Armenians in the Making of Modern Georgia

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While sharing a common ethnic heritage and national legacy, and an ambiguous status in relation to the Georgian state and ethnic majority, the Armenians in Georgia comprise not one, but several distinct communities with divergent outlooks, concerns, and degrees of assimilation. There are the urbanised Armenians of the capital city, Tbilisi (earlier called Tiflis), as well as the more agricultural circle of Armenians residing in the Javakheti region in southwestern Georgia.[1] Notwithstanding their differences, these communities have both helped shape modern Armenian political and cultural identity, and still represent an intrinsic part of the societal fabric in Georgia.

The Beginnings

The ancient kingdoms of Greater Armenia encompassed parts of modern Georgia, and left an imprint on the area as far back as history has been recorded. Moreover, after the collapse of the independent Armenian kingdoms and principalities in the 4th century AD, some of their subjects migrated north to the Georgian kingdoms seeking save haven. Armenians and Georgians in the Caucasus existed in a boundary space between the Roman-Byzantine and Iranian cultures and, while borrowing from both spheres, struggled to preserve their autonomy. The Georgian regal Bagratids shared common origins with the Armenian Bagratuni dynasty. And as part of his campaign to forge a unified Georgian kingdom in the late 11th and early 12th centuries, the Georgian King David the Builder encouraged Armenian merchants to settle in Georgian towns. They primarily settled in Tiflis, once it was conquered from the Arabs, and in the town of Gori, which had been established specifically for Armenian settlers (Lordkipanidze 1974: 37).

While there is no detailed demographic data from this period, a significant number of Armenian peasants resided in villages in the Georgian countryside, at least in the southwest near the historically Armenian territories of eastern Anatolia, and Armenian merchants dominated the

[1] Although there is also an Armenian presence in Batumi, along the Black Sea cost, and in the separatist statelet of Abkhazia in northwestern Georgia, this chapter focuses on the Armenian communities in Tbilisi and in Javakheti.

Georgian towns. Indeed, social roles in the Georgian kingdoms and principalities became differentiated along ethnic lines. Ethnic Georgians comprised the majority of the enserfed peasantry working for the rural estates of the landed Georgian nobility, but Armenian craftsmen and merchants became important in the towns. While in the Georgian kingdoms the townspeople were also unfree serfs, Armenian merchant elites often became royally appointed city managers and privileged residents – referred to as 'mokalakeebi' (Suny 1993: 37-40; Kappeler 2001: 177).

Ethnic Relations under Tsarist Rule

The annexation of the Georgian kingdoms and the rest of the Transcaucasus[2] by the Russian Empire in the early 19th century consolidated these social roles, and brought greater physical security to the Armenians. In this period the Tsarist authorities viewed the Christian Armenians as both allies in the southern periphery and also as a small vulnerable nation that they were obliged by faith to defend from Muslim oppressors. Despite facing increasing competition from Russian merchants, the urban Armenian merchants gained protection from abuse at the hands of Georgian nobles and access to wider markets in Russia, Europe and the Middle East. During the viceroyalty of Vorontsov in mid-century the Armenian merchant elite were able to increase their status and position in society, becoming hereditary 'honoured citizens' of the empire and placed in control of Tiflis' municipal government. In return for these opportunities the Armenian nascent middle class sought assimilation into Russian cultural life (Suny 1994: 94-5).

Meanwhile, the Transcaucasus was divided up and administered in regional governorships (gubernia) that were not directly associated with the nationalities living in them. Thus, there were no formal geographic categories of 'Georgia' or 'Armenia' in the Russian Imperial administration. The lands of modern Georgia were covered by the Kutaisi governorship, Tiflis governorship, and Batumi province (oblast). The territory of present-day Armenia was split between the Elizabetpol and Erivan governorships. As the capital of Tsarist administration of the Caucasus Viceroyalty that covered North and South Caucasus, Tiflis became the centre of cultural life and of economic activity in the region. As roads, railways, and other modes of communication expanded, Tiflis found itself in the centre of infrastructure connecting the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea and points beyond. The city thus evolved as a cosmopolitan and

[2] The term "Transcaucasus" is derived from the Russian "Zakavkaz'e", which means "the area beyond the Caucasus Mountains" – i.e. the South Caucasus as seen from Moscow's perspective.

multi-cultural hub of trade and exchange, a nexus of empires and cultures. Armenians were the most numerous ethnic group in the city and Armenian cultural and political life flourished here.

