Georgia Glass and Mineral Waters Company in predominantly Georgian areas of the province, we would expect that both turnover and production per capita in the predominantly Armenian districts of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda would be amongst the lowest in the country. There are very few enterprises in Javakheti, although a recent exception is the establishment of a garment factory in Ninotsminda by a local businessman who has spent several years in Russia. Overall, in 2007 the output of industrial production per capita in Samtskhe-Javakheti was less than half of the national average.

Samtskhe-Javakheti is a predominantly agricultural region. It is a prime potato-growing area. According to the State Department for Statistics, almost 110,000 tonnes of potatoes were produced in Samtskhe-Javakheti in 2007, which made up 37.4% of all potatoes produced in Georgia. However, production of all vegetables, including potatoes has been falling throughout Georgia in recent years, reducing the overall income for Samtskhe-Javakheti.

Coercion and fear overshadow the negligible positive

One tendency that has been observed in recent years in Samtskhe Javakheti is greater coercive control by the state. In particular, the influence of the Ministry of Internal Affairs has become increasingly pervasive. The security services of the Ministry of Internal Affairs have on a number of occasions questioned leaders of Armenian NGOs and other civic activists in an attempt to “unearth conspiracies” against the Georgian state. There are numerous cases of arrests and persecution of Armenian activists for their beliefs, political views, political actions and similar activities. Local observers claim that Akhalkalaki District Branch of the Provincial Office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs is used as the provincial hub for intelligence gathering and routinely refer to the staff of the Office as “KGB.”

On the positive side, the government of Georgia has made a real effort to end the isolation of geographically concentrated minority communities, both by taking positive steps to improve the infrastructure—a case in point is the rehabilitation of roads and school buildings in Javakheti—and by making an effort to improve proficiency in the Georgian language amongst remote minority communities. On the other hand, the government has done little to overcome the predominantly authoritarian dynamic that defines state-society relations in Samtskhe-Javakheti and has failed to introduce real methods of participatory democracy. In Javakheti, the government continues the policy of the Shevardnadze administration of co-opting wealthy and influential members of the Armenian community to administer the region and supports efforts by this elite to undermine all public movements that threaten its continued hegemony.

The tendency by the authorities of Georgia to treat any grassroots movement organized by members of national minorities with suspicion is counterproductive. The authorities should heed the call of the Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti, that they want integration, but not assimilation.