

Rising Armenian–Georgian Tensions and the Possibility of a New Ethnic Conflict in the South Caucasus

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Abstract: This article analyzes the recent geopolitical developments in Georgian and Armenian societies and the possibility of a new interstate conflict between the two nations. The article focuses on the role of internal and external political factors, such as the the integration of the Armenian minority in Georgia’s Javakheti region into the political processes and economic projects in that country; unresolved issues concerning the ownership of Armenian churches in Georgia; third-party geopolitical overtures in the region; and the role of new information technologies in social mobilization and political activism. The article finds that despite a centuries-old relationship between these two countries, the possibility of new conflicts in the South Caucasus is, though small, not entirely out-of-the-question.

Keywords: Armenia, Georgia, ethnic conflict, South Caucasus

The South Caucasus region is in the news again, and not for good reasons. There have been occasional bursts of headline-grabbing events in the Caucasus since the heyday of Gorbachev-era political reforms and following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many of them having to do with military confrontation between the region’s various ethnoreligious inhabitants. Considered the traditional domain of Russian economic, political and military influence, the South Caucasus has generally been absent from Western political and media analysis, but with the recent engagement of the United States and the Euro-

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pean Union member states in the area's vast energy resources, things have considerably changed. While the states that comprise the Caucasus region were previously left to negotiate the intricate balance of power under Moscow's supervision,¹ now the balancing act has become more complicated, with different geopolitical forces competing for a dominant position suitable to their political and economic ambitions. It is in the light of these developments that the problem of Armenian and Georgian relations, as well as the question of the Armenian minority within Georgia, should be discussed; without this crucial context, our understanding of the latest goings-on in the region, and more specifically the tensions between Armenia and Georgia, will be impaired.

Before we make any observations about the recent flare-up between Armenia and Georgia, a brief overview of the region's contemporary social and political realities is necessary. In order to do that, this article will briefly discuss the various factors contributing to the emergence of this potentially explosive situation, the role of the new and alternative media outlets that have made the dissemination of critical information both possible and easy, and the role of local scholars and politicians who are increasingly becoming media-savvy in their endeavors to best their opponents inside and outside of their respective countries. The article will focus on recent developments in Georgian and Armenian societies in light of the attempted appropriation of a number of Armenian churches in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, as well as the arrest of Armenian activists in the predominantly Armenian-inhabited region of Javakheti (Armenians refer to the area as "Javakhk") in eastern Georgia. To assess the likelihood of the conflict, the article will survey local and international press reports, as well as speeches and statements made by leaders of the countries in question.

External Sources of Tension

Armenian-Georgian relations stretch back for centuries, well before the spread of Christianity in the region. Bound by geography and history, the two countries and the peoples that inhabit them share a multiplicity of cultural and social traits and cultural referents.² Their borders, over the centuries, have shifted back and forth without clearly distinguishable boundaries; the cultural monuments of both peoples that pepper the landscape attest to both of their presences and their shared suffering under foreign domination. Throughout their history, both countries endured Roman, Greek, Byzantine, Persian, and, later still, Ottoman and Russian imperial encroachments. Needless to say, the political traits and historical developments unfolding in one place have had visible and enduring effects on the other. These interpenetrating influences have left indelible marks on the arts and architecture, language and literature, and religion. Despite brief, intermittent, but also fruitful periods of what one may call a Caucasus-style *convivencia*, the geopolitical relationship between these two countries has not always been a peaceful one.³ Of late, disagreement has intensified due to a number of factors, both internal and external in nature.

Great Power Politics in the Caucasus

The tensions that we can attribute to external factors are the geopolitical situation created in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the brief but precipitous decline of Russian influence in the region that followed, and Russia's economic and military resurgence with concomitant ambitions to rehabilitate its lost power and prestige in the

post-Soviet *blizhnee zarubezh'e* (or “near abroad”)—the South Caucasus being just one vector of this approach. Another factor contributing to the rise of tensions is the active involvement in the region’s economic projects and the political processes of the US and the EU, who have refused to recognize Russian special claims to the region as a “privileged” sphere of influence⁴—a move that Russian analysts and policymakers have interpreted as attempts to deprive Russia of its status as a regional hegemon with vested economic and political interests, “intended to prevent Russia’s rebirth.”⁵

