

Georgian Foundation of Strategic and International Studies –
Javakheti: Georgia’s Contagious Separatism
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It seems only natural for minorities in the former Soviet Union to feel a constant pull towards separatism. Their national borders were drawn almost arbitrarily—often to encourage conflicts—and a nascent sense of self-determination that followed the end of Soviet communism certainly plays a role in the region’s separatism, even today. Georgians, in particular, have witnessed their share of nationalist struggles, together leaving thousands dead and hundreds of thousands homeless.

In Georgia’s mostly Armenian region of Javakheti, however, the potential for conflict has always rested just beneath the surface, requiring a greater and untapped impetus to inspire rebellion. As Georgia’s southernmost region, Javakheti shares not only a border with Armenia, but also a culture, religion, and language, as Javakheti is more than 90% Armenian. Despite being born in Georgia, few of these Armenians feel any allegiance to Georgia at all. After all, Soviet leaders in the early 20th century relocated thousands of Armenian families to Georgia’s southern regions to provide a protective buffer between the Ottoman Empire and the rest of the Soviet Union. Culturally, linguistically and politically, the Georgians in Javakheti are Armenian.

And while any unrest in Javakheti pales in comparison to the tension in Georgia’s authentic separatist regions—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—Javakheti has all the makings of a civil ethnic conflict. To start, the most common language in Javakheti is Armenian, and Georgian is not a required part of the local curriculum for the same reason that Russian is not a required part of the Georgian curriculum—both nations feel a burgeoning sense of pride and self-determination. Javakheti has a better relationship with Yerevan, Armenia’s capital, than it does with the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. The central government provides very little financial assistance to Javakheti, citing economic difficulties and limited resources, which inevitably leave the undeveloped region’s infrastructure in pieces and the people alienated.

Unlike in Abkhazia and South Ossetia—breakaway regions enjoying de-facto autonomy under Russian patronage—calls for secession or reunion with the "home country" have never been quite as loud in Javakheti, even though most of the unrest tethers to economic and cultural concerns—both typical catalysts for rebellion.

More specifically, Armenian political groups on both sides of the border continuously push Tbilisi to give the Armenian language equal official status to the Georgian tongue in the Javakheti region. Yet like most countries with a large ethnic majority, Georgia requires that its public schools teach the Georgian language and Georgian history above all others. Yet Javakheti’s Armenians neither speak the Georgian language nor know its history. With a population that is less than 10% ethnic Georgian, however, such a law could hardly be enforced, as the local bureaucracies and infrastructure are entirely sustained by Armenians who speak virtually no Georgian. Making an immediate transition into Georgian is impossible, even assuming the Armenians wanted to abandon their cultural heritage. Moreover, there is said to be implicit discrimination against the Armenian language in the region’s state-run offices. According to the US State Department, Javakheti has a “relatively

independent media,” but any news about Georgia is only available in the Armenian and Russian languages. Nearly all of the news concerns Armenia and is in Armenian.

Individually and collectively, measures designed to integrate (or assimilate) a country’s diverse groups are prone to backfire. As is the case in most separatist struggles, Tbilisi is trying to balance its policies in order to give its ethnic minorities just enough freedom to embrace their own cultures, but not so much freedom as to isolate these minorities even further. Unfortunately, the best balance between these two goals is often a symbolically powerful law that is completely unenforceable, such as requiring a group to embrace another culture, and doing nothing to ensure such a transition.

Immediately following Georgia’s independence in the early 1990’s, Javakheti nearly became independent itself, due to Georgia’s inexperienced and weak central government. Only in the last decade has Georgia tried to keep Javakheti on a tight (but inevitably long) leash, understanding that the language barrier is the primary wall to integration. Without at least minimal assimilation, Javakh Armenians will continue to make additional demands for mandatory Armenian history curriculums in local schools, an end to the general “Georgianization” of Armenian culture and heritage, a Georgian minority rights law, the construction of a highway linking Javakheti to Yerevan (which Armenia will finance), and the recognition of Javakheti political movements pushing for the region’s political autonomy.

