

## SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SITUATION IN SAMTSKHE-JAVAKHETIA AND AROUND IT

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The Southern Caucasus is not merely the crossroads of the North-South and East-West transportation and communication routes. It is the place where the ambitions of the most influential actors—Russia, Western Europe and America—clash.

For various reasons, Russia is obviously the most influential regional force, its impact is felt in Georgia's Samtskhe-Javakhetia region in particular, therefore the situation there should be considered in the context of Russia's influence.

Over the past ten years, Samtskhe-Javakhetia has been repeatedly discussed by politicians, state and public figures, as well as all kinds of experts. The region figured in numerous official state and interstate as well as public projects designed to carry out sociological research there, improve its social and economic infrastructure, and remedy other local ills. Tens of millions of U.S. dollars supplied by all sorts of international organizations (the EU, Council of Europe, OSCE) and local and international foundations based in the U.K., Germany, and the U.S. were poured into these efforts.

Today, however, no one can say that the state and the public sector have achieved concrete results: just like back in the 1990s, the local people are still complaining about social and economic problems and feel abandoned by the Georgian central authorities and the international community as a whole.

The local public leaders have returned to the political slogans of the past, which became even more radical than before.

In fact, the agreement between the governments of Georgia and the Russian Federation on the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki is the only tangible result: on the strength of the November 1999 decisions of the OSCE Istanbul summit, Russia began removing its military hardware from the base.

It should be said that the local realities are rarely discussed: each of the sides involved tends to use the media to promote its own ideas and the methods to be employed. It is very hard to say whether they have anything to do with the region's public opinion.

Some public leaders are inclined to make political decisions that might worsen the local people's social and economic situation. Political demands, especially those formulated in the last twelve months, are leading to a political confrontation between Georgia and Armenia and deeper confrontation in the Southern Caucasus and across the vaster geopolitical expanse (the Middle East, Southern Caucasus, the Black Sea Basin) of which Georgia is part. An open discussion of Samtskhe-Javakhetia's problems should answer the following questions:

- Is the current situation a natural one or was it deliberately created?
- What is behind the current developments and how are they promoted?

- What is the structure of the regional processes? Which actors are involved in each of them? What roles do they play, and what interests, aims and goals are they pursuing?
- In what way are the local processes and the processes across the much wider geopolitical expanse connected?
- What are the most logical developments of the current situation and how will they affect the local people?

Here is what is going on in the area today: "In the 1980s, this was a modestly prosperous area. Today, the meat factory, dairy, clothes factory, furniture works, cement works, printers, shoemakers and chicken battery are all closed. The railway, established briefly towards the end of Soviet rule, has been torn to pieces for scrap."<sup>1</sup>

This is what has been going on in the region for over ten years now. Since the mid-1990s, international organizations and Georgian businessmen have been trying to revive those enterprises, the state of which would, and could, be used to reproach the Georgian government.

So far, everything that was done to improve the social and economic climate in the region met with amazingly stubborn resistance from the local influence groups (especially prominent in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda), as well as certain top state structures and people in the highest echelons of central power.

It looked as if they wanted to preserve the situation that allowed them to shape local politics or manipulate all sorts of funds and grants. The interests of the local people and the country as a whole were dismissed as unimportant.

Everything that the NGOs could say about the implemented projects was obviously biased and designed to promote their interests. Few of the

<sup>1</sup> A. Lieven, "Imperial Outpost and Social Provider: The Russians and Akhalkalaki," available at [<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav022001.shtml>].

documents provided a true picture, described the real problems, or offered solutions in the interests of the local population.

It is commonly believed that the idling enterprises are one of the reasons for the difficult social and economic situation; they should be restored. But in order to be restored, a facility must first come to rack and ruin, either deliberately or by negligence.

In the 1990s, practically all the industrial enterprises in the region were plundered; the metal parts were sold as scrap, the rest was used either for building private houses and commercial facilities, or merely sold off. There were more than 30 large production facilities alone among them.

Who is responsible for this?