It is no surprise that external and extra-regional forces such as the US, the EU and Russia are jockeying for influence in the regional affairs of the South Caucasus, as the collapse of the Soviet Union opened a vast field of opportunity to outside competition.⁶ Such factors as the region’s oil and natural gas resources—combined with its geographic proximity to such strategically important countries as Iran and Turkey, along with the greater Middle East—have elevated the region’s international status and its geostrategic significance. Western powers have responded to this opening by making steady inroads into the region, offering financial and economic incentives and promising future European integration to the trio of South Caucasus countries—Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. Compared to the West, which has strengthened its position there by courting the South Caucasus countries through heavy capital investments, regional energy projects, security cooperation, and the EU’s Eastern Partnership (EaP) project, Russia has experienced a steady decline in the region on practically all fronts—with the exception of Armenia, where Russian companies, both state-owned and private, own or otherwise manage large swaths of energy-based and other strategically important economic infrastructures. Russia also maintains a strong military presence in Armenia through its 102nd Military Base in the nation’s second largest city, Gyumri; this is Russia’s only such base in the region.

Nowhere, however, has the rise of Western influence and the Russian decline been more noticeable than in Georgia. Russia’s comparably weaker economic and strategic leverage within the country⁷ has thus contributed to a growing narrative within the Russian foreign policy establishment that when it comes to Georgia and the South Caucasus as a whole, Russia is lagging behind the West in terms of strategic engagement. Having “allowed” American and European penetration into the region,⁸ especially in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Russian policymakers feel that American security personnel have overstayed their welcome, and blame the decline of Russian fortunes there on Western intelligence operations.⁹ Thus, one way to reengage in the regional processes and reverse this decline has been an aggressive revival of a time-tested Russian strategy in the post-Soviet space: external interference. Strategically successful precedents of this approach include Russia’s backing of the two separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as Moldova, during the 1990s.

As Michael Brown has observed in his analyses on the typologies of the causes of ethnic conflicts, in conflicts where the causes are external they are almost exclusively the result of “discrete, deliberate decisions by governments to trigger conflicts in nearby states for political, economic, or ideological purposes of their own.”¹⁰ According to Brown, however, such manipulations are possible only if there are pre-existing “permissive conditions” in the target country, since “outsiders are generally unable to foment trouble in stable, just societies.”¹¹ The present makeup of the Georgian ethnopolitical scene points precisely toward such “permissive conditions.” Given the polyethnicity of the Georgian polity, the long-existing mutual distrust among country’s ethnoreligious minorities, and

the titular ethnoreligious element, external manipulations are, in a sense, invited. Coupled with the latest Western encroachment into the region, such manipulations may well prove to be the only workable option for a revanchist Russia to project its power and keep Georgia in a semi-permanent state of ethnopolitical tension in order to stay in the game. Apart from an actual confrontation, nothing works better than the possibility of confrontation hanging over the region as a Damoclean sword.

Homecoming, Russian-Style

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian military bases remained in Georgia and Armenia—in Georgia partly due to logistical and strategic reasons, and in Armenia due to Russia's strategic considerations and Armenia's need for secure borders with its traditional enemy, Turkey.¹² To observers, it was obvious, however, that Russia never quite intended to leave the Caucasus. The Russian military presence in Georgia, along with the military base in Armenia, had provided Russia with a substantial foothold, as well as the capability to defend its interests in the region should the need arise. Neither the Zviad Gamsakhurdia nor the Eduard Shevardnadze regimes were able to force the Russian military presence out—not, however, for lack of trying.¹³ That task was left for Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili.¹⁴ Saakashvili, after assuming power through the Rose Revolution of 2003, with the help of his newfound European and American allies accelerated the process of Russian military withdrawal from Georgia some four years later, significantly reducing the Russian military footprint in the South Caucasus.¹⁵ Having no military presence in Georgia, Russian supply lines to its base in Armenia were virtually cut off, thus leaving the question of maintaining the strategic operability of the base to the determined anti-Russian, pro-NATO, and largely unpredictable regime of Saakashvili. This was a gamble that Russian policymakers were loath to make.

Another geopolitical development with negative economic and political consequences for Russian interests—over which Russia had virtually no control, and was perhaps the most obvious sign of the decline of Russia's influence in the region—was the inauguration in May of 2005 of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, built to transport Azeri oil to Western markets. The route of the pipeline was designed in such a way, however, as to reduce the Russian role in regional energy projects and to leave Armenia, Russia's sole military and strategic ally in the region, out of these endeavors.