Another Armenian community evolved to the southwest of Tiflis in the region of Javakheti (called Javakhk by Armenians) and in and around the neighbouring town of Akhaltsikhe. This area was included into Russian Empire as a result of 1828-1829 Russo-Turkish war and subsequent peace treaties. While there long had been an Armenian presence in Javakheti, the Russo-Turkish conflict altered the demographic structure of the region. 7,300 Armenian families, approximately 58,000 people, resettled from Ottoman territories to Russian-controlled Javakheti and its surrounding areas, and many local Muslims in turn migrated to Turkey. In 1874, Javakheti was given administrative status as the Akhalkalaki district (uezd) within the Tiflis governorship. According to the 1897 Russian Imperial census, Armenians made up the vast majority of the population of the district: 72.3% (Pervaya n. d.). The First World War and Armenian Genocide in 1915 prompted another wave of Armenians to seek refuge here. Despite the harsh climate of the far-flung region, sometimes called 'Georgia's Siberia', local Armenians eked out a living through agriculture and small-scale trade (George 2009: 143).

The Rise of National Consciousness

The cultural and socioeconomic features of the urbanised Armenian merchants separated them from, and created friction vis-à-vis, the Georgian nobility and their peasants (Suny 1994). The accounts of diarists, travellers and publicists of the 19th century are replete with stereotypes of Georgians as gracious and gregarious, yet lazy, impulsive and self-indulgent, while Armenians were depicted as hard-working and industrious, yet also greedy, manipulative and deceitful. These antagonisms increased in the context of the economic and demographic transformations of the mid- to late-19th century, as the traditional agrarian economy waned and aristocrats and peasants migrated from the villages and estates of the countryside to the towns and cities. These interactions, combined with the exposure of elites to European intellectual conceptions of nationalism, facilitated the rise of national consciousness among Georgians and Armenians alike.

In Tiflis, "Georgians of various classes came face to face with a well-entrenched, financially secure, urban middle class whose members spoke a different language, went to a different church, and held very different values" (Suny 1994: 115). By the end of the 19th century, these differences in culture and social class had morphed into racial stereotypes. Urban

Georgians began to question their position vis-à-vis the Armenians, and were encouraged to define their own sense of identity by the first generation of Georgian nationalist elites, known as the 'Tergdaleulebi' (literally 'those who drank from the waters of the Terek') because their journey to the renowned universities in Russia and Europe had taken them across the river Terek.

In the progressive context of the 'Great Reforms' under Tsar Alexander II (1855-81), Armenian elites in Tiflis and in other towns of the Transcaucasus, including Baku and Batumi, began articulating their own sense of identity by means of newspapers, journals, and eventually through political organisations. Armenian intellectuals formulated an outlook and conception of national consciousness that was both essentially liberal and Russian-oriented. As Aleksandr Amfiteatrov observed, "Caucasia was Russified without Russification, and at the forefront of this natural Russianizing were, once again, the Armenians" (cited in Suny 1993: 41). The Armenian 'mokalakeebi' preserved their privileged positions in commerce and in municipal administration, and rose to high positions in the central government and its military. This pattern of elite integration, dubbed 'most-favoured lord' incorporation (Laitin 1998: 60), reached its apogee with the appointment of Mikhail Loris-Melikov, a Tiflis Armenian and decorated war hero, as Minister of Interior of the Russian Empire in 1880, charged with securing public order.

However, the assassination of Tsar Alexander II by Russian radicals from the 'People's Will' (*Narodnaya vol'ya*) movement in 1881 signalled the end to the period of liberal tolerance and the onset of the so-called period of reaction. The subsequent years saw a renewed emphasis on Russian patriotism and efforts to assimilate national minorities. Russian attitudes towards the peoples of the Caucasus became more chauvinistic, and tapped into the negative stereotypes of the Armenian bourgeoisie. Rather than being seen as a small, reliable nation of industrious Christians on the periphery that Russia was obliged to protect, Armenians were viewed as shiftless, devious and potentially subversive towards imperial rule. And as depictions of Armenians in the Russian popular press became increasingly negative, the government began to close Armenian schools and cultural organisations, including charitable societies and libraries.

Against the backdrop of the emerging Georgian national movement and this accelerating Russian chauvinism, Armenian nationalist organisations also began to take shape. The Social Democrat Hnchakian Party, or Hnchak ('The Bell') was founded in 1887 in Geneva by a group of Armenian university students, including several from Tiflis, such as Avetis Nazarbekian, Mariam Vardanian and Gevorg Gharadjian, the Armenian equivalents of the Georgian

Tergdaleulebi. Three years later the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, or Dashnaktsutiun, was founded in Tiflis. As was the case with many nationalist movements at the time, these organisations incorporated elements of socialism into their programs. At first, the Hnchaks and Dashnaks focused their concerns on the plight of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. However, due to the increasingly hostile policies of the Tsar, culminating in the seizure of the property of the Armenian Apostolic Church in 1903, they gradually turned against the Russian autocracy as well. By the turn of the century, the onslaught of Russian chauvinism had undermined the traditionally Russophile and liberal orientation of the urban Armenian intelligentsia, in Tiflis and in other regional cities, and turned perceptions of Armenians as seditious rebels into reality.

