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**MINORITIES IN THE SOUTH CAUCUSUS**

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Working Group or the United Nations

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## **Introduction**

The South Caucasus located on a strip of land between Russia, Turkey and Iran, consists of three states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. An ethnically intermixed area, it witnessed three conflicts in Nagorno Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia during the demise of the Soviet empire. Legacy of these unresolved conflicts and a fear of potential ones around minority issues persists to this day. However, with so many conflicts around the world, the South Caucasus is an often neglected area on international community's map. The current paper is aimed at providing a background to the situation of minorities in the region and highlight the issues of majority-minority relations which can be a cause of concern.

The paper deals with the current situation of minorities, referring to history only to explain a particular issue. For general historical and political context please refer to the Minority Rights Group Report (2002) on *The South Caucasus: Nationalism, Conflict and Minorities* by the same author.<sup>1</sup> The paper is structured as follows: each country section outlines general issues, such as political framework, access to power and resources, language, education and public attitudes, roles played by the international community and local civil society. It proceeds to briefly describe the situation of the main minorities, and, in cases of Azerbaijan and Georgia, analyses the prospects for resolution of the conflicts in break-away areas. The bulk of the research has been done for the MRG Report with update on developments in 2002.

## **GEORGIA**

### **Overview**

#### *The State and Minorities*

At the time of the USSR collapse, Georgia was - and still remains - the most multiethnic country of the South Caucasus. According to the 1989 census, Georgians constituted 69 per cent of the total, while separate registration of ethnicity for other groups within wider Georgian 'nationality', such as Mingrelians, Laz and Svans, was denied. Armenians, the largest minority, made up 9 per cent and Russians 7 per cent

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Matveeva, *The South Caucasus: Nationalism, Conflict and Minorities*, Minority Rights Group International, London, 2002.

with large concentration in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. There were followed by Azerbaijanis, Ossetians, Abkhaz, Greeks, Jews and others. Since independence Russians, Jews and Greeks are largely gone. Given the internal divisions within the Georgian group and the large presence of ethnic minorities, the issue of defining the nation became a continuing preoccupation since the time of independence in 1991. Two violent conflicts - one in South Ossetia (1991) and second in Abkhazia (1992) - marked this earlier period and remain unresolved.

The Georgian Constitution leaves open the issue a possible federalisation of Georgia, until the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are decided. Ambiguity over constitutional arrangements creates uncertainty. In practice, the idea of federalisation is unpopular, since in the eyes of the Georgian majority the autonomous status of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Ajara led to their *de facto* separation from the rest of the country. As a result, the claims of Armenians in Javakheti for an autonomous unit of their own are discouraged.

Georgian single-chamber parliament does not provide any special arrangements for representation of minorities. At present Armenians have only four and Azeris six MPs in the 235-strong Georgian Parliament. As not all these MPs understand Georgian, it is unclear how they participate in the parliamentary work.<sup>2</sup>

Local government is undermined by the appointment by the President of provincial governors and heads of the local administrations outside the elected system. These posts are in fact an extension of patronage systems outside the capital when officials occupy rent-seeking positions in return for political support. Local power struggles play a pivotal role in who would get the ear of presidential entourage. Although an administrative reform aimed at the creation of larger territorial units has been accomplished, the president still prefers to deal with the heads of local administration directly, as he did in his Soviet days. Local elections held in summer 2002 did little to alter the situation.

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<sup>2</sup> Author's interview with Melik Raisyan, MP from Akhalkalaki, Javakheti, April 2001.

Ultimately, state policies towards minorities in Georgia are hard to determine. The fundamental issue is the nature of the Georgian state. The core issues of identity and independence remain unresolved, making political consolidation of both state and nation problematic. Considerable passion surrounds the issue of whether or not minorities can constitute a legitimate part of the nation, or a group of people defined as Georgians by culture and language should have a pride of place. This dilemma remains unresolved, projecting tension and potential conflict. Moreover, there are persisting doubts about whether independence from Russia is permanent and substantive, whether the new state will eventually take root, or whether some dramatic shifts might reverse the whole process.

Although Georgia contains substantial ethnic diversity, political culture is characterized by an exclusive ethnic nationalism so profound that minorities are not accepted as fully-fledged citizens of the country. Moreover, faith in the viability of autonomy structures located within wider federal arrangements is largely absent, as the separatism of the early 1990s emerged in the areas which enjoyed various degrees of autonomy. Notions of power sharing have no independent tradition to draw upon, while the Soviet experience of ethnically-defined territory has shaped nationalist aspirations. There is little tolerance by majority populations of minorities, who are seen as particularly susceptible to manipulation by outsiders since many of them tend to live in the border areas next to their kin states. This also discourages recognition of the legitimacy of any grievances they might have and discount them as separatism. For their part minorities seldom trust the states to ensure their well-being, and are often tempted to play the ethnic card in their struggle for attention and resources.

Nationalism continues to project a climate of 'Georgia for Georgians' where minorities are expected to feel privileged that they are allowed to reside on the territory of the Georgian state. This creates resentment and fear among minorities, blocks resolution of the existing conflicts and potentially instigates new ones. Nationalism provides fuel for the political system, helping to mask social and economic problems which are blamed on external interference, mainly by Russia and Armenia. Instead of tackling nationalism unleashed by the first president of Georgia Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1990 - 91), these views are only encouraged by politicians and

the media with potentially destabilising consequences. The on-going debate over the issue of whether to register ethnicity in Georgian documents reveals how much passion ethnic affiliation can generate. The ethnic Georgian supporters of registration led by MP Guram Sharadze claim that if registration of ethnicity is abolished, the Georgians can quickly lose their distinct identity and be outnumbered by other groups which enjoy higher birth rates.

As a result, many among minorities resort to emigration. Although this is also the case for the majority, the minorities are more ready to make such decisions. Their access to educational and professional opportunities is increasingly restricted by their lack of proficiency in the state language and by the withering away of Russian, which remains the main language for inter-communal communication. The pressure of popular attitudes and media coverage which echoes nationalist sentiments and the insularity of patronage networks of the titular group which dominates significant positions combine to create an atmosphere where minorities experience discomfort. Many fear bleak prospects for their children. Social pressures and lack of tolerance towards other groups further contribute to a situation in which minorities feel unwelcome. Intermingling of ethnic groups of the Soviet era is gradually diminishing and previously more mixed areas are becoming more homogenous.

Social and economic problems which minorities perceive as deliberate neglect, can also be explained by the fact that the Georgian state has not fully expanded into its entire territory. Most of its loosely controlled areas are populated by minorities. Being remote, underdeveloped and economically unattractive territories, they provide little incentive for the authorities to invest time and money, or initiate much action. Provinces generally lag behind the capitals in the levels of economic well-being, such as gas and electricity supplies, roads and other infrastructure. Since minority populations tend to live in remote regions, the problem for them seems to be worse. They are constantly losing out in the battle for funding and resources with other groups, who have better lobbying power, are better represented in the capitals and have the ear of the governing regimes. Such *de facto* arrangements are much more powerful than the letter of the law. The state, on its part, argues that as economy is in

dire straights, the resources it can allocate to the regions are extremely limited and that poverty affects everybody.

### *Language and Cultural Rights*

The Georgian state generally preserved the educational practices inherited from the USSR days apart from introducing new curricula for history and geography courses and closing down of Russian schools and diminishing teaching of Russian. However, its ability to maintain and finance the system of education in minority languages is increasingly lagging behind. Although a language bill had been drafted, in May 2002 Georgian parliament postponed indefinitely its debate, since it aroused too much controversy. The original draft prepared in 2001 requested all civil administration business to be conducted in Georgian which minorities in compact areas of settlement largely do not speak. As minorities raised concerns, Rolf Ekeus, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) interfered on their behalf. The bill was amended allowing for the use of languages of minorities in local councils in districts where they constitute the majority of the population. This, however, was met with stiff opposition in the parliament.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, the new needs of civil integration through language have not been adequately addressed. There are no state organised Georgian language courses for the minorities in their areas of settlement. Even those who might be willing to learn Georgian have no opportunity to do so.<sup>4</sup> For instance, at present it is hard for minorities to access Georgian laws, since they are published in Georgian and sometimes translated into English. As minorities tend to speak neither, initiatives have been taken by the minority NGOs with Western funding to translate Georgian laws from English into Russian, to make them more 'user-friendly'. However, given such a complicated route, inaccuracies occur leading to confusion. The Parliamentary Committee on Civil Integration intends to translate an essential package of Georgian

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<sup>3</sup> RFE/RL Caucasus Report, 'Georgian parliament shelves debate on language law', 23 May 2002, Volume 5, Number 18.

<sup>4</sup> Interviews with local residents in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda, April 2001, confirmed in interview with Alexandr Gerasimov, presidential adviser on interethnic relations, Tbilisi, April 2001.

laws into the main minority languages.<sup>5</sup> A programme to teach the Georgian language was signed by Shevardnadze in early 2001, but remained largely on paper. However, the OSCE through HCNM's intervention, started to provide funds to teach Georgian to 250 Armenian civil servants from Javakheti at 17 specially established teaching centres. A similar programme is envisaged for the Azeri minority.