Thus, the cumulative effect of the coming-to-power of a decidedly pro-Western Saakashvili—with his plans for NATO membership, the unceremonious departure of the Russian troops that ensued, the inauguration of the BTC pipeline, and other smaller but similar geopolitical developments—was the exposure of the “great fragility”¹⁶ of post-Soviet Russia's geopolitical agenda, not only on the global scale but in what it had come to consider its traditional “sphere of influence,” a term often used by Russian policymakers and analysts to describe Russian claims on former Soviet republics. Far from inducing paralysis or political introversion, the growing unease over “losing” the South Caucasus¹⁷ and being irreparably pushed out of the region jolted Russia into adopting a strategically revised geopolitical approach, designed to regain its lost stature in the region and break through the “tightening Anaconda noose” of the West around Russia.¹⁸ For Russia, losing the Caucasus through Georgian obstructionism was not only a worrisome option economically and strategically. It also had symbolic undertones, as it meant the perpetuation of the image—if not the reality—of Russian economic and

political debility, inviting doubts about Russia's self-sufficiency as a sovereign state capable of defending its national interests. As one pro-Kremlin journalist, Mikhail Leontyev, had put it in an article about the need for renewed Russian assertiveness on the foreign policy front, Russia needed to "... rehabilitate [its] vital interests especially in the immediate space surrounding Russia. Economically, Russia is not self-sufficient as a sovereign state without the near abroad of the 'post-Soviet space.' And, moreover, [without the above], Russia is vulnerable politically [author's translation]."¹⁹ If Russia lost the Caucasus, the thinking went, everything else would become fair game for the West. With these developments, Russian political and military elites came to the conclusion that their influence in the region, or whatever

was left of it, was no longer to be taken for granted, and postured for a populist, if dangerously assertive, foreign policy. The circumstances themselves, in a sense, "overdetermined"²⁰ a bullish response by Russia. Weary of the Saakashvili regime's increasing overtures toward Western military, economic and political structures; the possibility of a Georgian-style "color revolution" being exported to the region's remaining countries; and such extra-regional developments as the possible deployment of American missiles in Eastern Europe and the expanding American military presence in Central Asia; the Russian government realized the zero-sum nature of its engagement in the region. This culminated in the brief but brutal five-day war between Georgian troops and Russian federal forces in August 2008, when the former began bombing Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia. This headstrong war, largely launched by Saakashvili to retake breakaway South Ossetia,²¹ provided Russia with the perfect timing and the much-needed political aperture to prove that it still considered the South Caucasus its backyard—and that it would use force whenever its strategic and national security concerns warranted it.²²

This was, by any stretch of the imagination, the first salvo heralding Russia's reemergence in the region. There would be no parley this time, as Russia seemed determined to reverse Western "soft power" gains through Russian-style "hard power" politics. The European and American responses, meanwhile, have been little more than a rhetorical finger-wagging on both sides of the conflict.²³ Apart from the commitment to rehabilitate the badly damaged Georgian economic and military infrastructures through various aid packages and the expression of support for Georgian territorial integrity, neither the US nor the EU have shown a robustness comparable to that of Russia, contrary to local expectations.

Having begun reengagement with the region by capitalizing on the delicate situation surrounding Abkhazia and South Ossetia to effect punishment on Georgia for its perceived anti-Russian politics,²⁴ Russia has now assumed a multipronged platform to tilt the situation in that country in its favor, using a combination of political intrigue, economic sanctions, and renewed threats of wars or rumors of wars. Thus, in March

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2009, suspicion about the Russian financing of Georgian opposition groups to effect regime change led to a brutal crackdown on opposition activists after the latter organized mass demonstrations calling for Saakashvili's resignation.²⁵ Meanwhile, talk of a second Russian-Georgian war has become not at all uncommon. Pavel Felgenhauer, a Russian political analyst who predicted the first war, believes it is "merely a question of time" before a second war breaks out.²⁶ This sentiment is also shared by senior officials in Tbilisi who believe that "Georgia is unfinished business for Russia ... [which is] actively preparing for another moment to strike" ²⁷ While these suspicions are to be taken with the proverbial grain of salt, they are not entirely foreign to the Russian *modus operandi* in the post-Soviet space. Russia, meanwhile, is hoping that whoever comes to power—whether through its political machinations or through Georgia's own evolving political processes—if not loyal to Moscow, is at the least expected to neither share in Saakashvili's adventurism nor repeat his political follies *vis-à-vis* Russia. More importantly for Russia, such a leader will ultimately abandon the idea of NATO membership for Georgia, a Saakashvili *cause célèbre* and the greatest geopolitical thorn in the side of Russia regarding the South Caucasus. For Russian policymakers, such a leader would also be less likely to agitate Moscow, and could perhaps make the Georgian economy again hospitable for large Russian investments and capital. This could then translate into growing political clout, with certain strategic ends in mind.