After the eruption of violence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in cities throughout the Transcaucasus during the events of the Revolution of 1905, the Viceroy Vorontsov-Dashkov restored the property of the Armenian Church and set about reviving the Russian-Armenian relationship. Though Georgia was spared from the grave ethnic clashes that occurred elsewhere in the region, Tiflis soon became the centre of political turmoil in the Transcaucasus. The incompatible goals of the Armenian national movement, the Georgian national movement, Russia's Imperial authorities, and its Bolshevik challengers, resulted in a period of great disarray.

Revolution and Conflict

In the context of the collapse of the Russian Empire in February 1917 and the quagmire of the First World War, local nationalist movements, such as the Dashnaktsutiun, took on added salience. With the loss of an imperial government that, despite ups and downs, often had served as a patron and protector, Armenians found themselves in a difficult predicament: unlike most other ethnic groups in the region, they lacked a clearly defined and defensible territorial base at a time when modern states were about to be carved out of the ruins of the Tsarist Transcaucasus.

While the centre of the former empire descended into chaos with the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II, the Bolshevik seizure of power in November 1917 and the Civil War from early 1918, the Georgian Mensheviks, the Armenian Dashnaks and the Azerbaijani Musavat party – all of them socialist and nationalist political organisations – sought to ensure stability by joining together to form the united 'Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic' in February 1918. However, internal contractions among the constituent nationalities caused this attempt at unified statehood to collapse within a few months. The Ottoman Empire tried to take advantage of the

collapse of the Russian army by sending troops to regions in present-day Georgia and Armenia. Georgians and Armenians resisted the Ottoman encroachment, but Muslims tended to support it. The Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic fell apart as Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan declared independence in May 1918. But this did little to solve the region's conflicts.

The Armenian state was led by the Dashnaks, and included several prominent Armenians born in Georgia, such as its first three Prime Ministers: Hovhannes Katchaznouni (Akhaltsikhe), Alexander Khatisian (Tiflis), and Hamo Ohanjanyan (Akhalkalaki). The first Armenian republic mostly consisted of territory from the Erivan governorship, but made claims to areas in southern Georgia. Georgia, for its part, eyed some lands controlled by Armenians (Cornell 2001: 59; Yilmaz 2009). These competing territorial ambitions left the South Caucasian republics prone to infighting, and as the Ottoman forces retreated from the region in 1918, Georgia and Armenia stumbled into war over the borderlands of Javakheti, Lori, and Borchalo. These districts had earlier been part of the Tiflis governorship but were to a large extent inhabited by Armenians.[3]

In the course of this conflict, Georgian authorities for the first time came to view its Armenian population as potential enemies. Dashnak politicians in Tiflis were arrested, and newspapers linked with the party were closed down. The governor of Tiflis declared all Armenians as 'prisoners of war', many civilians were subjected to arrest and expropriation of property, and scores of Armenian civil servants in Tiflis were sacked (Hovannisian 1971: 122). This situation marked a particular low point in Georgian-Armenian ethnic relations. Though the conflict between the two republics was resolved through British mediation in January 1919, the debacle caused the recently victorious allies to regard both states, if not the entire Transcaucasian region, as a headache in the important run up to the Paris Peace Conference (Suny 1994: 203).

The creation of the first Armenian republic in 1918, though comprising a mere fragment of the historical Armenian-populated territories and mired in conflict, presented a stark choice for the urban Armenians in Tiflis and the rural Armenians in Javakheti and adjacent territories: Should they stay in their home towns and villages, where they had been rooted for decades or centuries, even though now they found themselves in what had essentially become somebody

[3] Armenian officials felt that Armenians would be not safe under Georgian rule. During the preceding Ottoman invasion, Georgia had denied asylum to Armenians fleeing from Akhalkalaki and Akhaltsikhe and thus forced them to seek refuge in the barren Bakuriani highlands to the north, where 30,000 had perished (Hovannisian 1971: 68).

else's country? Or should they relocate to unknown circumstances in Armenia and its capital city of Yerevan, and take part in the building of a country emerging under extremely dire conditions?

Ethnic Relations under Soviet Rule

Armenians in Tiflis and Javakheti continued to grapple with these questions even after the Sovietisation of the Transcaucasus in 1920-21. For while the early Soviet nationalities policies offered many concessions and opportunities for minorities, ethnic groups residing outside the borders of their officially identified 'homelands' found themselves in an ambiguous situation.

Armenians were considered an 'advanced' nation in the Soviet schema, and as 'titulars' in the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic had significant resources available to further their culture (Broers 2004: 113). On the other hand, Armenians within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic were left in a more vulnerable situation. In line with the Soviet use of affirmative action policies in support of titular nationalities, Georgians were favoured for official posts in their republic, and migrated to the capital, which led to the nationalisation of the public sphere. To be sure, Georgia's Armenians were shielded from assimilation through hereditary nationality markers in the Soviet passports,[4] and enjoyed access to general education, as well as state-funded cultural institutions and newspapers in their native language (Hin 2003: 43). However, in addition to Russian, they now had to adapt to the use of Georgian in public life. Armenians in Tiflis learnt Georgian from their social surroundings, and preferred to attend Russian-language schools and university sectors, and therefore often lost, at least partially, their native language.