The lack of proficiency in the Georgian language started to raise concerns for the purposes of civil administration. For instance, the system of qualifying exams and appraisals has been introduced for civil servants which should be taken in Georgian, although a grace period has been provided for those in minority areas. However, it is unrealistic that many of the members of local administration would be able to comply with such regulation even given grace period. Another bone of contention is the appointment of judges speaking only Georgian to the minority-populated areas, who have to conduct trials via interpreter. Locals then complain that this leads to unfair decisions since the judge often cannot adequately access what had been said.

Access to printed and broadcast media for minorities is restricted by their lack of proficiency in the Georgian language, by the absence of devices to transmit broadcasts to remote areas where many minorities live, by electricity blackouts and prohibitive costs of the newspapers. Some of these factors are shared with the remote ethnically Georgian areas.

An important matter is that population at large and minorities in particular gather most of their information from a rumour mill. This gives rise to rampant speculation and various conspiracy theories about the intentions of the Georgian politicians and the neighbouring states. The Georgian majority, in its turn, obtains information about situation in minority areas from its own rumour mill which tells them that minorities are overwhelmingly armed and harbour separatism, only waiting for a suitable moment to strike. The Georgian state does little to dispel such rumours and come up with true information about the state's intentions or life of minorities.

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<sup>5</sup> author's interview with Gela Kvaratskhelia, Chair of the Committee on Civil Integration, Parliament of Georgia, Tbilisi, July 2001.

### *International Community and Local NGOs*

Georgia is the third largest recipient of US aid per capita in the world after Israel and Egypt. US strategic rationale for such massive commitment is obscure, but can be explained by the sentiment about Shevardnadze's reputation as the ex-Soviet foreign minister, Georgia's anti-Russian stance and threats of further conflict, if Western involvement does not come through. At the same time, international donors have been surprisingly lenient on Georgia, committing substantial funds to the country without holding much leverage over its leadership and the course of development in the country overall. Huge sums of foreign aid disappeared without trace,<sup>6</sup> but, with the exception of the World Bank,<sup>7</sup> this did not affect the flow of funds. Moreover, overemphasis on conflict resolution which so far achieved no tangible results, overshadowed other important issues, such as situation of minorities in the Georgian state. This allowed nationalism to go unchallenged. The international community tends to view situation in Georgia as a set of different problems, rather than a single underlying problem - defining a post-Soviet state in relation to nationalism.

The departure of Shevardnadze or reassessment of US policy may produce a sudden shift in such Western attitudes to Georgia.

Local civil society was developed and survives almost exclusively thanks to Western funds. This happened through no fault of NGOs themselves, as opportunities for fundraising inside the country are practically non-existent. Although Western funding allowed intelligentsia to survive in the time of troubles, it also made the NGO community to follow the donor agenda. As a consequence, NGOs tend to undertake short-term projects within funding priorities to ensure continuous relevance for donors, rather than speak on behalf and influence their own communities. As tolerance and protection of minority rights were not considered as an important

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<sup>6</sup> A total of 120 million laris (\$54.6 million) is taken annually in bribes in Georgia, Caucasus Press on 29 May quoted Economy, Industry, and Trade Minister Gia Gachechiladze as saying. That figure is reportedly based on calculations by World Bank experts and Georgian statisticians – RFE/RL Caucasus Report, 30 May 2002, Volume 5, Number 19.

priority by the internationals, local civil society activists who took up the issue, overall had little encouragement. Organisations which advocate minority rights and seek to promote minority cultures, such as the Caucasus House or Multinational Georgia are often criticised for their stance by state and society alike. Consequently, little has been done to challenge the extremists or to engage minorities in the debate, or to reach out to society at large rather than to Tbilisi elites. Serious debate on issues of nationalism and tolerant multiethnic state is yet to happen.

### **Situation of Particular Minorities**

#### *Armenians*

Armenians are the largest minority in Georgia. In 1989 they numbered 437,200 (8.1 per cent), a substantial number of them concentrated in Tbilisi (over 150,000 or 12 per cent of the city population). Since then the situation has changed: many emigrated and presently the Armenians constitute about 350,000,<sup>8</sup> having lost most of their economic and political positions in the capital.

Outside the capital, the Armenians are concentrated in Javakheti, a remote southern region of Georgia, bordering Turkey and Armenia where they constitute nearly 95 per cent.<sup>9</sup> It currently forms a part of the Samtskhe-Javakheti province, Samtskhe being an intermixed Georgian - Armenian area. Javakheti itself consists of two districts - Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda. In Soviet times the region existed as a border zone closed to outsiders. Perceptions of a Turkish threat due to historical memories of 1915 massacres at the time of dissolution of the Ottoman empire, the high degree of group cohesion and the distinct identity of a mountain people remain strong.

The move to unite Javakheti with the low-lying territories of Samtskhe aroused resentment because it was interpreted as an attempt to make the region more 'Georgian'. It also led to the establishment of an administrative centre in Akhaltsikhe,

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<sup>7</sup> in March 2002 it warned the Georgian government that the Bank may cut its support by 20 per cent in 2003 from \$130 to \$100 million unless financial discipline improves and corruption is tackled, - RFE/RL Caucasus Report, 14 March 2002, Volume 5, Number 10.

<sup>8</sup> According to the estimates of the Armenian Embassy in Georgia, author's interview, Tbilisi, April 2001.

a lower town poorly connected with Javakheti. Administrative reform, which endeavoured to create larger units, also caused resentment in other, more ethnically homogenous regions of Georgia, because of a similar distancing of the state from its citizens. However, the Javakheti Armenians are negative about the mainly Georgian composition of the provincial administration.<sup>10</sup>

The region has two alternative political groupings, Javakh and Virk. The latter advocates the administrative separation of Javakheti from Samtskhe, and the formation of an autonomous Javakheti within the Georgian state.<sup>11</sup> Autonomy is regarded as a security guarantee for the future rather than a way of changing the present. Virk applied to be registered as a political party in Georgia to be able to represent the interests of Javakheti Armenians in Tbilisi, but the application was rejected on the grounds that Georgian law does not provide for ethnic-based parties.

Javakheti hosts the 62nd Russian military base at Akhalkalaki. Local Armenians regard the Russian military presence as a security guarantee against a Turkish threat. Close relations between the Russian military and the Armenians in Javakheti are regarded with suspicion by the Georgian majority. Tbilisi insists on withdrawal by 2004 while Russia would like to preserve the base until 2015.

The Akhalkalaki base is essential to Javakheti's economy. The Georgian state cannot support the local population to the extent that the Russian base does. Georgia's campaign to close the base is strongly resented not only for economic, but also security reasons. These threat perceptions partly reflected local fears that Turkish troops would move in as a part of a NATO strategy to replace Russian forces. Another concern is that Georgian troops will enter the region.

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<sup>9</sup> Ninotsminda statistics office reported Armenians as constituting 95.9 per cent in 2000, Akhalkalaki is believed to have a similar composition. In 1989 Armenians were 89.6 per cent in Ninotsminda and 91.3 per cent in Akhalkalaki.

<sup>10</sup> David Darchiashvili, 'Southern Georgia: Security Objectives and Challenges', Writenet report for UNHCR's 'CIS Local Monitoring Project', March 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Author's interview with Virk members, including David Rostakyan and Mel Topusyan, co-chairmen of Virk, Akhalkalaki, April 2001.

Relationship between Georgia and Armenia is tense, but the leaderships are trying not to upset it, as both have a stake in promoting stability. Tbilisi seeks to avoid another conflict in its border region, while Yerevan is aware that Georgia offers the only transit route westwards out of landlocked Armenia. The Georgian and Armenian presidents signed a new bilateral treaty on friendship, mutual security and cooperation outlining the basis of the relationship. The presidents, however, are under severe pressure from the public distrustful of the other ethnic group. In Armenia the opposition accuses the President of failure to act on Armenian concerns, such as pressure on Armenians to leave mixed areas in Georgia, their push from political and economic positions in the capital, the insufficiency of aid and development in Javakheti, problems with transit due to corruption and neglected roads and military cooperation with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Armenia brought the issue of its ethnic kin before the Council of Europe (CoE) in September 2001, thereby raising concern over the plight of Javakheti Armenians.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, at present conflict is unlikely. Yerevan is keen to maintain good relations with Tbilisi. Armenian ideologues do not consider Javakheti to be a part of historic Armenian lands, unlike Karabakh and Nakhichevan (Azerbaijan). The region is remote and absorbed into power struggles between three influential economic groupings, or clans, represented in the local governing structures. The Tbilisi authorities do not interfere into these battles. However, the closure of the Russian military base can have a sudden and severe impact on the economy and political stability.

The Baku-Ceyhan pipeline construction to bring Caspian oil from Azerbaijan to Mediterranean port of Ceyhan in Turkey is another important development. It will traverse Samtskhe-Javakheti area, but Armenians doubt that they will get any benefit from it. At the same time, in case of a crisis, triggered, say, by a closure of the Akhalkalaki base, local radicals would have the power to disrupt supplies to make a political point.

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<sup>12</sup> Alaverdyan, D., 'Armenia faces Georgian dilemma', IWPR's Caucasus reporting service, no. 102, 22 October, 2001.