Russia and the Base

Perhaps the most important humanitarian concern for Armenians living in Javakheti is the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki, the region’s capital. After years of negotiations, Russia has agreed to withdraw from the base, which has been a crutch to Javakheti’s economy since its opening in the mid 1990’s when Georgia agreed to the Russian military presence in order to restabilize the recently independent country. Employing more than a thousand mostly Armenian workers, upwards of 10,000 locals are dependent on a salary at the base. Moreover, the Russian soldiers consume a large portion of Javakheti’s produce—the region’s primary source of income. President Saakashvili has promised that the Georgian government will fill the void left by the Russian military, whose departure is a great cause for celebration in Tbilisi, despite years of protest by Armenians living both in Armenia and Javakheti. Specifically, Saakashvili proposed to use the produce consumed by Russian troops to feed Georgian troops instead, but many analysts have suggested that surplus produce will only be a part of the crisis when Russia pulls out. According to official statistics, Javakheti produces 30 times more potatoes and 210 times more milk than the 20,000 soldiers in the Georgian army can consume. Besides, inviting Georgian soldiers to Akhalkalaki is likely to serve as kindling to the tension.

Recognizing this, on April 29, President Saakashvili altered his remedy on a visit to Javakheti: "We're not planning to set up a new military unit [there]. But we will offer those who serve on this base to join the Georgian armed forces in return for a higher pay. To those who turn down this proposal, we will offer a separate social-rehabilitation program, business [training]. These people must not feel they will lose out on the deal. On the contrary, they must benefit from the fact that Georgia is developing," Saakashvili said. Another solution, put forward recently by Georgian

Parliamentary Speaker Nino Burjanadze is to open “food processing enterprises” in Akhalkalaki to create new jobs. The ethnic Armenians in Javakheti are understandably skeptical, as they have seldom seen Tbilisi offer either relief or solidarity (see TOL, “Never Again,” Feb.25, 2004).

For its part, Russia has its own ambitions in a Caucasus that has looked increasingly to the West to provide its necessary political and economic support. Armenia happily gives Moscow its desired influence in the southern Caucasus, in exchange for Russian protection from Armenia’s neighboring Muslim enemies (Turkey to the west and Azerbaijan to the east), both of which maintain strict blockades at their borders with Armenia. The dispute over Turkish responsibility for the deaths of more than one million Armenians during and after World War I has long frozen Armenian-Turkish relations. And Azerbaijan is no friendlier, having been humiliated by Russian-backed Armenia in the early 1990’s in the Nagorno-Karabakh war and forced to tolerate an island of Armenian-dominated land in the middle of Azerbaijan. Ever since, Azerbaijan has been pining to retake Nagorno-Karabakh using sophisticated weapons purchased with its windfall of petrodollars.

Yet regardless of any real or exaggerated threat to Armenia, Russia has always been eager to manipulate the region’s conflicts—much to Tbilisi’s fury—in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh, and there is little reason to think that Russia would not similarly arm Javakheti separatists, were it ever so inclined. In fact, for years Tbilisi has accused Russia of colluding and inciting conflict in Javakheti, most recently in early March when protesters insisted that the violent death of a Javakh Armenian was ethnically motivated.

As Georgian MPs often do, Parliament Speaker Nino Burjanadze suggested that the protests and general unrest can be attributed to “serious external forces, who try to trigger destabilization in this region”—a coded punch at Russia for its military presence in Akhalkalaki. In fact, according to some Tbilisi officials, weapons belonging to Parvents, a Javakh paramilitary group, once belonged to the Russian base in Akhalkalaki, and were used in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Naturally, Russia continues to deny this, and as recently as April 26, Georgia’s own Interior Minister, Vano Merabishvili, said Moscow has had nothing to do with the recent unrest in Javakheti, despite Russia’s regional interests.

Granted, if Russia ever did fully arm and promote Javakheti’s separatists, Yerevan would have to agree to it, and Armenia feels isolated enough as it is without angering Georgia. Blockaded from both sides, Armenia must rely on its northern border with Georgia and southern border with Iran for all the nation’s international interests. So Yerevan cannot afford to be blockaded by Georgia, whatever Russia’s regional ambitions might be. For this reason is most pan-Armenian solidarity limited in Javakheti, despite a rather convincing pro-Javakh lobby in Armenia.

The Mouthpiece

Much of the protests over Tbilisi’s poor treatment of its Armenian citizens actually come from political parties in the Armenian ruling coalition government, which have a greater capacity for political mudslinging than their relatively disorganized and inexperienced Javakh counterparts. One party, “Zor Airenik” (Mighty Homeland) was

even formed by natives of Javakheti who now live in Armenia (there are more than 100,000 such emigrants, most of whom left for economic reasons). And other parties such as the “Nor Serund” (New Generation), the Armenian Democratic-Liberal Union, and the Ramkavar Azatakan Party all have similar agendas to ensure the safety of the Armenians in Javakheti living in fear of ethnically motivated harassment and violence. Nearly all of these Armenian political parties argue that increased political autonomy and self-governance in Javakheti are warranted given Javakheti’s ostracized culture and security concerns.