Some Tiflis-Armenians migrated to their official 'homeland', the Armenian SSR, after the properties of the bourgeoisie were expropriated due to Soviet housing policies. Those who stayed in Tiflis (renamed Tbilisi in 1936) gradually moved from the central Golovin Avenue (now Rustaveli Avenue) and left the prestigious Sololaki district and the city's old town, where the Armenian Bazaar street was renamed after General Leselidze, a Georgian General during the Second World War. Indicative of their fading fortunes, the remaining Tbilisi-Armenians became concentrated in less esteemed areas, such as the Avlabari district. Several Armenian heritage sites were demolished in the city under Soviet rule, most notably the Khojivank Armenian

[4] The nationality marker appeared on the fifth line of Soviet passports and was ascribed to new passport holders on the basis of their parental lineage. If the parents were of the same nationality, the child simply inherited theirs, but if the parents were of different nationalities, then the child had to chose between either nationality at the age of sixteen.

cemetery complex with the St. Astvatsatsin Church that had existed in the Avlabari neighbourhood since the 17th century and where a range of famous Armenian writers and public figures had been buried. The church and much of its adjoining cemetery were destroyed in 1937, and many of the gravestones were used in the construction of official Soviet buildings in Tbilisi.[5]

Unlike Georgia's 'indigenous' Abkhazian and Ossetian minorities, who presided over an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and an Autonomous Oblast, respectively, Armenians were considered 'settlers' in the Georgian republic and were denied special autonomous status for Javakheti. Yet, this region still developed very differently from the remainder of the Georgian SSR. Because of its location next to the international border with Turkey, the Soviet Union in 1923 established a special border regime covering areas up to 23 kilometres inland. After Turkey's accession to NATO and the onset of the Cold War, this zone was extended further inland and Javakheti, together with neighbouring Samtskhe, became a restricted zone, heavily influenced by the Soviet army base in Akhalkalaki (Ramishvili 2007). Local residents had little contact with the rest of Georgia, and the Georgian language was seldom heard in Javakheti. Armenian and Russian were used for the purposes of education and administration, since locals through these languages could seek out opportunities in the Armenian SSR or elsewhere in the USSR, where Russian functioned as the *lingua franca* and as a gateway for career advancement.

Ethnic Relations and Societal Collapse in Post-Soviet Georgia

In the context of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a sovereign state of Georgia, Armenians again had to reassess their relationship to, and role within, the state. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who spearheaded the drive for independence and was elected president in 1991, gave voice to a zealous ethno-nationalism, encapsulated in the slogan 'Georgia for Georgians'. He envisaged a historically enclosed Georgian nation, united around their language and through adherence to the Georgian Orthodox Church, which he perceived to be threatened by "other nationalities which were brought here by the Kremlin, by Russia, by the empire: Azeris, Armenians and even the Ossetians are newcomers here" (cited in Shane 1991). Gamsakhurdia's pursuit of Georgian ownership over the republic, couched in messianic talk of the 'Spiritual

[5] For a candid viewpoint on the privileged position of Georgians and the perceived unfair treatment of Armenians and other ethnic minorities in post-war Soviet Georgia, see the letter of the Tbilisi-born Armenian Red Army Major Sukiasov to Soviet Marshal Zhukov in April 1956 (in Blauvelt, Smith 2015 (forthcoming): 285-95).

Mission of Georgia', made it well nigh impossible for minorities to belong. This virulent and exclusionary discourse alienated Georgia's minorities – as well as a fair amount of Georgians.

In late-1991, Gamsakhurdia was ousted after a brief shooting war on the streets of Tbilisi by a motley coalition of displaced communists, democratic intellectuals, and mafia-esque politicians. Over the following years the country descended into "a quasi-medieval condition, with separate fiefdoms ruled by different warlords" (Nodia 1995: 111). Despite the secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Eduard Shevardnadze, the former First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party and Foreign Minister of the USSR, who had been invited by the ruling junta to serve as figurehead chairman of the government, managed to use his political acumen to balance the factions off against one another. By 1995, Shevardnadze had restored a semblance of order, but the state remained very weak, held together only by patron-client networks fuelled by rent-seeking and corruption. Public institutions were neither centralised, nor coordinated, and Shevardnadze's authority had little reach beyond the capital of Tbilisi (Berglund 2013). For fear of upsetting this delicate stability, and unleashing another round of conflicts, Shevardnadze could not pursue policies too favourable either to Georgian ethno-nationalists or alienated minorities. He thus embarked upon what Broers (2004: 211) terms 'the politics of omission'. Despite granting citizenship to all residents, removing Soviet-era ID markers from Georgian passports, and extoling multiculturalism and civic nationalism, Shevardnadze in fact treated minorities as passive objects to be ruled over rather than as active participants in the national political arena.