In April 2002 the Georgian government announced a strategic development programme for the region for 2003 - 05. Yerevan hinted that it was prepared to shoulder the financial burden of the programme in exchange for opening its consulate in Javakheti to monitor implementation.<sup>13</sup> Still, Javakheti Armenians' confidence has been undermined by Georgia's decision not to allow them to take electricity from Armenia which it offered on grace conditions, claiming that it can supply the region by itself. The Georgian supply has turned out to be unreliable, giving rise to worries about winter.

Since recently, international actors started to get involved in the situation in Javakheti. UNDP has made proposals for mitigating conflict potential through economic intervention, in particular through improving road infrastructure. This, undoubtedly, will bring improvement, but won't prevent corruption and discrimination, i.e. stop the Georgian police from extracting bribes from ethnic Armenian drivers and local mafia - from making Armenians to sell their produce at wholesale prices on the edge of the city. So far, most Javakheti production goes to Armenia.

### *Azeri*

The Azeris are currently the second largest minority in Georgia, concentrated in the rural areas of Marneuli, Gardabani, Bolnissi and Dmanissi along the border with Azerbaijan which comprise the administrative province of Kvemo-Kartli. In 1989 they numbered 307,5000 (5.7 per cent), 18.000 of them in Tbilisi (1.4 per cent). In early 1990s some Azeris articulated claims for autonomy, but lack of support from Azerbaijan and the cautious policies of the Georgian leadership diffused tensions.<sup>14</sup>

Border crossing into Azerbaijan and policing ethnically mixed areas are issues of social tensions, especially as the police are drawn mainly from the Georgian group, which leads to claims that police actions demonstrate ethnic discrimination.

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<sup>13</sup> RFE/RL Caucasus Report, 'Georgia unveils plans to revive Djavakheti', 3 October 2002, Volume 5, Number 33.

<sup>14</sup> Kukhianidze, A., 'Armianskoe i Azerbaidzhaniskoe menshinstva v Gruzii. O natsionalnoi i vneshnei politike Gruzii' (Armenian and Azeri minorities in Georgia. On nationalities' and external policies of Georgia), in A. Malashenko, B. Coppieters and D. Trenin (eds), *Etnicheskie i Regionalnye Konflikty v Evrazii* (Ethnic and Regional Conflicts in Eurasia), vol. 1, 'Tsentralnaia Azia i Kavkaz' (Central Asia and the Caucasus), Moscow, Ves Mir, 1997, pp. 170 - 182, p. 179.

Otherwise the same issues of language (many people speak only Azeri), education, labour migration, political participation and representation,<sup>15</sup> access to information (the population watches TV from Azerbaijan) affect the Azeri minority in the same way as the Javakheti Armenians. Language and education are particular issues of concerns: there is no provision to learn Georgian in Azeri schools or the history and geography of Azerbaijan in schools where the majority of pupils are Azeri.<sup>16</sup> Some Azeri-language schools were closed, which provoked local resentment. The authorities argued that villages where schools were located are becoming depopulated and the state cannot afford to provide for schools with so few students.

As more international attention has turned to Javakheti, the Azeri minority closely watches the developments to try to wrest comparable concessions from Tbilisi. The main difference is that while Armenians constitute an overwhelming majority in the areas of their compact settlement, Azeri settlements are intermixed with the Georgian ones. As a result, mostly Georgians are appointed to the local government positions, while in Javakheti such appointments are held by ethnic Armenians. There are also perceptions of discrimination in allocation of the plots of land during privatisation. Besides, plans have been drawn to change some names of Azeri villages in Bolnissi. These events cause some representatives of intelligentsia of Azerbaijan to issue an appeal to President Shevardnadze.<sup>17</sup>

### *Ajara*

Ajarians are historic Georgian Muslim converted to Islam during the Ottoman rule who speak their own dialect. At the same time, Islam does not appear to be practised nowadays. The distinct identity of Ajarians is rather based on its autonomy from Tbilisi rule reinforced after the collapse of the USSR. In the Soviet days Ajara was,

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<sup>15</sup> In December 2001 passions heightened because of exclusion of an ethnic Azeri candidate from Dmanissi region, Mikhael Makhmudov, for the CUG party list to fill a vacancy in the parliament resulted from resignation of an MP, - 'Vacant seat in the parliament of Georgia caused discussion and accusations of infringement of minority rights', Tbilisi, 5 December /Black Sea Press, cited in MINELRES, 23 December 2001.

<sup>16</sup> RFE/RL Caucasus Report, 'Georgia's Azerbaijani minority airs grievances', 4 April 2002, Volume 5, Number 12.

<sup>17</sup> 'Problems of ethnic Azeris in Georgia', *Sharg*, 31 August 2001, cited in MINELRES, 1 September 2001.

like Abkhazia, an autonomous republic within the Union Republic of Georgia. Since the break-up of the USSR, it has enjoyed almost complete self-rule, although being nominally loyal to Tbilisi. Batumi, the capital of Ajara, offers an alternative political pole to Tbilisi. Its leader, Aslan Abashidze rules the republic as his own fiefdom where members of his blood family occupy key positions. At the same time, Ajara enjoys relatively more order and development, even if such order is being promoted by rather crude means.

Having learnt bitter lessons in the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Eduard Shevardnadze sticks to a 'non-interference into internal affairs' approach to Ajara. The laws governing the Ajara legislature, judiciary and security are of local making, with lip service paid to the central authority in Tbilisi. Mostly importantly, Tbilisi cannot persuade Batumi to part with a share of the lucrative income from customs the port of Batumi levies on transit.

Georgian border troops on Ajara territory are controlled by the Abashidze leadership which practices local recruitment. The Russian military base stationed in Batumi, another bone of contention between Russia and Georgia, also employs largely local personnel. Tbilisi would like the Russian troops to leave as soon as possible, while the Russian side seeks to secure basing rights till 2015.<sup>18</sup>

### *Kists*

Kists live in the Pankissi valley in Kakhetia, Georgia, in the north of the Akhmeta region on the border with Chechnya. Pankissi is populated by Kists (8,000 people or 65 per cent), Georgians (24 per cent) and Ossetians (11 per cent).<sup>19</sup> Social culture remains conservative and traditional norms have been reinforced in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Interethnic relations between these three groups are prone to tensions. Relations with ethnic Georgian villages in surrounding Kakhetia are also strained: following a wave of kidnappings and robberies originating from Pankissi, Kakhetian

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<sup>18</sup> RFE/RL Caucasus Report, 3 January 2003, Volume 6, Number 1.

<sup>19</sup> these figures are approximate. According to the last Soviet census, in 1989 population of Pankissi was 11,000 and consisted of 43 per cent Kists, 29 per cent Georgians and 28 per cent Ossetians. 'Pankisskoe Uscheli: Problemy Trebuyut Reshenia' (Pankissi Valley: Problems Need Solutions), Tbilisi, Caucasus NGO Forum, 2001.

villagers set up local self-defence groups in face of the unfolding lawlessness. They claim that since the state is powerless to protect them, they have no other option but to take up arms.

The second Russian war in Chechnya led to refugee flows into Georgian territory and into Pankissi. Many are hosted by their ethnic kin. Russia claimed that Chechen and international terrorists penetrated into Pankissi disguised as refugees, and that the valley serves as a sanctuary for fighters and a source of arms and ammunition. Georgia used to deny these allegations, but after the US State Department articulated similar concerns, admitted that there is truth in these claims.

Interconfessional tensions bring additional fault lines. Kists are traditionally Sunni Muslims. Radical Islam, or *Wahhabism*, started to penetrate Pankissi during the first war in Chechnya when Kist volunteers came into contact with Islamic fighters and took root as the second war in Chechnya progressed.

It is perceived by the locals that the deterioration of the security and interethnic situation has been compounded by the influx of refugees from Chechnya and pressure of new arrivals into the already poor conditions.<sup>20</sup> The refugees, however, claim that the criminal and Islamic networks had already been established prior to their arrival and that it is convenient to attribute blame to the newcomers.<sup>21</sup>

As the authorities failed to enforce law and order in the valley, since the late 1990s it has emerged as a base for criminality of various kinds from drug trafficking to hostage taking. For instance, British banker Peter Shaw kidnapped in Tbilisi was kept in the valley. All criminal activity is blamed on the Chechens, although it appears more likely that Pankisi is just a convenient place for the problems to be recycled.

Separatedness of the area acts as a magnet for criminal and anti-social elements of all sorts, some with far-reaching connections.

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<sup>20</sup> 55 per cent of local Georgians, 27 per cent of Ossetians and 40 per cent of Kists blame Chechen refugees for deterioration of security in Pankissi - 'Pankisskoe Uschelié', p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> author's interview in the 'Caucasus House', September 2001, Tbilisi.

The valley is a source of tensions between Russia and Georgia. In August 2002 Russian warplanes bombed the valley, trying to hit bases of Chechen and Islamist fighters. It also served as a clear warning to Georgia to stop interfering into the Chechen war. Following these events a law-enforcement operation was undertaken in Pankissi under combined US and Russian pressure, but the fighters were warned to leave the area before troops were deployed. The US 'Train & Equip' programme was launched in April 2002 with allocated spending of \$64 million and aimed at training of 'elite' Georgian forces to combat terrorism. So far, the programme made little practical progress,<sup>22</sup> but provoked intense fears in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (see below).