According to the local bureaucrats who were left in control when the Soviet Union fell apart, "in the first half of the 1990s, Georgia was nothing more than a patchwork republic falling apart at the administrative seams, whereby local Armenian organizations fully controlled the situation in their region. It was Erevan's interference in the process alone that prevented the local Armenian population from achieving autonomy."<sup>2</sup>

It is not at all hard to identify personal responsibilities.

To do this we should go back to the personnel files of the 1990s to find out which of the local people de facto "ruled" the region's political and social life; who was responsible for what economic sphere in the region; and which forces in the center and Near Abroad lobbied what, etc.

The above was only part of the destruction process of local industry. At first, these criminal activities were pursued for personal material gains (this was typical of the entire post-Soviet expanse in the 1990s); later the situation ripened for smuggling, another type of criminal activity.

<sup>2</sup> "Zakavkazskaia anomalia i dzhavakhskiy vopros—miniimperii v novoy real'nosti," IA REGNUM, 10 October, 2005.

## Economic Situation

Smuggling affects not only individual regions but the country as a whole in a very tangible way. In fact, many of the locals live on the illegal gains derived from smuggling, but in the case of the Southern Caucasus as a whole the smuggling map shows that we are confronted with an international smuggling pyramid and a structure much more complicated than it looks.

Its history goes further back than the 1990s; the Russian military base has an important role to play in the pyramid.

“Their presence underlines what is by far the most important reason for the desire of local people to keep the base—its crucial economic role in a deeply impoverished region... Other than smuggling across the border from Armenia (with drugs and other goods often coming originally from Iran and points east), the Russian base is by far the biggest employer, responsible for supporting a quarter or more of the local population.”<sup>3</sup>

In the past few years, the leaders of the region’s states (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and the RF) have been repeatedly discussing the inadequacy of customs and border control. They are trying to fight smuggling and those who cross state borders illegally. Russia used this as a pretext to introduce visa conditions with Georgia, although everyone knows that this is being used to exert political pressure.

Still, we should bear in mind that there is a “state-governed” smuggling business in Samtskhe-Javakhetia conducted by Russia in its interests. This is more or less natural: for a long time the region remained one of the strategically important areas of the Soviet Union: it bordered on Turkey (which was a NATO member) and was crossed by a land transportation and communication corridor leading to the Soviet Union’s friends in the Middle East. At that time, we all belonged to the same state.

To gain a correct assessment of the present situation, we should bear in mind the following important questions:

- What human, information, and situational resources are critically important for continued smuggling in the region (the same applies to other, especially the conflict, regions of Georgia)?
- What aims threatening Georgia’s strategic interests is Russia pursuing by encouraging this criminal business in the region?

Whatever the case, even if the Russian Federation is managing the smuggling business, certain local people are involved as direct participants: they are people working at the local, district level (the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts) and members of the corresponding structures of Georgia’s neighbors, in short, all those who can be involved without negative consequences due to their administrative or legal status in the process or to help cover it up.

The Russian military base provided a firm basis for sustainable operations; at the same time, all the steps taken, including continued Russia’s military presence in Akhalkalaki, required justification and money.<sup>4</sup> The region’s socioeconomic situation, which has remained unchanged for the

<sup>3</sup> A. Lieven, *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> The withdrawal of the Russian military bases from Georgia (including those stationed in Batumi and Akhalkalaki) under item 20 (works designed to set up a joint Georgian-Russian antiterrorist center) of the bilateral agreement signed in Sochi on 31 March, 2006 has acquired a different nature. I would rather describe the process as transformation of Russia’s military presence in the sectors directly adjacent to NATO along the former Soviet borders.

last ten years and the radical changes of which were deliberately curtailed, is one of such justifications.

For several years, a railway to Turkey—either the Kars-Akhalkalaki (that is, across Georgia) or the Kars-Gumri (across Armenia)—has been one of the most actively discussed subjects.

What will happen if the Kars-Gumri railway is restored while the alternative project is removed from the agenda?