Against the backdrop of aggressive nationalism under Gamsakhurdia and socio-economic decline under Shevardnadze, Armenians contemplated their future in Georgia with trepidation. Many Armenians in Tbilisi opted to emigrate, often to the West, to Russia or the newly independent Republic of Armenia, in the early 1990s (Hin 2003: 56). They were under particular pressure since the capital was the centre stage of Georgian nationalist mobilisation. Moreover, hostilities against Armenians ran high due to the war in Abkhazia, where most local Armenians had entered the conflict on the side of the separatists by organising themselves into the Bagramyan Battalion.[6] Many Armenians who remained in Tbilisi therefore changed their surnames in order to make them sound more Georgian.[7] Even though the remnants of the

[6] Author's interview with Abkhaz official and political analyst, Sukhumi, 2009.
[7] Author's interview with activist at the Armenian Union Sayat-Nova, Tbilisi, 2010.

Armenian Pantheon of Tbilisi, most of which had been destroyed in 1937, was reopened in 2002, much of the territory of the Khojivank cemetery had at this stage been appropriated for the construction of the enormous Sameba Cathedral by the Georgian Orthodox Church. This drew ire from the Armenian community in Tbilisi, and from the Armenian diaspora, who felt that the Georgian state demonstrated little interest in protecting their churches and cultural artefacts.

While the Georgian-speaking Armenians in Tbilisi were in danger of assimilation, the Javakheti-Armenians were less inclined to yield to the Georgian state's nationalisation program. After Gamsakhurdia changed the name of Javakheti's Bogdanovka district and town to the Georgian-sounding 'Ninotsminda', and tried to establish control by appointing prefects to rule over the region, local Armenians reacted with frustration. In Akhalkalaki, only 52% of voters said 'yes' in Georgia's independence referendum,[8] and afterwards locals prevented Gamsakhurdia's prefects from taking up their posts (Guretski 1998; Cornell 2002: 163). In the meantime, a movement dubbed *Javakhk* organised an informal local election, which produced a Provisional Council of Representatives charged with governing the enclave. Its Armenian nominee was subsequently made prefect, and after Gamsakhurdia's ouster the region fell under the *de facto* control of the Javakhk movement, which advocated regional self-determination, and even had a militia, *Parvents*, at its disposal to keep marauding Georgian warlords at bay. Until the mid-1990s, this organisation effectively supplanted the state by collecting taxes and administrating law and order throughout Georgia's Armenian borderland (Demetriou 2002: 879).

Georgian authorities were troubled by Javakhk's quest for self-determination. Similar movements in South Ossetia and Abkhazia had ended in separatism, and arms and manpower flooded the region through local volunteers, who had fought in Nagorno-Karabakh, and through Russia's military base in Akhalkalaki. Shevardnadze thus set about undermining the movement. In 1994, he divided Georgia into nine provinces and appointed governors to each of them. Javakheti, where 95% of the residents were Armenians, was merged with Georgian-dominated Samtskhe (Meskheti) region into Samtskhe-Javakheti province, in which Armenians represented 54% of the population. As the competencies of the governors were ill-defined,[9] Shevardnadze's

[8] The rather high amount of voters responding affirmatively should be seen in light of Gamsakhurdia's threat to withdraw citizenship and property rights from those saying 'no' to independence.

[9] Pending the "complete restoration of the jurisdiction of Georgia", article two of the 1995 constitution had postponed the issue of Georgia's territorial organisation, as well as the question of which competencies to devolve.

envoy to Samtskhe-Javakheti, Gigla Baramidze,[10] proceeded to use his post to co-opt local elites into Tbilisi's patron-client networks. Thus, despite the formation of local self-governance bodies across Georgia in 1998, Javakheti's autonomous decision rights were in fact strongly curtailed.

The Javakhk movement disintegrated as some of its leaders were offered lucrative posts in local state structures – enabling them to extract kickbacks in their role as district administrators, police officers, prosecutors, or tax inspectors – while other activists were marginalised. Even though Armenians occupied most official positions in Javakheti, they became beholden to Tbilisi rather than to locals. In exchange for their loyalty to Shevardnadze, the most powerful Armenian officials developed informal networks, or 'clans', which were held together by the distribution of spoils from control over trade in contraband or energy resources (Metreveli 2004). Although Javakheti's elites were adept at funnelling votes to the ruling party during elections, local Armenians felt a "total alienation from the Georgian state" (Wheatley 2004: 33; George 2009). They also distrusted local officials, who served Tbilisi's interests, rather than theirs, and who on several occasions were the target of beatings (Nodia 2002: 88).