It was believed by the aid agencies that about 8,000 refugees from the second Chechen war stay in Pankissi and distributed benefits accordingly. When registration took place in 2002, it found under 4,000. As the valley maintains separatedness from Tbilisi control – the Chechen and Kist population has set up its own roadblocks beyond which Georgian officials until recently did not dare to go - refugees turned into a good business for local officials.

### *Repatriation of Meskhetians*<sup>23</sup>

Meskhetian Muslims, or Meskhetian Turks (the majority's self-identification is that of Turkish origin with a self-designation of *akhyska turklyari*, but some consider themselves Muslims of Georgian descent) were deported in 1944 from Samtskhe-Javakheti to Central Asia. In 1989 Meskhetians survived a pogrom directed against them in Uzbekistan when they were airlifted by Soviet troops and resettled in Azerbaijan (where some have become Azerbaijani citizens), in Ukraine, and in the Krasnodar and Stavropol *krai* and in Kabardino-Balkaria in Russia, where their presence is resented both by the population and the regional authorities. According to the last Soviet census of 1989, Meskhetians numbered 207,5000 while current estimates for the Meskhetian population are between 270,000 and 320,000. In 2001 between 90,000 and 110,000 lived in Azerbaijan where the state policies and attitudes

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<sup>22</sup> RFE/RL Caucasus Report, 'Is 'Train and Quip' under threat of collapse?', 15 July 2002, Volume 5, Number 24, also author's interviews in the Caucasus, November 2002.

on the whole are favourable.<sup>24</sup> Azerbaijan, wary of upsetting its relationship with Georgia supports the Meskhetian right to return, but conditional on its acceptance by the Georgian side.<sup>25</sup>

The Meskhetian minority organisations are Vatan, registered in 1994 in Russia, and Hsna, registered in Georgia in 1992. Vatan adheres to the Turkic origin of the Meskhetians, while Hsna united those who were prepared to accept the Georgian version of their origins. The Union of Georgian Repatriants and the Latifshah Baratashvili Foundation were established later in Georgia in an effort to speed up the return.<sup>26</sup>

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) together with the UNHCR led the efforts to move Meskhetians back to Georgia throughout the 1990s.<sup>27</sup> As a condition for joining the Council of Europe (CoE) in 1999, Georgia committed itself to repatriate the Meskhetians over a twelve-year period. Pressure was put on Georgia to pass legislation allowing repatriation, and a draft law was presented to the CoE in March 2001. Meanwhile, the prospect of a return of the Meskhetians is met with overwhelming local resentment because of the history of ethnic clashes with Georgians and Armenians in the period prior to their deportation.<sup>28</sup> There have been threats to resist the return by force, and the regional administrations are in sympathy with their populations on the issue. The national media coverage similarly echoes such sentiments, claiming that repatriation should never be allowed even if the withdrawal from the CoE is the price for this.

As a result, the progress has been disappointing as only 650 succeeded in returning to Georgia. Moreover, between 1994-97 Meskhetians were unable to obtain Georgian

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<sup>23</sup> see also Meskhetian Turks: Solutions and Human Security, Forced Migration Projects, Open Society Institute, December 1998.

<sup>24</sup> Yunusov, A., *Meskhetinskie Turki: Dvazhdy Deportirovannyi Narod* (Meskhetian Turks: People Deported Twice), Baku, Institute of Peace and Democracy, 2000, p. 94.

<sup>25</sup> Yunusov, A., *Meskhetinskie Turki*, p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Yunusov, A., *Meskhetinskie Turki*, p. 87.

<sup>27</sup> Deported Peoples of the Former Soviet Union: the Case of the Meskhetians. IOM: Geneva, January 1998.

<sup>28</sup> see, for instance, Zaza Baazov, 'Georgia: Unwanted Meskhetians', IWPR Caucasus Reporting Service, no. 106, 20 November 2001.

citizenship, which began to be granted to a few only under the combined pressure from the UNHCR and the OSCE. Tbilisi also argues that for the sake of interethnic peace it is more feasible to resettle Meskhetians around the country rather than return them to their ethnic homeland.

Numbers of those willing to return are widely disputed. The Georgian authorities fear that as much as 300,000 Meskhetians would seek to move to Georgia and argue that it could not accommodate such an influx given the presence of IDPs from the conflict in Abkhazia. However, this seems unlikely, as large numbers have already settled in places where they are, such as in Azerbaijan. For many Meskhetians the desire to return takes the form of a political demand expressing what they see as a historical right. In practice many would not necessarily take advantage of this possibility.<sup>29</sup> It is estimated that 13,000 Meskhetians settled in Krasnodar where the new governor recently tightened residence requirements in the face of growing immigration into the region. Human rights groups fear that pressure to leave will increase on them. Apparently, such communities are quite keen to be able to go to Georgia.

The Georgian authorities also cite Javakheti Armenians' opposition to the return of Meskhetians as one of the reasons for the delay. While such perceptions among Armenians are widespread, according to Vatan Society data, only 12 of the 220 villages from where Meskhetians were originally deported, are located in Armenian-populated territory, and 86 villages are deserted.<sup>30</sup>

## **Break-Away Territories**

### *Abkhazia*

The Abkhaz, a minority in their own homeland, measured at 103,000 in the 1989 USSR census, making up 17 per cent of population of the Union Republic of Georgia.

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<sup>29</sup> Dehdashti-Rasmussen, R., 'Historical and present problems and proposals as to the return of the Meskhetians to Georgia', Paper presented at the 'Conflicts in the South Caucasus' Workshop, Peace Research Information Unit, Bonn: Development and Peace Foundation, 15 January 2001, Berlin.

<sup>30</sup> RFE/RL Caucasus report, 'Meskhetians face yet another deportation', 4 April 2002, Volume 5, Number 12.

Abkhazia enjoyed an equal status with Georgia between 1921 - 1931 before being incorporated into the latter as an autonomous republic. Georgian-Abkhaz interethnic relations deteriorated since 1988, as did relations between the central government in Tbilisi, and Sukhum(i), the capital of Abkhazia. The violent conflict started in August 1992 when Georgian troops and paramilitaries entered Abkhazia. Initially the Abkhaz lost most of the territory to the Georgian troops, but aided by the North Caucasian volunteers and, tacitly, Russian military, in March 1993 fought back and launched a counter offensive, which culminated in a victory in September and causing most Georgians to flee Abkhazia.<sup>31</sup>

In November 1999 the Abkhaz leadership proclaimed formal independence and in 2001 expressed the desire to apply for 'associate status with the Russian Federation, similar to Russia's relationship with Belarus.'<sup>32</sup> Russia's introduction of the visa regime for Georgian citizens in 2000, which exempting Abkhazia and South Ossetia, encouraged further incorporation of these territories into Russia's economic and social space.

Since the war ended, Georgia sought to bring Abkhazia back by a combination of international pressure on the Abkhaz leadership and by sponsoring cross-border attacks by the guerrillas groups, such as the White Legion and the Forest Brothers, in the border zone to undermine Abkhaz security. It also secured economic restrictions on Abkhazia enforced by Russia in mid-1990s and attracted the Western powers to the peace process to provide a counterbalance to Russian influence.

Still, no progress has been made on the issues of the political status of Abkhazia and the return of Georgian IDPs. Tbilisi wants Abkhazia to recognise that it is a subordinate part of the Georgian state while guaranteeing a degree of self-rule. The Abkhaz feel no desire to enter a common state with Georgia fearing that if

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<sup>31</sup> on human rights violations by both sides see Human Rights Watch, Georgia/Abkhazia: Violations of the Laws of War and Russia's Role in the Conflict, vol. 7, no. 7, March 1995, can be downloaded <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Georgia2.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> 'How does Abkhazia envisage its future relationship with Russia?', RFE/RL Caucasus Report, 29 October 2001, vol. 4, no. 36.

incorporated into Georgia, the Abkhaz would have a lot to lose, such as security and a dominant political position.<sup>33</sup>

Since late 1993 the ceasefire line is patrolled by Russian troops under the aegis of the Commonwealth of Independent States Peacekeeping Forces (CISPRF) as agreed at the Moscow Treaty of 1994. The United Nations (UN) assumed the mediating in the conflict in Abkhazia and a UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) monitors the border area. The CISPKF and UNOMIG mandates are based on the right of return for all IDPs and the preservation of Georgia's territorial integrity within the 1991 borders. Over sixty Russian peacekeepers died in ambushes and mine explosions targeted by Georgian guerrillas and six UN staff were killed in a shot-down helicopter in October 2001. Mandate of the CISPKF is conditional on regular extension approved by both sides, and in this connection the Georgian parliament periodically threatens to withdraw its approval for Russian peacekeepers' presence. President Shevardnadze, however, subsequently negotiates its continuation.

Open hostilities broke out twice in the border region of Gali, in May 1998 and October 2001, when Chechen fighters and Georgian paramilitaries launched an offensive. Abkhazia quickly mobilised and fought back, forcing the attackers to flee.<sup>34</sup> In autumn of 2002 both sides were on the brink of confrontation following military activity in Kodori valley, partly controlled by Georgian and partly by the Abkhaz side. Since then de-escalation took place, but tensions run high.