These moderate parties often call on the Saakashvili regime to pay more attention to the needs of Javakheti and its residents, while seldom encouraging the outright secession of Javakheti. Even still, calling for mere “political autonomy” was deemed separatist enough for Tbilisi to prohibit “Virk,” a local political movement in Javakheti, from registering as a political party in July 2002. In fact, this is why most ethnic Armenians who run for Georgia’s Parliament do so under a mainstream party—like Saakashvili’s National Movement Party—while it is no secret that they represent Georgia’s ethnic Armenian population.

Nevertheless, despite being elected by Georgia’s Armenian population, a handful of MPs—among them Van Baiburt, a native of Javakheti—is often criticized for not fighting hard enough for Javakheti’s interests. On March 16, Baiburt controversially said that “the Georgian authorities are not imposing any restrictions on Georgia’s Armenian population,” and went on to say “the government has agreed to allow official business to be conducted in Armenian in the area” because Tbilisi understands that it is “unreasonable” to expect and demand that Armenians suddenly speak Georgian. And in any case, he noted, it is “unrealistic” for Javakheti’s civil society to demand a heightened status for the Armenian language in Javakheti.

In an October 2005 interview, Baiburt even indicated that he believed Russia and Armenian radicals are to blame for Javakheti’s dangerous separatist leanings. Unsurprisingly, then, Javakheti’s moderate politicians—and certainly the radical ones—feel abandoned by MPs like Baiburt and have called him “a puppet in the hands of some dark forces.” As a result, Javakh Armenians feel they must look for help from Armenia and, to a lesser extent, Javakheti’s local government and civil society.

In response, the Georgian government and media often paints Javakheti’s civil society as as instigating separatist and anti-Tbilisi sentiment in the region, and use this as a basis for keeping these “movements” from becoming recognized political parties. While Virk’s political ambition has received the most attention, other local civic organizations—like the “United Javakh-Democratic Alliance” (a union of 8 youth organizations) and “Javak”, another group also pushing for political autonomy—are encountering equal resistance for allegedly instigating violence. Virk leader David Rstakian, however, attributes the relative calm in Javakheti (compared to South Ossetia and Abkhazia) to the restraint of these demonized groups, which he says actually prevent Armenian protests from escalating into outright separatism. In the past, Rstakian has also insisted that outright secession or reunion with Armenia is not necessary to ensure the safety and prosperity of the Javakh people—that only an

“administrative-territorial unit within Georgia [is] required in order to have Armenian schools and have conditions which would be conducive to pursuing the Armenian way of life. Georgia is a member of the UN and therefore the same standards of the protection of national minorities must be observed here as are accepted by other democratic nations... We do not oppose Georgia's political system [and] we do not call for war or strife... but sooner or later, Georgia will have to agree to a federative structure.”

In contrast, however, Vahan Chakhalian, leader of the United Javakh-Democratic Alliance has said that the Russian withdrawal leaves local Armenians defenseless, and that United Javakh would therefore retaliate if Georgian troops tried to take their place—regardless of whether they came to relieve the farmers of their surplus produce. Starkly, such declarations are eerily similar to those put forward by Abkhazian and South Ossetian separatists in the early 1990’s, immediately preceding two very bloody conflicts, which have yet to be resolved.

Likewise, “Dashnaktsutiun,” a radical century-old political party in Armenia’s ruling parliamentary coalition, often reacts to Tbilisi’s policies in Javakheti by issuing heated press releases—even warning that discriminatory policies in Javakheti give the people “no other choice than the use of force to protect their interests and dignity.” It is worth noting, however, that Dashnaktsutiun seldom wins more than a handful of Armenia’s 131 parliament seats, and frequently threatens to leave the coalition for varying reasons.

So far, the bulk of the political parties and movements in Javakheti are not, in fact, pushing for violent resistance, but they are pushing for cultural and political autonomy, if not outright secession and reunification with Armenia. But Javakh Armenians may not need much saber rattling to push them over the edge, as events in the last year illustrate.

Approaching the Threshold

For instance, in March 2005, 6000 Javakh Armenians rallied in Akhalkalaki to protest a resolution in the Georgian Parliament that called for the withdrawal of the city’s Russian base and used the occasion to protest against their many other grievances.