In 1997, a petition gathered 42,000 signatures demanding that Javakheti be made a separate province with an Armenian governor. These efforts were pushed by Javakhk-members who had not been co-opted, such as David Rstakyan, who later set up *Virk*, an unregistered party with a pro-Russian and anti-Turkish orientation, which had a fair amount of local sympathisers.[11] Despite Tbilisi's refusal to devolve autonomous decision rights, events in the late 1990s exposed its frail control. In August 1998, Armenian militias stopped, and almost clashed with, Georgian soldiers trying to enter Javakheti for planned exercises, which they had neglected to inform locals about. Georgian fears were further stoked by ties between local nationalists and the Dashnaktsutiun party, whose program called for the unification "of historic Armenian lands" (Georgia's 2006: 19). Nonetheless, Armenian officials went to great lengths to calm the situation in Javakheti, in part due to landlocked Armenia's reliance on transit trade through Georgia.

Many Javakheti-Armenians felt stuck in a no man's land: going 'to Armenia' meant going to Yerevan, and travelling 'to Georgia' meant to Tbilisi.[12] Despite the stability engineered by Shevardnadze, locals endured a dreadful recession. By 2000, Georgia's GDP had contracted

[10] His tenure lasted from 1994 to 2002. Baramidze was also Georgia's ambassador to Armenia from 1995 to 1998.
[11] Author's interview with leading activist in Virk, Akhalkalaki, 2010.
[12] Author's interview with Armenian political activist, Akhalkalaki, 2010.

to less than a third of its 1990-levels, and Javakheti fared much worse than the national average (What 2002; Wheatley 2009: 9). Apart from rampant unemployment, locals also had to cope with decrepit infrastructure and erratic power supply. It took over six hours to drive around 200 km long road to Tbilisi, due to the disastrous road conditions, and on the way motorists often had to bribe corrupt policemen exacting kickbacks for supposed infractions. Thus, locals seldom ventured out into Georgian-speaking areas, and instead relied on Russia's 62nd military base in Akhalkalaki, which was the region's single largest employer, as well as the most important market for farmers selling produce. Thousands of households survived thanks to the generous salaries paid to its personnel, and since military vehicles were not checked at customs, they often served as a conduit for contraband trade (Antonenko 2001). Russian Rubles remained a more common tender than Georgian Laris, pupils studied using textbooks from Armenia, and locals argued that they did not need to speak Georgian since they hardly ever met one (Tatoyan 2010).

Nation-Building after the Rose Revolution

The situation facing Georgia's Armenians, especially in Javakheti, changed after the 2003 Rose Revolution, in which Shevardnadze was compelled to step down in favour of Mikheil Saakashvili and his United National Movement (UNM). Saakashvili launched a dramatic campaign in order to rid Georgia of corruption and crime, generate a coordinated and capable state apparatus, and stimulate the integration of minorities by ensuring equal opportunities for all Georgian-speakers. The authorities sought to reduce barriers to inclusion through the protection of minority cultures, and to foster knowledge of the Georgian language among minorities.[13]

Saakashvili revived inclusionary imagery from Georgia's past, for instance by holding forth the tolerant policies of King David the Builder as a noble template (Maisuradze 2009). He also introduced new national symbols, changing Georgia's flag, anthem and its state emblem, which prominently displayed the country's new motto: 'Strength in Unity' (*dzala ertobashia*). In conjunction with these symbolic modifications, Saakashvili repeatedly underlined that all ethnic minorities were part and parcel of Georgian statehood, and equal by virtue of their citizenship. In 2005, the government ratified to the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. In order to translate its provisions into the domestic sphere,

[13] Author's interview with Georgia's State Minister for Reintegration, Tbilisi, 2009; and with the Deputy State Minister for Reintegration serving as Coordinator of the Inter-Agency Commission, Tbilisi, 2010.

Saakashvili established a State Ministry for Reintegration Issues, a Civil Integration and Tolerance Council under the President's Administration, and a Council for National Minorities under the Public Defender's Tolerance Centre (Berglund 2014). These institutions were then put in charge of executing a National Concept and Action Plan for Tolerance and Civil Integration.

As part of these efforts, Saakashvili strengthened legal provisions against discrimination, tried to reach out to minorities through radio- and television-programs in their native languages, and supported organisations advancing the culture of minorities, such as the Petros Adamyan State Armenian Drama Theatre and the Hayatun Cultural Centre in Tbilisi as well as local libraries in Javakheti (Second 2012; Assessment 2014). However, Saakashvili's liberal nationalism was alien to some Georgians, who felt that the authorities were not paying sufficient heed to certain aspects of traditional Georgian culture, such as the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). This became increasingly problematic, since the approval rating of the GOC and its Patriarch Ilia II shot up from 38.6% in 2003 to 86.6% in 2008 (Nijaradze 2008: 3). Though officials were frustrated with its influence, they refrained from publicly criticising the GOC, and only occasionally went against its wishes (Georgia 2009). In 2011, for instance, the UNM pushed through reforms, despite conservative protests, enabling other denominations, such as the Armenian Apostolic Church, to register as Legal Entities of Public Law (Bill 2011).