The situation of IDPs in Georgia is dire and the issue is highly politicised. Even the numbers are at odds. According to the 1989 Soviet census, 235,000 ethnic Georgians lived in Abkhazia. UNHCR figures show 245,204 displaced from Abkhazia into Georgia proper, but about 50,000 are thought to be normally resident in Gali controlled by the Abkhaz side. Since they are entitled to benefits on the Georgian side, there is little incentive to officially declare that they have returned. Moreover, some

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<sup>33</sup> See Herzig, Edmund, The New Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, RIIA/Pinter, London, 1999.

<sup>34</sup> Alexandr Iskandarian, Alan Parastayev, Gagik Avakian, 'Sobytiya v Kodorskom Ushelie. Oktiabr' 2001 goda' (Events in Kodori valley. October 2001), Fact-finding mission of the Caucasus NGO Forum,

Georgians stayed on in the north of the republic which saw no fighting. The Georgian leadership encourages IDPs to hope for a speedy prospect for return and offers little help in integration into the current conditions. However, after ten years of displacement a certain accommodation has taken place. How many people, especially young ones, are willing to return, is unclear. However, the Georgian leadership continues to carry on with the 300,000 figure of IDPs. This exacerbates the Abkhaz fears that in case of reunification they will be vastly outnumbered by Georgians and become a minority again - with a clear implication that full return cannot be allowed.

Meanwhile, Georgian leadership continues to support the existence of the 'government-in exile', whose leader Tamaz Nadareishvili is a part of the Georgian government and a member of the National Security Council. The 'government-in-exile' remains a major obstacle, as it calls for an armed intervention into Abkhazia and promises war trials for the Abkhaz should Georgia regain control over the territory. The Abkhaz are unlikely to trust the Georgian leadership while Nadareishvili remains a part of the Georgian establishment and the government sponsors attacks by guerrilla groups on the Abkhaz territory. Such actions make the peace process an unlikely prospect. In the words of the UN Secretary General Special Representative (SGSR) Heidi Tagliavini, 'as soon as the situation deteriorates in the area, you can't put the sides together to speak about politics'.<sup>35</sup> Although a major Georgian intervention into Abkhazia seems highly unlikely - at least until peacekeeping forces are there, - a risk of a military adventure of the October 2001 kind remains and only harden the Abkhaz position.

Security situation in Gali remains precarious. Petty criminality and violence, i.e. hostage-taking and vehicle theft are endemic. Farmers are constantly harassed by both Abkhaz and Mingrelian mafias. The problem of law and order has been highlighted by the UN Secretary General's October 2002 Report and some discussions took place within Working Group II of the Joint Coordinating Council set up to supervise the peace process. However, it is unlikely that UNOMIG and CISP KF would engage in

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UNHCR Working Group of the CIS Conference and The William R. Nelson Institute for public Affairs, Dzaujikau, 2001.

more robust policing efforts, while calls for introduction of international police forces seem equally unviable.<sup>36</sup> In the absence of a political solution on the status of the territory and creation of a local police force which would have a stake in law and order in the region, external engagement may be futile.

Over the years of 'no war, no peace' the mechanisms to promote resolution of the conflict became more elaborate, however, with little result. Apart from UN track supplemented by OSCE Mission, a 'Group of Friends of the UN Secretary General on Georgia' comprising the US, the UK, Germany, France and Russia was established to internationalise the conflict and counterbalance Russian influence. Initially, the Abkhaz experienced apprehension, as its leader expressed that 'Friends of Georgia' are not necessarily friends of Abkhazia. 'Friends', however, did not do anything more than the UN, and the Abkhaz relaxed.

Meanwhile, latest political developments, such as dispute between Russia and Georgia over the presence of fighters in Pankisi, stand-offs in Kodori and US 'Train and Equip' operation, as well as general deterioration in Georgia,<sup>37</sup> pull sides further apart and Abkhazia - closer into Moscow orbit. Russian policy on Abkhazia is dependent on Georgia's support for Chechnya: during the first war (1994-96) Shevardnadze came on Moscow side and Russia reciprocated with sanctions on Abkhazia. In Moscow eyes the policies of imposing economic blockade brought no effect on resolution of the conflict, while relations with Georgia continued to deteriorate. In the second war (1999 - ongoing) the tables were reversed. Under Putin restrictions on movement from Abkhazia were relaxed, and the Abkhaz were given an opportunity to obtain Russian passports. Russian and Turkish businessmen started to take advantage of the Abkhaz privatisation programme.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> RFE/RL Caucasus Report, 'Kodori, Pankisi tensions stall UN mediation in Abkhazia', 23 September 2002, Volume 5, Number 31.

<sup>36</sup> LINKS, 'The Georgia-Abkhaz Peace Process: A New Role for the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia?' LINKS: London, 2002.

<sup>37</sup> some observers even anticipate a return to 'warlordism' of the early 1990s, - RFE/RL Caucasus Report, 11 October 2002, Volume 5, Number 34.

<sup>38</sup> RFE/RL Caucasus Report, 'Georgia sounds alarm over Abkhaz privatization', 13 June 2002, Volume 5, Number 21.

At present, there is little political dialogue between the parties to conflict. In 2001 the former UN SGSR Dieter Boden in consultation with the Friends of Georgia devised a document on 'Basic Principles for the Distribution of Competencies between Tbilisi and Sukhumi', locally known as the 'Boden Paper' which set out a plan for the settlement. However, since it was framed within the context of Georgian sovereignty over Abkhazia, the Abkhaz side have refused to accept it. Currently, concerns are raised that it could become outdated if the Abkhaz rejection of the document carries on.

Abashidze, named by Shevardnadze as a special envoy on Abkhazia conflict, has designed an alternative peace plan which he agreed with Moscow. The plan argues that greater legitimate economic interaction (criminal interaction in Gali appears to function) can lead to better relationship and eventually to peace. He suggested to open road, rail, air and sea communications, fully restore the Inguri hydropower station and export gas and electricity via Abkhazia to Turkey. The Georgian side rejected the proposal as legitimising the *status quo* and giving the Abkhaz a unilateral advantage.<sup>39</sup>

The December 2002 UN Security Council meeting discussed the conflict behind closed doors, but failed to agree on the way forward.<sup>40</sup> The Abkhaz side is distrustful of the UN as an institution since it adheres to Georgia's sovereignty over Abkhazia and does not give a chance for the Abkhaz side to voice its concerns, while Georgia is a member of the UN. Tbilisi has no confidence in Russia as a mediator for its support rendered to the Abkhaz side and presence of Russian peacekeepers who, in the view of Georgian nationalists, act as the Abkhaz border guards.

#### Minorities in Abkhazia

Abkhazia remains a multiethnic place. According to the Abkhaz 'government' website, there are 135,000 ethnic Abkhaz (total population 200,000) currently residing in Abkhazia with Russians, Armenians, Georgians, Greeks, and Jews.<sup>41</sup> Although

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<sup>39</sup> RFE/RL Caucasus Report, 11 October 2002, Volume 5, Number 34.

<sup>40</sup> RFE/RL Caucasus Report, 12 December 2002, vol. 5, no. 39.

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.apsny.org/home.html>

ethnic Abkhaz are a dominant minority, numerically they are outnumbered by Armenians. As in Georgia proper, access to political power for minorities is limited. Language policy became a subject of a debate with the return of the Georgians to Gali. The Abkhaz authorities' notion is that returnees are to be integrated into the 'Republic of Abkhazia' as it is now and one way of doing it is through the language. [Sukhumi] Ministry of Education made Russian the predominant language of instruction and introduced compulsory lessons in the Abkhaz. In reality little has changed. Schools in Gali teach in Georgian with some Russian if they can find teachers. There are not enough teachers of Abkhaz to reach out to remote areas, even Abkhaz-populated, let alone teach Abkhaz to Mingrelians in Gali. Meanwhile, Mingrelians are more keen to learn English than Russian, but this is also constrained by the lack of teachers.

According to the [Sukhumi] Ministry of Education, schools in Gali are not supposed to teach history and geography using Georgian textbooks, as they show Abkhazia as part of Georgia and describe the war in pro-Georgian terms. At the same time, no other textbooks in Georgian are available.

### *South Ossetia*

The conflict in South Ossetia unfolded along similar lines as in Abkhazia with claims to territory combining with Ossetian fear of assimilation into the Georgian nation. Georgians suspected that South Ossetians were in a privileged position vis-à-vis other regions of Georgia, benefiting from affirmative action practised by the Soviet system in respect of minorities. The conflict dates back from the Soviet times. In August 1990 South Ossetia issued a declaration of sovereignty and demanded recognition from Moscow as an independent subject of the USSR. Tbilisi retaliated by abolishing South Ossetia as an administrative entity in December 1990. Fighting erupted between Ossetian and Georgian militias and resulted in expulsion of the Georgians from Tskhinval(i), the region's capital, who then besieged and bombarded the city from the surrounding hills.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> on the history of conflict see Herzig, E., *Ibid.*

The fighting continued into Shevardnadze's time, until the Ossetians, supported by North Caucasians, gained the upper hand in 1992. Population exchanges took place: Ossetians from other parts of Georgia moved to South or North Ossetia (Russia), and most ethnic Georgians left South Ossetia. A cease-fire was signed in June 1992 supervised by a combined Russian, Georgian and Ossetian peacekeeping force. Negotiations were held under Russian auspices and supported by the OSCE mission established in 1992. In March 1994 its mandate was extended to monitor peacekeeping operations. In May 1996 the parties signed a memorandum on refraining from the threat of force and gradual demilitarisation.