Another potential mechanism that Moscow may use to bring the desired changes is the possible agitation of the relations between Armenians and Georgians in the Javakheti region of Georgia, an area densely populated by Armenians that has a history of ethnopolitical restiveness.²⁸ The combination of economic deprivation, local governmental corruption, and an overall sense of being purposefully left out of the larger Georgian political "banquet table" has exacerbated Javakheti's ethnopolitical instability and has created a suitable ground for extraregional political manipulation.

Meanwhile, the possible opening of the Armenian-Turkish border after years of secret negotiations will make Armenia less reliant upon Georgian transport routes and more aware of the plight of its ethnic kin in Georgia. While the US may want to delay the admission of Georgia into NATO, it may not do so at the cost of exposing its energy security to the whims of the Medvedev-Putin "tandemocracy,"²⁹ seeking to strengthen its presence in Georgia rather than abandon it. Seizing on the US overextension in Iraq and Afghanistan, Russia is not wasting time in reshuffling its Caucasus policy, bringing it more in accordance with its strategic foreign policy objectives. This renewed effort by Russia, coupled with the American and European desire to diversify their energy resources, has created a situation within which there is not much room for the "small states" like Armenia or Georgia to conduct independent or efficient diplomacy or foreign policy.³⁰ Consequently, internal tensions that once festered below the surface are increasingly coming to the fore.

Internal Sources of Tension

Internal factors that have contributed to the deterioration of the ethnopolitical situation in Georgia *vis-à-vis* its Armenian minority and have made available the possibility of extra-regional meddling and political manipulation are not recent in origin, and have a number of important dimensions. The complex web of internal dynamics undergirding the problems between Georgians and Armenians falls largely under two main groupings—the larger rubric of incompatible nationalist narratives and the economic debility

plaguing Javakheti and Georgia's other regions. The economic crisis, however, has made the narrative disconnect more acute. Needless to say, all of these factors have been at play simultaneously, defying easy categorization and analysis.

There are, however, things that we can safely discuss. The 2008 war between Georgia, South Ossetia and Russia exposed not only the full force of Russian desire to reverse its fortunes in the South Caucasus, but also epiphenomenally exposed the structural deficiencies of the Georgian model of dealing with ethnopolitical tensions within its boundaries since the aftermath of the Soviet demise. It still essentially remains a zero-sum proposition. The rising nationalist tide that successfully confronted the Soviet state has certainly undergone changes.³¹ These changes, however, have been more formal than conceptual, redirecting the object of the grievances from the imperial giant to the north to the minorities within Georgian administrative boundaries.

As Charles King has pointed out, in the Caucasus (and Georgia is no exception), identities are always "relational": "One might be a Christian in contradistinction to a Muslim, a Gregorian Christian as opposed to an Orthodox one"³² The newly-elected Saakashvili's introduction, for example, of the medieval Georgian King David's flag, complete with five crosses symbolizing Christianity, was not lost on observers—the flag was meant to "reaffirm Georgia's Christian legacy."³³ The flag, however, only made obvious what was already prescribed in the Constitution of the country *vis-à-vis* the Georgian Orthodox Church and its role in the society: That "The state shall declare complete freedom of belief and religion, as well as shall recognise *the special role of the Apostle (sic) Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia and its independence from the state* [author's italicization]."³⁴

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, leaders of the newly independent Georgia embarked on a multipronged program to confront the ideological challenges awaiting the country and articulate a national identity that was as much in accord with Georgia's historical experience as it was relevant to emergent geopolitical realities.³⁵ These and similar processes were in no way unique to Georgia, but mirrored several analogous developments underway throughout the post-Soviet space.³⁶ The effort included, but was not limited to, the rehabilitation of the Church's historic, cultural, and sociopolitical significance, which had been severely undermined during the Soviet period. Despite seven decades of Communist anti-religious propaganda, the Georgian Church continued to be seen as the only true repository of Georgian national ideals and the custodian of the Georgian people's collective spirit. As such, its renaissance not only made sound political sense, but was of paramount importance for the country's smooth transition from Soviet authoritarianism to a more open society.