Due to the current political situation in the region (Armenian-Turkish and Armenian-Azeri relations in particular), the construction will be deliberately slowed down because of the Karabakh conflict and the current interests of certain political circles in Russia. The project will be completed to become an object of political maneuvers if it is the only railway outlet to Turkey.

In this context, another regional project—the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline—deserves special mention.

Despite certain official statements, the original route across the Akhalkalaki region was changed in the fall of 2002. It was done not only because of the purely political objections coming from the local Armenians, but also because of the real danger of deliberate interference in the pipeline construction in the interests of Russian rivals (oil pipelines moving oil products to Europe, including two potential lines Ukhta-Murmansk and West Siberia-Usa-Murmansk that required more time to be completed than the BTC line).

The project would have created jobs for the local Armenian people, improved their social and economic situation, and undermined the position of local political manipulators. This explains why by the end of 2002 some of the NGOs in Akhalkalaki, Ninotsminda, and Tbilisi joined the local activists to oppose the project.

If the Kars-Akhalkalaki railway operates in addition to the Kars-Gumri railway, the latter, as a purely economic project, will lose its political value as a lever of pressure.

There is also another aspect.

According to Armenian experts, today, when Armenia is “blockaded,” the annual legal trade turnover between Armenia and Turkey is, according to different estimates, between \$100 and \$120 million, which is a lot by Armenian standards.

There is probably also illegal trade turnover, the figures of which, in the context of the “conflict” and the ensuing “blockade,” are very high.

This presupposition is based on what we know is going in the zones of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Osset conflicts and on certain aspects of the officially undeclared business going on between certain “business” structures of Armenia and Azerbaijan, in which Georgia serves as a transit territory. In the absence of a conflict, the quality and quantity of business transactions as well as incomes would suffer, making shady business hardly worth maintaining.

The incident that took place on the Azeri-Georgian border in the fall of 2004 is highly significant in this respect: in the course of two months, several hundreds of oil tanks were arrested on the Azeri side, allegedly because the Georgian side meant them for Armenia. Later certain sources in Azerbaijan revealed the fact that the oil was indeed meant for a number of Armenian business groups and that Georgian businessmen were involved as intermediaries for cover-up purposes.

## Information Policies

The Russian military base remained in the region for a long time not only for economic reasons, but also because there was deliberately created information background to which the local

people were especially responsive. They lived far too long in the “special border area” that stretched along the Soviet borders and played the role of the “iron curtain” of the Cold War period. There was a special everyday and information context to match. It was easy to brainwash the people in this situation.

I myself witnessed the results of these ideological efforts at a seminar held in Akhalkalaki on 25-26 September, 2001.

The local people wanted to discuss the “threats to the region and its population,” one such threat being a possible Turkish invasion into the area similar to that carried out in 1999, when in pursuit of the fighters of Abdullah Ocalan’s Kurdistan Workers’ Party, Turkish troops invaded Iraq.

I dismissed this as an absurdity with the question: “Do the local Armenians or Armenians in Turkey intend to follow the example of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party?”

In Akhalkalaki this is not an idle fear; this is part of the complex inherited from the past—“the outpost on Russia’s southern borders”—and exploited today.

In the past three or four years, the local people have acquired another phobia—Georgia’s alleged intention to set up a monoethnic state—another political trap created by the interested structures.

Recently, Vakhn Ovanessian, who represented the Dashnaksutiun Party, announced that Georgia planned to evict the Armenians from its territory, thus forcing them to take adequate measures. A similar statement (this time about the Ossets) came from prominent Armenian political scientist Igor Muradian during our talk in Erevan in September 2004. It is obviously part of a complicated political technological process.

“Georgia is obviously trying to become a monoethnic state; for this reason its political and economic establishments will do their best to force the Ossets to abandon their land and move to North Ossetia.”

We were talking in the presence of an Osset who had fought during the 1991-1992 conflict.

On hearing this he said: “If the local Ossets are forced to move to North Ossetia, they will realize that Russia has betrayed them. Before leaving, we shall fight in the South. Later, when living together in one country, we, Ossets, shall join forces to push Russians ‘from our land,’ which means that the Russians will acquire another hotbed of permanent war in the Northern Caucasus.”