In July 2005, Javakh Armenians from the city of Samsar refused to allow a group of students and nuns from Tbilisi to restore a nearby church dating back to the 12th century. After accusing the nuns and students of trying to “Georgianize” the Armenian Church and culture, the argument quickly turned physical and left a number of people severely injured. That same day, in Akhalkalaki, a group of Javakh Armenians and Greeks raided a Georgian school for similar reasons.

In October 2005, Tbilisi tax officials closed 10 small shops owned by ethnic Armenians in Akhalkalaki for financial irregularities, which prompted protests by hundreds in front of the district’s state administration building. Local police tried to disband the protesters with rubber truncheons and by firing gunshots into the air, injuring many protesters.

And more recently, on March 9, an ethnic Armenian was killed in a bar fight in Tsalka, a city in Javakheti's neighboring region of Kvemo-Kartli; soon afterwards, hundreds of ethnic Armenians protested the man's death, claiming he was targeted in Georgia's natural "climate of ethnic intolerance." The Tsalka jail holding the suspected killers were soon surrounded by protesters calling for swift justice.

And only two days later, ethnic Armenians gathered nearby in Akhalkalaki to protest the dismissal of ethnic Armenian judges, who (Armenians believe) were fired for not knowing and using the Georgian language in court. To reinforce the now-frequent demand that the Armenian tongue be made officially equal in status to Georgian, the Akhalkalaki protesters raided a local court chamber, ousted a Georgian judge, and then stormed both a Georgian Orthodox Church and the local branch of Tbilisi State University. United Javakh issued a statement that described the dismissal of the Armenian judges as "cynically trampling on the rights of the Armenian-populated region." More broadly, the statement warned that the "destructive trends in the Georgian government's policy" illustrated Tbilisi's desire to "crush the will of Javakh's Armenian population to protect its right to live in its motherland."

To ease the tension, however, a Georgian ombudsman quickly ruled that the bar fight was merely a "communal crime," not ethnically motivated; and likewise, Georgian officials continue to maintain that the judges were fired for misconduct, not for anything having to do with their ethnicity or ignorance of Georgian. Nevertheless, Tbilisi has appointed a number of judges in Javakheti who only speak Georgian and must use translators to conduct judicial proceedings, much to the frustration of local Armenians, who dismiss this practice as Georgian cultural imperialism.

In the last two months, Javakhetians have held a number of rallies—both organized and spontaneous—which have protested and physically blockaded the Russian military withdrawal. Eager to facilitate the withdrawal of the Russian troops, Georgian President Saakashvili on April 28 asked his Armenian counterpart, Robert Kocharyan, to help ease the tension in Javakheti. According to a source in the Saakashvili Administration, the Georgian leader argued that Moscow is trying to make its withdrawal from Akhalkalaki as painful as possible for Georgia, by subtly manipulating the ripe civil tension within the isolated region.

Meeting Halfway?

While visiting Javakheti on April 19 and again on April 29, President Saakashvili pledged to put an end to Javakheti's isolation in Georgia, beginning with the construction of roads in the region—including one from Akhalkalaki to Akhaltsikhe (the capital of neighboring region of Samtskhe) and another road connecting Akhalkalaki to Tbilisi. Funded by the U.S. Millennium Challenge Account, these infrastructural developments, Saakashvili added, "mean that Javakheti's geographical isolation from the rest of Georgia will end once and for all; this means that local peasants will be able to freely export their products from here; this means that more businesses will come here; this means that more transit will take place here.... Roads and development—these are what Javakheti needs now."

With policies like these, it seems that Tbilisi is hoping to recruit friendly Javakh Armenians by encouraging interaction between Georgia's diverse ethnicities. More

transit means more cooperation, which brings interdependence and perhaps enough assimilation to quell separatist rhetoric and ambitions.

In fact, if national policies like these actually come to fruition, they could help integrate and intertwine the Georgian and Armenian communities through significant economic and humanitarian gains. But these are not the gains that the Armenians insist they need most: for instance, Javakheti will get an important highway, but it traverses the 300 km to Tbilisi, not Yerevan.

Tbilisi refuses to give Javakheti a broader self-governance or autonomy package because such policies are, in fact, just as likely to isolate Javakheti. Worse still, loosening the leash might set a dangerous precedent for successful separatism. So it seems, then, that the politicians have no choice but to return to the scales and reset the balance for another day of gambling, perhaps hoping simply to merely break even.

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