In South Ossetia, unlike Abkhazia, the issue of repatriation is not so important, since both sides accepted population exchanges and some Georgians managed to return. People are free to travel and engage in commerce. However, there is no progress on the issue of political status. Ossetians maintain that they will settle for the same status as is eventually agreed with Abkhazia, while Georgians offer a wide-ranging autonomy.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the Georgian government would like to gain control over the Ossetian Military Highway, the main commercial artery connecting Georgia with Russia, and to generate revenue from customs, but the Ossetians are reluctant to let the Georgians to collect taxes. By the same token as Abkhazia, South Ossetia is exempt from the Russian visa regime.

Although many assumed that the conflict in South Ossetia is on its way to resolution and that the resumption of hostilities is highly unlikely, 2002 brought new developments. First, as in Abkhazia, the US 'Train and Equip' programme gave rise to a concern of a possible Georgian intervention. Then 'bearded men' believed to be fighters pushed out of Pankisi, were sighted in remote places in the area. South Ossetians became scared not only of these men, but of a possible Georgian 'law enforcement' operation or of Russian overreaction. The leadership and the population

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<sup>43</sup> Matveeva, A., 'Georgia: Peace remains elusive in ethnic patchwork', in P. van Tongeren, H. van de Veen and J. Verhoeven (eds), *Searching for Peace in Europe and Eurasia: An Overview of Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002.

started to buy arms.<sup>44</sup> Following deterioration of the relationship between Moscow and Tbilisi and growing local crime, relationship between Russian and Georgian peacekeepers also broke down in August.<sup>45</sup>

## **Concluding Remarks**

So far, the Georgian state had little positive to offer to the people on the territory it controls, majority or minority likewise. It is no wonder that both Abkhaz and South Ossetians do not see much incentive to join in. Apart from reference to international law and attention of Western powers, Georgian state has little to prove that if break-away territories are to be incorporated into it, it would ensure fair rule and good governance.

In dealing with claims of ethnic groups for self-determination in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet empire, the international community choose to apply the territorial integrity principle and accepted legitimacy of the Soviet administrative borders largely defined under Stalin. In doing so, it did not question whether the new states would adhere to the standards of behaviour vis-à-vis their minorities and ensure their vigorous protection that should come with statehood. Minorities which used to rely on Moscow for protection, lost it almost overnight. In failing to engage with the issue of ethnic minorities from the start, in the eyes of minorities the international community has applied the letter rather than the spirit of international law. As a result, intense external efforts to make minorities who broke away from the host states, to share by peaceful means the ‘territorial integrity’ principle so far yielded no result.

## **AZERBAIJAN**

### **Overview**

#### *State and Minorities*

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<sup>44</sup> RFE/RL Newswire, 30 December 2002, see also Alan Parastaev, ‘SALW Proliferation in South Ossetia – Security Problems and Humanitarian Consequences’, in Anna Matveeva (ed.), Arms and Security in the Caucasus, Saferworld: London, 2003 (forthcoming).

<sup>45</sup> RFE/RL Caucasus Report, ‘Trouble Brewing in South Ossetia’, 4 September 2002, Volume 5, Number 29.

Azerbaijan is populated by 7,953,400 people (1999 census), 91% of which are ethnic Azeris, main minorities include Lezgins (2.2%), Avars (0.6%) and other North Caucasians, and Russians (1.8%).

The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan stipulates the unitary state structure, resisting any suggestion of autonomous arrangements for its minorities and making no provision for the status of Karabakh, if incorporated back. The demands for political, or even cultural autonomy, articulated throughout the 1990s by the Lezgin groups, therefore, have no legal outlet. The heads of local administrations are centrally nominated, while President Aliiev keeps a close eye on personnel appointments in the minority-populated areas. He has access to prominent representatives of the minorities communities, especially those with whom he worked in his time as the Soviet ruler of Azerbaijan. While various committees on nationality affairs exist in the presidential administration and in the parliament, the most prominent political body dealing with minority problems is the Ministry for State Security.

Since independence, Azerbaijan is becoming more ethnically homogenous. Most of the Armenians, many Russians, Jew and Greeks already left Azerbaijan. The same trend affects smaller indigenous groups, such as the Laz, Tat, Avar, Tsakhur. As the state support for their languages and cultural facilities diminishes, there is an intensification of the fear they might disappear altogether as distinct communities. The practice of registering some representatives of minority groups as members of the Azeri group diminishes their official proportion which is regarded by the state as an important aspect of nation-building.

Apart from the Russians who mainly live in Baku and other cities, minorities are concentrated in remote areas either in the north or south of the country. By the same token as in Georgia and Armenia, outlying provinces tend to be much poorer than the metropolitan area,<sup>46</sup> whether they are minority areas or ethnic Azeris.

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<sup>46</sup> for instance, RFE/RL Caucasus Report 'Latest suicide highlights extent of poverty', 13 September 2002, Volume 5, Number 30. The minimum monthly wage in Azerbaijan is 27,500 manats (\$5). Doctors earn on average approximately 100,000 manats (\$20), teachers and police employees -- nearly 150,000 manats (\$30). The minimum state pension is 55,000 manats (\$11). - "Azerbaijan," a weekly analytical-information bulletin, No. 23 [325], 6 June 2002.

The authoritarian and highly personalised regime of the President Aliev firmly holds the reigns of power. Its approach to minority issues is in essence a variant of the Soviet pattern of recognising the power of ethnicity, but suppressing political demands for autonomy. On the one hand, the state practices detention and prosecution of real or alleged separatists, such as Talysh and Lezgin who are given long jail sentences for their 'terrorist activities'. On the other hand, many Lezgins live in Baku where they occupy senior positions in the civil service, army and parliament. The Aliev regime ensures that for the sake of stability ethnic minorities - and women - are proportionally represented in public positions. The state renders financial and political support to the officially sanctioned minority organisations, such as the Samur Lezgin National Centre.

However, the lesson which the government has drawn from the Nagorno Karabakh conflict is that if they had denied the importance of ethnic identity and suppressed emerging secessionist tendencies from the beginning, it might have been possible to prevent separatism from becoming a mobilising force. Such conclusions have made the government very wary of recognising any level of ethnic demands from whatever source.

On the whole, such policies make the situation of minorities bearable. However, political stability in the country - and the situation of minorities - are dependent on the survival of the President Heidar Aliev (born in 1923). When he goes, present hidden tensions may become serious risk factors.

### *Language and Education*

In Azerbaijan minorities have since Soviet times enjoyed better proficiency in the majority language, as compared to their neighbours. Russian is also more widely used in Baku and receives state attention; in the provinces, however, the situation is changing. The issue is rather how to keep minority languages and culture protected in future. In this respect, the transition to Latin script, ordered by the president since 1 August 2001 to bring it into line with the Turkish alphabet, has caused alarm among the minorities (a transition period has been introduced, but it has been largely ignored,

until the president prohibited the use of Cyrillic). One has to add that the move is also unpopular among the Azeri majority.

### *International Community and Civil Society*

Although Azerbaijan is to benefit from exploitation of its energy resources, developmental aid to the country has been limited. US state assistance to Azerbaijan has been restricted by Section 907 (a) of the Freedom Support Act of the US Congress which prohibits aid to the regimes responsible for blockades of other states. In 2002 the US Congress has waived this section as a reward for Azerbaijan's support in the 'war against terrorism', and a flow of funds into civil society development is expected.

Civil society in Azerbaijan, as elsewhere in the Caucasus, remains limited, with NGOs concentrated mainly in the capital and often based on family ties. Relationships within the NGO community are highly conflictual, as many are an extension of opposition parties and are much politicised. Funds for NGOs have been more scarce in Azerbaijan, leading to acute competition. As a result of internal strife, the civil society's cumulative impact on changing attitudes and practices leaves much to be desired. On the Karabakh issue, civil society agents and opposition parties proved extremely unwilling to open up a debate on a need for serious compromise or to challenge views prevalent in their societies, at times being more militant than the political leadership. As Vaux and Goodhand observe, the real problems lie in the extremely limited nature of civil society with these groups having little claim to any constituency. Dependency on external support for funding further separate them from the rest of the people.<sup>47</sup>

### **Situation of Particular Minorities**

#### *Lezgins*

Currently Lezgin are the second largest group in Azerbaijan. Some 250,000 Lezgins live on both sides of the river Samur in southern Dagestan (Russia), while there are

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<sup>47</sup> Tony Vaux and Jonathan Goodhand, *War and Peace in the Southern Caucasus: a Strategic Conflict Assessment of Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict*, Report by Humanitarian Initiatives, 2002, pp. 28-29.

178,000 (2.2 per cent of population, 1999 census) in northern Azerbaijan. The local experts estimate that the real numbers are 250-60,000.<sup>48</sup> They live in Gussary where they constitute 91 per cent, in Khachmaz, Sheki and Quba regions, and Baku is 15 per cent Lezgin.

Tensions between Lezgins and Azeris began in 1992, but reached a peak in mid-1994, soon after the period of heavy casualties on the Karabakh front and resistance to conscription to the Azerbaijani army. Since then tensions receded, but the fear of assimilation and the perception of a threat to their community remain, especially since division of the ethnic group between Azerbaijan and Dagestan poses the threat that a distinctive Lezgin identity might be weakened.