The current problems of ethnic tolerance and understanding in Georgia, which are attracting a lot of attention from the international community and certain Armenian political figures, bring to mind what Igor Muradian, an inevitable participant of almost every public and political forum in Samtskhe-Javakhetia, said: “From the very beginning, Nagorno-Karabakh was not our aim. In the 1980s, we intended to eliminate the Azeri state. The Azeris are a failed nation. It was you who transformed it into a state.”<sup>5</sup> This was addressed to members of the ANM (Armenian National Movement).

Certain political forces in Armenia have been exploiting the Javakheti question with increasing frequency—this is an important information component of Russia’s strategic interests in the region.

The radical political parties of Armenia frequently speak about Javakhetia; in the past year or two, the highest-ranking Armenian bureaucrats turned to the issue in their public speeches.

The final meaning of practically all the declarations made in connection with the processes in Samtskhe-Javakhetia and Georgia as a whole, coming from all types of political figures, was

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<sup>5</sup> ARABOT, 10 December, 2005.

summed up as follows: “We cherish our friendship with Georgia and might be interested in preserving its territorial integrity if its authorities realize that by refusing to grant autonomy to Javakhetia, something that the local Armenians want, they might threaten the interests of the entire country.”<sup>6</sup>

## Russia’s Influence

Russia is using the Javakheti question to fortify its political and economic position in the Southern Caucasus. It wants to detach the entire region, as far as the Black Sea coast, from Turkey (or, rather, from the West) and minimize the West’s direct influence on the states still beyond its direct control.

If the plan works, Georgia and its government would become economically and therefore politically more dependent on Russia and, by the same token, much more easily governed by Russia’s political establishment. In this way, Russia would become the master of the transportation-communication corridor leading to the South and the Middle East.

By the corridor I mean geographical space rather than the South Caucasian states and nations living in this space. There is nothing new in this: at all times—when Russia was an empire, part of the Soviet Union, and today—Russian politicians are fond of talking about our region in these terms. It was this approach that fostered the ideas of supporting separatism in the conflict zones of Georgia, in Ajaria, and in Samtskhe-Javakhetia.

It was under Aslan Abashidze that a project of a Batumi-Erevan corridor independent of Tbilisi appeared: a 16 km-long tunnel under Goderdzi Pass that would give Armenia access to the Black Sea.

In Russia, two prominent political figures—former presidential advisor Andronik Migranian and Director of the CIS Institute Konstantin Zatulin—were actively promoting the project represented at the local level by local politicians.

In September 1998, the then head of the Ajarian Autonomous Republic said it would be expedient to unite Samtskhe-Javakhetia and Ajaria, the idea being eagerly supported by members of public organizations of Samtskhe-Javakhetia, including the Javakhk organization. These statements came soon after Migranian and Zatulin visited Batumi and Erevan.

The Dashnaktsutiun program states that one of its aims is to make Akhalkalaki part of Armenia.

Javakhk bases its program on similar strategic political ideas. “The contradictory ideas and approaches of the regional actors toward Southern Georgia might cause conflicts and political and ethnodemographic shifts. According to one analyst, Javakheti might become as common geographical name as Nagorno-Karabakh.”<sup>7</sup>

After 1998, many critically important problems were deliberately suspended—this is true of the problems on which the settlement of the Abkhazian, South Osset and Karabakh conflicts depend. Certain decisions were repeatedly and intentionally delayed; this, in turn, slowed down other related solutions.

In fact, the processes that together were part of the regional conflicts were artificially separated: there is a tendency to discuss many closely intertwined issues separately, which makes it even harder to achieve positive dynamics.

<sup>6</sup> Speech by representative of the ARF Bureau of Dashnaktsutiun Grant Margarian at the 29th Congress of ARFD on 6 February, 2004 in Erevan.

<sup>7</sup> “Zakavkazskaia anomalia i dzhavakhskiy vopros—miniimperii v novoy real’nosti.”