It also signified the fulfillment of a long-held vision of a Christian Georgia, the contours of which had been expressed by one of its most famous nationalist sons, Ilia Chavchavadze. This late-19th century poet and journalist had proposed three pillars that would in his estimation sustain Georgia: "homeland, language, faith." Faith, in this context, exclusively meant Georgian Orthodoxy.³⁷ Thus, to understand the extent of the Christian religious nationalism that has since underscored the Georgian national consciousness and the exclusive role of a particular form of Christianity in the nation-building process, one need not look much further than Chavchavadze and his contemporary intellectual heirs. By all accounts, Chavchavadze had become the patron saint of Georgian nationalists,³⁸ whose thoughts on the meaning of Christianity for Georgia has developed into their ideological

backbone: “Besides the teaching of Christ, for us Christianity means the land of Georgia. Today across the trans-Caucasus the Georgian and the Christian are synonyms. Instead of saying ‘he adopted Christianity’ they will say ‘he became a Georgian.’”³⁹

Some politicians, such as Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first president of independent Georgia and the founding leader of the Society of Saint Ilia the Righteous (named for Chavchavadze), went even further, advocating a Georgian messianism with a “spiritual mission,” a light unto the world.⁴⁰ Gamsakhurdia, in the words of Elizabeth Fuller, was driven by “the mystic belief that he was divinely appointed by God to lead the Georgian people, and by extension, that Georgia has a divine mission to be a moral example to

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the rest of the world.”⁴¹ And although Gamsakhurdia described himself and his political orientation as “Christian Democratic,” much in the same way that many of European Christian Democrats describe themselves, “he behaved like an autocratic ruler who did not tolerate negotiations and bargains, creation of alliances and building of consensus.”⁴² Thus, when Gamsakhurdia declared, “Georgia for Georgians!,”⁴³ other ethnoreligious groups such as Abkhazians, Ossetians, and Armenians were by definition

either left out of the equation entirely, or rightly felt as though they had no chance in securing a fair place in the country’s political processes. This situation changed somewhat after the ouster of Gamsakhurdia and the arrival of Shevardnadze, who successfully managed to break the “wall of international isolation”⁴⁴ that had enveloped the country as a result of Gamsakhurdia’s increasingly erratic political decisions.⁴⁵ Though it was credited with bringing a degree of political stability and economic growth,⁴⁶ the year-long disastrous war in Abkhazia in 1992–1993 was largely the result of Shevardnadze’s political miscalculations and his inability to hold back the hotheads of the Military Council who sought a quick solution to the Abkhaz separatist problem⁴⁷—which, according to Georgian political scientist Thornike Gordadze, brought about the “near total collapse of Georgian statehood.”⁴⁸ Despite these political and military setbacks, Shevardnadze was able to substantially reduce tensions between the country’s various political factions and different ethnoreligious groups by refocusing his regime’s attention on more pressing issues, such as the economy and civic reconciliation—essentially postponing the issue of interethnic relations until a later time, pending the betterment of the political situation in Georgia.⁴⁹

The political situation changed again this time, when the energetic and Western-educated Saakashvili assumed power in 2004 by toppling Shevardnadze’s rule. Contrary to promises and expectations, however, the ethnopolitical milieu under Saakashvili did not change in a manner that would inspire comfort and consolation for Georgia’s minorities. That in a very short span of time Saakashvili was able to institute democratic changes and tackle the debilitating culture of corruption head-on is indisputable. Yet his approach to simmering ethnopolitical tensions, largely inherited from previous governments, was neither conceptually nor structurally much different, despite the

inclusion of civic nationalist ideas in his speeches and interviews. If anything, Saakashvili's style of mixing firebrand nationalism (arguably lacking the metaphysical luster of Gamsakhurdia's speeches) with adventurism, made manifest in the 2008 war, reminded these groups of the return of the Gamsakhurdia days—and effectively confirmed minority groups' long-held fears that given the choice to accommodate to their concerns and Georgian national interests (as Georgian political elites define it), violent methods of conflict resolution are never off the table. To add insult to injury, Saakashvili went as far as to ceremoniously rehabilitate Gamsakhurdia (universally loathed by the nation's minorities as the single most important factor in fanning the flames of nationalist hatred in Georgia) as one of his first presidential acts, calling Gamsakhurdia a “great statesman and patriot.”⁵⁰