Most Lezgins are bi- or trilingual, speaking Lezgin, Azeri and Russian. The Azerbaijan state takes initiatives to promote the language and culture of the Lezgins, such as state sponsorship for the Lezgin-language newspapers and radio programmes. A Lezgin National Drama Theatre was established in 1992 in Gussary. A branch of the Baku Teachers' Training College is located in Gussary and prepares students for teaching Lezgin in primary schools. It also acts as a centre of scholarship on the language.

The main language of instruction in schools in Azerbaijan is either Azeri or Russian, but in primary schools with many Lezgin pupils, two sessions a week are offered in the Lezgin language. In the Lezgin areas of Dagestan Lezgin is still the language of instruction in primary schools, as was the case in Soviet Azerbaijan. Written script for the Lezgin was designed in late 19th century, only to be changed from Arabic to Latin in the 1920s after the October Revolution. In 1938 it was changed again from Latin into Cyrillic, and in 2001 - back into Latin. The transfer to the Latin script from the Cyrillic enacted by Aliiev since 1 August 2001 for Azeri and Lezgin caused Lezgins to appeal to the authorities to revoke such measures where the Lezgin language was concerned. They claim that not only are Lezgin and Azeri very different, but also that

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<sup>48</sup>Yunusov, A., 'Ethnic Composition of Azerbaijan (according to the 1999 census)'

their relationship with their ethnic kin across the border would suffer, as the latter continue with the Cyrillic script. The authorities, however, remain unimpressed.

### *Avars*

The Avars live in Zakataly and Belokany regions in the north of the country, numbering some 50,000 (0.6 per cent of the population of Azerbaijan)<sup>49</sup>, while the majority of the Avars live in Dagestan where they constitute the largest ethnic group (600,000). Interethnic relations in the north are prone to tensions, especially over crime and the actions of law enforcement agencies. Throughout 2001 clashes have erupted a few times between the locals and the predominantly Azeri police, several people were killed.

### *Talysh*

The Talysh are an Iranian people who adhere to Shi'a Islam. They live in south-eastern Azerbaijan, mainly in the Lenkoran and Massaly region and are overwhelmingly rural (97 per cent). In 1989 21,200 Talysh were registered (0,3 per cent of population). The 1999 census reported 76,800 Talysh (1 per cent). Some Azeri experts, however, believe that in reality between 200 and 250,000 Talysh live in Azerbaijan, but the authorities are reluctant to admit this.<sup>50</sup>

In July 1993 at the time of turmoil in Azerbaijan which ended the Azerbaijan Popular Front rule, a 'Talysh-Mugan Republic' in Lenkoran was proclaimed by Ali Akram Hummatov. His group tried to set up border posts with Azerbaijan. It was crushed by the Aliev regime by August 1993 with relative ease and the leader ended up with a lengthy jail sentence.<sup>51</sup> Currently it is believed that Iranian influence is growing in the Lenkoran area, which is becoming visibly more Muslim with new mosques and madrases established.

## **Conflict over Nagorno Karabakh<sup>52</sup>**

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<sup>49</sup> Yunusov, A., 'Ethnic Composition of Azerbaijan (according to the 1999 census)'

<sup>50</sup> Yunusov, A., 'Ethnic Composition'.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Arzu Abdullaeva, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, Baku, September 2001.

The conflict in Nagorno Karabakh, in Soviet times an autonomous *oblast* (province) of the Union Republic of Azerbaijan with predominantly ethnic Armenian composition, dates back from 1988. Karabakh Armenian grievances over ethnic discrimination of the perceived Azerbaijani policy of a denial of cultural rights, resettlement of ethnic Azeris into Karabakh which led to a shift in the demographic balance (Armenians made up 94 per cent of the population in 1921, reduced to 76 per cent in 1979) and suspicion of underinvestment in the region found close rapport within Armenia. The desire for the region to be transferred from Azerbaijani to Armenian jurisdiction within broader USSR federal arrangements led to escalation of tensions, ethnic conflict and, subsequently, a war between the two states when they acquired independence in 1991.<sup>53</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, Armenia has practically formed a common state with Karabakh. Military and political figures from Karabakh, including President Robert Kocharian, hold key positions in Armenia. The struggle for the ethnic cause also strengthened the Armenian identity. Armenia's military superiority and the seizure of strategic positions around Karabakh mean that security concerns are low. The Armenian diaspora financed a programme of reconstruction in Karabakh, thus enabling the region to avoid the worst consequences of post-war devastation. However, Azerbaijan has cut road, rail and energy links with Armenia, supported by Turkey which also closed its borders. Armenia retaliated with the closure of its border with Nakhichevan, Azerbaijan.

The predominant perception in Armenia is that the current situation is 'peace', however imperfect, and that the conflict is 'resolved', although the terms of resolution are not recognised. By contrast, the Azerbaijani perspective is that the reality is 'war' and all efforts towards normalisation of relations and 'regional cooperation' only serve to legitimise the *status quo*. Positions of the sides remain far apart, such as the political status of Karabakh, security guarantees for it in case of Armenian withdrawal from the territories outside Karabakh which Armenian army currently holds, the issue of Lachin corridor connecting Karabakh to Armenia, and return of Azeri IDPs,

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<sup>52</sup> for contemporary issues see Vaux and Goodhand

<sup>53</sup> for the analysis of the issues of conflict see Herzig, E., *Ibid.*

especially to Shusha, a town of considerable cultural significance for Azeris who made up most of its inhabitants prior to the conflict.

In 1992 the OSCE Minsk Group was set up as the international vehicle for resolution of the Karabakh conflict. States with influential Armenian diasporas - the US, France and Russia - take an active interest in the conflict mediation efforts and became its co-chairs. The Minsk Group advocates a phased process of settlement, the notion shared by Azerbaijan, but rejected by Armenia which prefers a package solution to embrace all aspects of settlement. In early 2001 the Karabakh peace talks gained momentum, culminating in the Key West summit between the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia. Although presidents appeared close to making a deal, the peace process has stalled since then and relations deteriorated. The two presidents, while close on many issues, could not make a final agreement. The major obstacle remains entrenched public opinion on both sides which suspects that the presidents may betray the 'national cause' and give up 'their' territory to the enemy. The two presidents seem to be 'ahead of their populations' in their understanding of the need for compromise and find themselves unable to take their societies with them.<sup>54</sup>

The Azerbaijani army is unable to pose a threat serious enough to force the Armenian side into concessions. There is also no reliable backing for a renewed Karabakh war inside the country since the threat of further ethnic separatism remains. Minority populations - such as Lezgins or Talysh - may not support the struggle for Karabakh, since they have their own grudges against the Baku authorities. How they would react to a new war is unclear. However, there are also indications that militancy among desperate young people may be spreading. As Islam is taking hold in Azerbaijan, it may emerge as a mobilising force for future struggle. The change of power in Azerbaijan as President Aliiev is ageing, is likely to be a turning point. After Aliiev goes, the Karabakh issue could become a platform for bids for power and tempt contenders into new militancy. The Azerbaijani President is keen to reach a settlement

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas de Waal, 'Crossing the Line – Reflections on the Nagorny Karabakh peace process', Conciliation Resources, Practitioners' Notes 3.

during his term of office, however, such a political burden appears too heavy even for Aliev to bear.<sup>55</sup>

In Armenia the sensation of a war victory is overwhelming. In social and economic terms, the present is a major improvement compared to the situation a decade ago. Still, many resent the burden of the unresolved conflict and the price Armenians continue to pay. However, the idea of giving up Karabakh in return for economic opportunities is not appealing for a nation which has felt itself victimised throughout its history and has asserted its own agenda. Now, as articulated by Vahan Hovhannissian, head of parliamentary Commission on Defence, National Security and International Affairs, 'we do not need to win a war, we want others to be afraid of attacking us'.<sup>56</sup>

Azerbaijan hosts over 760,000 IDPs and refugees displaced as a result of the conflict. The government tends to keep them in limbo promising return rather than helping them to settle elsewhere. Some younger people migrated to Russia for work, but many continue to live in tented accommodation.

Prospects for resolution anytime soon are limited. Even if peace can be negotiated behind closed doors between the presidents and a narrow group of supporters, the main challenge is that both societies are largely unwilling to compromise. A policy of resettlement in areas held by the Armenian forces around Karabakh ('occupied territories' or 'security zone') which enjoy relative security has been conducted since 1990s. Applications for settlement are approved by the governor of Lachin who tends to mainly accept families. Settlers normally receive state support in renovation of houses, do not pay taxes and much reduced rates for utilities, while the authorities try to build physical and social infrastructure. At present, the numbers are small - between 20,000 to 28,000, according to local authorities.<sup>57</sup> However, if this process continues (and the expectation is that Armenian labour migrants who will be returning from

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<sup>55</sup> Matveeva, A., 'Nagorno Karabakh: A straightforward territorial conflict', in P. van Tongeren, H. van de Veen and J. Verhoeven (eds), Searching for Peace in Europe and Eurasia: An Overview of Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities, Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002.

<sup>56</sup> Noyan Tapan, 19 November 2001, quoted by RFE/RL Caucasus Report, 21 December 2001.