Nevertheless, from the perspective of Tbilisi's Armenians, Saakashvili's policies still left much to be desired. Despite the activities of the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Georgia and the Hayatun Cultural Centre, and the celebration of the 100-year-old annual Vardaton rose laying ceremony at the grave of Sayat Nova, Armenian activists listed numerous concerns. Several Armenian churches, which had been appropriated by the state under Soviet rule, had still not been returned to the community, since officials did not dare to challenge the GOC, which claimed them as Georgian churches (International Religious Freedom Report 2011). Five of these disputed sites were situated in Tbilisi, including the old town's Norashen Church, located on the former Armenian Bazaar Street, and many of these properties were falling into disrepair.[14] Only two Armenian churches were functioning in Tbilisi, Ejmiatsin from the 18th century and St. Gevorg from the 13th century, but the latter had to be closed after its dome collapsed in 2009. Activists also wondered why, if the criterion for inclusion under the official

[14] Author's interview with official at the Council for Religious Minorities under the Public Defender's Tolerance Center, Tbilisi, 2010; and with activist at the Armenian Community of Georgia, Tbilisi, 2010.

'civic' nationalism was the knowledge of a state language, Tbilisi's Georgian-speaking Armenians were heavily underrepresented in the city legislature.[15] Was it not 'their' city too? Another source of concern was the dwindling number of Armenian schools in the capital, and the closure of Russian schools, which pushed future generations into Georgian-language schools.[16] One respondent argued that, if youngsters did not receive better opportunities of learning Armenian at school, the consequence might be the 'silent assimilation' of Tbilisi's Armenians.

Meanwhile, Javakheti's Armenians – in some ways – grew less estranged from the state. The region's dreadful road network was rehabilitated through the US Millennium Challenge Corporation, and by 2011 locals could reach Tbilisi in less than three hours. Furthermore, due to Saakashvili's anti-corruption reforms, locals could embark upon these roads without having to pay bribes to police officers. Border crossing points to Turkey and Armenia were rebuilt, and construction began of a railway linking Baku (Azerbaijan) to Kars (Turkey), with a station in Akhalkalaki. Gas lines were drawn to Javakheti's biggest towns, making it easier to heat houses in this cold outpost, and the electricity supply became more reliable. Since taxes were now being collected, rather than stolen, by tax administrators, the state could afford to provide a modicum of public goods.[17] Another critical step in reducing Javakheti's isolation was taken in 2007, when Tbilisi pushed Russia to fulfil its promise to close the 62nd military base in Akhalkalaki. On top of this, the authorities began implementing several laws, which had gone ignored under Shevardnadze, demanding that local officials and civil servants be capable in the state language.

These developments did not occur without a fair amount of drama. Even Saakashvili's critics welcomed the rehabilitation of roads and efficient fight against corruption, but Armenians opposed the withdrawal of Russia's military base, which functioned as the region's economic motor, and was perceived as vital source of protection against Turkey. Georgia's participation in infrastructure projects linking Azerbaijan and Turkey, and its (unfulfilled) obligation to repatriate Meskhetian Turks deported from the region in 1944, also worried Javakheti's Armenians. In addition, the sudden application of dormant language laws was seen as a threat to the jobs and career prospects of civil servants, who had relied on Armenian or Russian during proceedings.[18]

[15] Author's interview with activist at the European Armenian Federation for Justice and Democracy, Tbilisi, 2011.
[16] Author's interview with activist at the Armenian Union Sayat-Nova, Tbilisi, 2010.
[17] Author's interview with local government official, Akhalkalaki, 2010.
[18] Author's interview with local activist, Akhalkalaki, 2010; and journalist, Akhalkalaki, 2010.

However, since Saakashvili's government upheld the practice of co-opting local patrons, Armenians lacked channels through which they could vent their concerns (Wheatley 2009: 19).

The result was a series of protests in the years following the Rose Revolution, against the firing of Armenian civil servants, attempts at artificial demographic changes, and against 'Georgianisation' writ large, but in favour of maintaining the military base, making Armenian a regional language, and greater self-determination (Hakobyan 2005; Georgia's 2006: 3). A younger generation of activists, centred on Vahagn Chakhalyan's *United Javakhk* movement, became prominent in connection to the 2006 local elections. However, as the removal of the 62nd military base drew closer, and tensions between Russia and Georgia rose in the build-up to the war in August 2008, Tbilisi's security agencies beefed up their presence in the region.[19] In July 2008, after a blast near the house of Akhalkalaki's police chief, Chakhalyan was arrested and his organisation withered away. Whether these events were part of a feud between local clans, a clash between national interests, or an attempt at Russian subversion remains mired in mystery.[20]

During his second presidential term, Saakashvili scaled back the implementation of laws demanding that local public servants conduct their proceedings in Georgian, and tried to help the next generation of Javakheti-Armenians to learn the state language through education reforms.[21] Though the 2005 Law on General Education upheld minorities' right to tuition in their native language, their schooling was streamlined according to the national curriculum. Georgian textbooks were translated into Armenian, thus replacing old textbooks imported from Armenia. New textbooks were designed for pupils learning Georgian as a second language, and a School Partnership Program fostered contacts between students in Georgian and non-Georgian schools. Plans were drawn up for teaching social science subjects in Georgian in otherwise Armenian-language schools, and about a dozen of schools in Javakheti participated in an experimental multi-lingual education program, where several languages of instruction were used in parallel.[22]

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[19] Author's interview with senior intelligence official, Tbilisi, 2011.

[20] Author's interview with political analyst, Tbilisi, 2010; political analyst, Akhalkalaki, 2010; and with a close relative of Vahagn Chakhalyan, Akhalkalaki, 2010.

[21] Author's interview with member of the Civil Integration and Tolerance Council, Tbilisi, 2010.

[22] Author's interview with Director of Civil Integration Programs at the Ministry of Education and Science, Tbilisi, 2010; and activist at the Center for Civic Integration and Inter-Ethnic Relations, Tbilisi, 2011.

However, due to the lack of qualified teachers, these programs often ran into serious difficulties. Armenian pupils in Javakheti still graduated with limited Georgian language skills, and as a rule failed to pass the entrance exams governing admission to Georgia's universities, whose diplomas had become ever more valued after the elimination of corruption in the higher education system (Fighting 2012: 75-82). Officials took numerous steps to help minorities gain access to higher education, culminating in the introduction of an affirmative action scheme in 2010 (Mekhuzla, Roche 2009). By the end of Saakashvili's second presidential term, well over a hundred Armenians from Javakheti were admitted to Georgia's universities every year.[23] Before moving on to their regular university courses, which were taught in the state language, these students had to pass a yearlong, but state-funded, Georgian Language Training Program. The younger and more malleable generation of locals thus began preparing for a life in Georgia.

Nonetheless, Saakashvili's heavy-handed policies, coupled with the rise of a credible opposition, precipitated a drop in local support for his ruling party. Unlike the situation in 2008, when the UNM won through a 90% landslide, Saakashvili garnered about 78% of local voters in 2012, while the opposition Georgian Dream coalition made inroads into Javakheti's voter base. However, after it became clear that the opposition had won a majority in parliament, some local strongmen, such as the MP from Ninotsminda district, defected from the ruling party and began currying favour with the new party of power – as he had done after the 2003 Rose Revolution too. Though Akhalkalaki's MP remained loyal to the UNM, the traditional pattern of co-optation prevails, and testifies to the persistence of patron-client ties in the context of Javakheti's politics.

Conclusion: Strangers in a Strange Land

Armenians have been rooted in the towns and villages of Georgia for a long time, yet throughout modern history they have been under external rule – Tsarist, Soviet, or Georgian – rather than their own. They have been living in the midst of larger cultural spheres, and struggled to preserve their national characteristics, while at the same time adjusting to the shifting social milieus.

The stability and tolerance offered by the Tsarist Empire enabled Armenians in Tiflis for much of the 19th century to prosper both culturally and economically, and laid the foundation for their Russophile outlook. But rising national sentiments amongst the Georgians, as well as

[23] Personal communication with official at the National Examinations Centre, 2015.

intermittent Russian chauvinism, drove Georgia's Armenians to demarcate their identity. After the ensuing clash of local nationalists movements, occurring against the backdrop of the crumbling Russian and Ottoman Empires, Armenian intellectuals raised in modern-day Georgia became prominent figures in the emergent Armenian republic and in the Armenian diaspora.

In the wake of Georgia's Sovietisation, Armenians in Tiflis lost their positions of power. They were construed as 'settlers' in what had become a Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, and many migrated to the Armenian SSR, their official homeland. Armenians in the isolated and militarised outpost of Samtskhe-Javakheti largely escaped these pressures. But in order to climb the social ladder in the USSR, many Armenians either continued the path of Russification, or melted into the dominating, Georgian, part of the republic's population (Blauvelt 2013).

Georgia's independence brought new troubles. In the context of aggressive nationalising policies, a wave of Tbilisi-Armenians opted to emigrate or assimilate, while Javakheti's Armenians defied the central government's control. Only after the Rose Revolution did the latter group, reluctantly, start integrating and planning for a future in Georgia. But the perilous situation facing Armenians in the capital cast doubt over the possibilities of staking out a life in Georgia without assimilating. Tbilisi's Armenians were losing facility in their mother tongue, denied ownership of their churches, and lacked representation in the city's legislature despite speaking Georgian. As strangers in a strange land – one which they were not masters of but considered as their habitat – Georgia's Armenians continued to ponder the issue of how to adjust to their surroundings and maximise their life chances without losing their traditions and culture.

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