<sup>57</sup> Author's interview in Lachin and Karabakh, November 2002.

Russia, will be encouraged to go there), Israel-type scenario can be easily envisaged and it would be even more difficult to reach a 'peace for territories' settlement.

## **ARMENIA**

### **Overview**

#### *State and Minorities*

Minorities occupy a modest place in Armenia (about 2 per cent). Armenia (98% ethnic Armenians) is the only state in the Caucasus which almost achieved monoethnicity. In Soviet days Armenians numbered 93% of the republic's population. The Karabakh conflict with the neighbouring Azerbaijan led to expulsion of ethnic Azeris and Muslim Kurds, while restricted opportunities prompted emigration of many Russians and Greeks who have kin states outside Armenia's borders. Other minorities, such as Yezidi Kurds and Assyrians, have none, and Armenia is their only homeland.

As minorities occupy such a small proportion of population, their presence tends to be overlooked by the authorities which are preoccupied by larger concerns, such as policy over the Karabakh dispute and the economic problems. This situation negatively affects the largest minority - the Yezidis, since they are often excluded from policy-making and opportunities to promote their identity. The past Soviet policy of ensuring minority quotas and guaranteeing participation in public life and educational opportunities has gradually withered away and no specific alternative policies has replaced it. Popular nationalism, lying in the core of the new Armenian identity, goes unchallenged and often makes minorities feel socially excluded.

Armenia accommodates some 311,000 refugees from Azerbaijan who fled the conflict in 1990-91. Most of them were city dwellers and had urban professions, many displaced from Baku were Russian speakers with poor Armenian language skills. The authorities try to relocate them to rural areas, because Azeris who fled Armenia were mostly farmers. However, many struggle to adapt and lament their lost lifestyle and property left in Azerbaijan. Although the authorities encourage them to take up

Armenian citizenship and significantly simplified the procedure for them, only 46,000 have done so, as of mid-2002.<sup>58</sup>

### *Language and Education*

Since independence, Armenian language assumed its domination in all spheres, as there is far less need to use Russian for interethnic communication. Russian schools were closed and teaching of Russian as a second language vastly diminished, with an expectation that English will be more useful. However, in practice a swift transition to Armenian for those with little proficiency in it has been difficult. This includes not only minorities, but also ethnic Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan who are predominantly Russian-speakers. Call were made that it would be more productive to improve teaching Armenian as a second language, especially to adults, than to abolish teaching of Russian. Israel is cited as an example of successful methods to quickly educate newcomers in Hebrew.<sup>59</sup>

### *International Community and Local Civil Society*

Armenians are a diaspora nation, with sizeable and influential communities outside of the country, notably in the US, Russia and France. Diaspora sources provided the bulk of aid to the country, concentrating on humanitarian relief, assistance in economic and infrastructure projects, and help towards cultural revival. USAID has been the largest bilateral donor, having provided aid to Armenia totalling some \$1.3 billion between 1992 - 2000. OSCE Office in Armenia and Council of Europe address the issues of minorities in the country. Human rights groups have been relatively active in defending rights of ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, and situation on the whole is gradually improving.

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<sup>58</sup> according to the State Department for Migration and Refugees of the Republic of Armenia, Yerevan, 2002.

<sup>59</sup> Armen Arnautov, vice president of Jewish cultural centre 'Menora', in Framework Convention for the Protection of the National Minorities: legal and practical implementattion of the Convention in Armenia, OSCE Office in Armenia/CIVITAS Conference Report, Yerevan, 2002, p. 95.

Arguably, it is easier for international organisations to press Armenian authorities to ensure minority rights than in other two countries. Firstly, minorities constitute too small a proportion of the population to present a challenge, by, say, demanding autonomy. Secondly, Armenian government is generally more receptive to international instruments and is keen to use them to their advantage. The government is more willing to listen to the expression of legitimate grievances, such as language or access to economic opportunities, - but everyday popular nationalism and intolerance to 'others' are more difficult to influence. On the Karabakh issue Vaux and Goodhand observation (see Azerbaijan) applies.

### **Situation of Particular Minorities**

#### *Yezidi*

Majority of the remaining Kurds in Armenia are Yezidis,<sup>60</sup> while most of Muslim Kurds had left Armenia during the Karabakh conflict. The Kurds consider Yezidis as belonging to the Kurdish group,<sup>61</sup> which is consistent with the Soviet pattern of registering ethnic groups by linguistic affiliation rather than by self-identification. The Yezidis in Armenia insist on their separate identity based on their distinct religion which includes the elements of sun worship, Christianity and Zoroastrism. Outside of Armenia, the Yezidis are adamant in declaration of their Kurdish identity.<sup>62</sup>

The first waves of Kurdish migration came to Armenia in mid-nineteenth century, while many Yezidis settled in Armenia in 1915-20. The remaining part of the community is estimated at under 50,000. Yezidis are mainly rural and only 8% are urban-dwellers. Most live in Oktemberian and Echmiadzin provinces and are engaged in cattle-breeding. Some villages are Yezidi only, but mixed villages also exist. Their communities are based on religious and clan principles. Levels of education among the Yezidi community is much lower than among the Armenian majority: in 1989 only 1,3% had higher education and over 20% did not have primary education. Situation has worsened since, reinforced by general economic hardship and little

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<sup>60</sup> most of the information in this section is based on a field study by Marina Kurktsyan on Yezidis in Armenia, prepared for UNDP, 1996. See also Mark Grigorian, 'Growing in the Mountains'

<sup>61</sup> see, for example, 'Kurds in Armenia', Kurdish Life, Spring 1995, <http://www.xs4all.nl/~tank/kurdish/htdocs/lib/armen.html>

<sup>62</sup> Onnik Krikorian, 'The Yezidi/Kurds in Armenia', MINELRES, 16 May 1999.

incentive for education, shortages of textbooks and travel costs, as Yezidi villages are located in remote areas.

Contacts with Armenian majority are reduced to a minimum, two groups try to avoid much interaction. Social distance is vast which is also reflected in almost total absence of mixed marriages. However, relationship with Molokans is much closer and Yezidi - Molokan villages are more intermixed. Since independence the situation of Yezidis somewhat worsened for two main reasons: social and cultural distances between them and the majority population has widened, while the gradual disappearance of preferential treatment for minorities, inherited from the Soviet practice, meant reduction of various social opportunities. Since early 1990s Yezidis started to migrate for economic reasons, mainly to Russia and to Germany where Kurdish diaspora exists. Yezidis, however, note that such migration is temporary and they do not have any other homeland but Armenia.

Other Yezidi concerns include the absence of registration of ethnicity in the new Armenian passports which produced fears of gradual assimilation. The state authorities also avoided tackling the issue of Kurdish/Yezidi dichotomy, i.e. whether two distinct communities exist, or not.

### *Russians and Molokans*

Russians are the second minority. They are made up of two different groups: those in the cities, mainly in Yerevan, many in mixed marriages; and surviving religious communities of Molokans, a sect within Orthodox Christianity, who entered the Caucasus at the time of religious intolerance in Russia in early 19th century.

According to the Foundation for Assistance to Russian Compatriots in Armenia, there are 5,000 Molokans in the country, 1,500 in Fioletovo, their main village. Their self-identification was related to their creed and they used to stress that they are 'Molokans, not Russians'. This, however, changed after independence, when common concerns about language and education created a new bond with other ethnic Russians in Armenia, and with Russia as a homeland and destination for potential exodus.

Education is a major concern, since teaching of Russian language has been dramatically reduced and there are only three schools in the country with Russian medium of instruction, two state schools in Molokan areas teaching up to 8th grade (equivalent of GCSE) and one private school in Yerevan, offering full course up to University level.<sup>63</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Having lost the overarching protection of the Soviet central government and found themselves face to face with majorities, minorities have been the net losers in the changes of the independent period. They also somehow ‘fell through’ the attention of the international community, as the governments in Georgia and Azerbaijan did not welcome external engagement out of fear of fostering ethnic demands. At the same time, after the earlier turmoil, the governments of the region preserved a balancing act as a result of which interethnic tensions did not lead to new confrontations. In Georgia, the state so far failed to conceive policies to support diversity, but is too weak to pursue coherent assimilatory or centralising approaches, and minorities managed to achieve *de facto* self-rule. The future, however, is uncertain, depending much on succession and new leaderships to come.

To sum up, as matters stand now, the chance for resolution of conflicts through international efforts are slim. Moreover, certain accommodation has taken place, alternative arrangements emerged, making the current situation more bearable. However, prevention of further conflicts centred on minorities, especially in Georgia, is a priority area for the international community to concentrate upon. It also should pursue interventions with realistic expectations and honest admission of the nature of the minority problems in the South Caucasus rather than apply recipes derived from experience elsewhere. The main problem lies not in the legal provisions (law means little in practice) nor in any brutal oppression (which, unlike at the onset of independence, minorities are more ready to resist if need be), but in everyday

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<sup>63</sup> Yuri Yakovenko, ‘Language and Education Issues of National Minorities of the Republic of Armenia in the light of Framework Convention on National Minorities’ Protection, pp. 64 - 71, in Framework

harassment, discrimination, corruption and intolerance by the majorities. Attitude change is the most difficult one to tackle.