The full cultural and sociopolitical implications of the Saakashvili era's “liberal democratic nationalism” are yet to be seen. One obvious side-effect, however, is the growing alienation of a large segment of Georgia's various ethnoreligious minorities⁵¹ via evolving existential “threat perceptions.”⁵² Among the minorities that have become wary of the return of the Gamsakhurdia-like jingoism and ethnic populism are the Armenians of Javakheti.⁵³

The Armenian Minority in Georgia

One of the residual grievances that Javakheti Armenians have continually raised with authorities in Tbilisi has been the Georgian failure to integrate their community into the political and economic developmental processes of the country, and the unwarranted eagerness in crafting and enacting legislation deemed discriminatory toward the community at large, designed to stillborn the grassroots political activism that invites attention to local problems. Among the issues that the population of Javakheti has cited are the high rates of unemployment, paltry educational opportunities, discriminatory language laws,⁵⁴ and high emigration numbers. Combined with other factors, these developments have contributed to growing unease among Georgian Armenians regarding their future in the country. There have been nominal attempts by Tbilisi to address these issues, such as the establishment in 2004 of the State Ministry of National Integration—tasked with the elaboration of strategies for ethnic minority integration—yet these efforts have been classified as insubstantial and ineffective,⁵⁵ and after the 2008 war are hardly trust-inducing for Javakheti Armenians.⁵⁶

At present, the growing alienation among Javakheti Armenians is clearly visible, and is thus manageable for the foreseeable future by the authorities in Tbilisi. There is, however, a real danger that a growing undercurrent of less-manageable alienation is slowly coming into play, born out of resentment toward Georgian emphasis on its own cultural heritage.

Conflicting visions of the development of contemporary Georgia between the center and the periphery,⁵⁷ and the centrifugal and “incompatible nationalist agendas,”⁵⁸ have also persuaded minorities like the Armenians to seek real solutions to their problems through self-governance, which would entail some form of autonomy or federalism.⁵⁹ The crises in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were largely the result of the unwillingness of the first generation of post-Soviet political elites in Georgia to address issues similar to those in Javakheti in a meaningful way. The unfolding crisis with Georgia's Armenian population also has comparable roots, and could result in the sort of “reactionary mobilization”⁶⁰ that precipitated the onset of many of the conflicts in the South Caucasus during the 1990s.

This problem is compounded by the lack of political will and resources to address the very real economic issues prevalent in the Armenian-populated areas of Georgia (with a possible exception of the Armenian community of Tbilisi), and the limited—if at all upward—move into the echelons of political power by Armenians beyond their regional locale. Impressive as some of the reforms initiated in the wake of the Rose Revolution are, especially within law-enforcement and military superstructures,⁶¹ the promised government reforms aimed at democratization and decentralization of power have yet to materialize.⁶² Contrary to these promises, there has been a noticeable increase in presidential powers; Saakashvili has projected his power in the regions through local governors by a combination of co-option and unconcealed cronyism.⁶³ Minority representation in the central government and in the parliament has been at best symbolic, limited, and largely inconsequential.⁶⁴

While Javakheti Armenian frustrations over failed integrative policies are not without reason, they are not entirely one-sided. The Armenian population of Javakheti, while demanding greater participation in the political life of the Georgian republic, is largely unrepresented in the country's official language, and as a consequence is unable to pursue higher education that holds the promise of upward mobility. This state of affairs is largely the result of the reluctance on the part of Javakheti Armenians to enroll their children in Georgian-language secondary schools, opting instead to place them in schools where the primary language of instruction is either Armenian or Russian.⁶⁵ This, in turn, has led to the inability of the graduates of these schools to compete successfully against their peers who have obtained secondary education in Georgian, who have taken university entrance exams with greater linguistic proficiency, obtain higher scores, and who have thus shut out a much weaker competition.⁶⁶ These, and similar other factors, have contributed to the increase in the rates of out-migration by Georgian Armenians to Armenia and Russia in search of better educational and socioeconomic conditions.⁶⁷ The resulting negative demographic curve has contributed to Javakheti Armenian perceptions of their collective vulnerability in the face of what they believe to be discriminatory educational policies that limit their economic and political opportunities—and, as a final goal, envisions their complete assimilation.⁶⁸ Contributing to this sense of vulnerability are also careless remarks by Georgian leaders, such as those made by Saakashvili at a joint press conference with visiting Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer in 2004. After the exchange of diplomatic pleasantries, Saakashvili went on to note:

I have said ... several times that Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's activities, which were directed towards Turkey's unification and strengthening, are a perfect example for me. I think that what he did for Turkey, the same we have to do for Georgia. Georgia should become a modern, united, developed and successful state and in many issues we follow example of our neighboring friend—Turkey.⁶⁹

Although seemingly benign and made out of deference to a visiting head of state, the remark was perceived as anything but trivial for Armenians, as Ataturk for them symbolizes the loss of Armenian presence from what is now Eastern Turkey.

In addition to the above-discussed political and socioeconomic issues, there are also problems that are religious and cultural in nature, which, given the atmosphere of mutual distrust, have been politicized. The absence of a comprehensive system of laws meant to

address issues of religion and introduce religious affairs into the legislative field has made it difficult for the Armenian Church to reclaim churches and other houses of worship that were either confiscated during the Soviet Union or have otherwise fallen into disrepair. Because of such legislative shortcomings, the proper role of religion, and more specifically the Georgian Church *vis-à-vis* the state and society, is not up for rigorous debate. It is a virtual given that the Georgian Church is the sole spiritual institution that has state-sponsored privileges, whereas other religious groups do not possess the full protection of the law and practically have no way of seeking redress of their concerns in the courts should the need arise.⁷⁰ Having the full support of the government in Tbilisi, as well as the support of the public at large, the Georgian Church *ipso facto* does not feel the need for a leveled playing field with other religious groups, which would limit or rescind its privileged position in the society. As matters stand, it is enjoying the status of *prima inter pares*.⁷¹

Not unlike other minority ethnoreligious groups in Georgia, Armenians have become politically sensitive due to the changing nature of the Georgian state-building process and the assertiveness of Georgian nationalists, who have projected the attitude that minorities such as Armenians are “temporary guests” unwilling to adapt to “Georgian culture and values.”⁷² A famous quip from the days of Zviad Gamsakhurdia captures this inhospitable sentiment best: “Armenians are renters, the Greeks—immigrants, and the Russians—occupiers [author’s translation].”⁷³ Not unaware of these nativist sentiments among the Georgian majority, Armenians have looked to their ethnic kin outside of Georgia for moral and political support,⁷⁴ perhaps hoping for some permutation of what Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink have termed the “boomerang effect,” whereby outside sympathizers will have considerably better chances to petition the host country for better treatment and administrative reforms.⁷⁵ The response from Armenia, though thus far mild, may portend more worrisome developments in the future.

The official Armenian position regarding Javakheti and the Armenian minority in Georgia has for the most part been consistent. The Armenian government has tried to stay on the sidelines and has not attempted to influence the situation through knee-jerk reactions. The Armenian leadership is well aware of the strategic and economic significance of Georgia for the Armenian economy, and has avoided pursuing open-ended hostilities with Tbilisi; it realizes the consequences should state-level hostilities arise, as Armenia will almost certainly be perceived as an aggressor with an irredentist agenda toward Georgia. Therefore, the posture of Armenian officials has been delicate and careful, utilizing more discreet diplomatic channels to convey their concerns to Georgian authorities. Former Armenian President Robert Kocharyan understood the situation well and made his position public during a meeting with the students and faculty of the Yerevan State University in April 2007. Citing the example of the “strong and prosperous” Armenian diaspora in France, Kocharyan urged the Armenians of Javakheti to “think about learning Georgian instead of how they could replace it with Armenian. Without the knowledge of Georgian Armenians in Georgia will not be able to seek senior and high government position and can not run successful businesses.”⁷⁶ Kocharyan’s successor Serz Sargsyan has followed a similar script, both in his capacity as a prime minister in Kocharyan’s administration and as president. However, he has made one important break from Kocharyan’s position with regard to the Armenian language. During a speech in September 2009 delivered at the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sargsyan also touched upon the issue of the Armenian minority in Georgia:

We have to make serious efforts in aiding the Armenians of Georgia. The logic of our policy towards Javakhk should be based on the premise of 'integration without assimilation.' Integration in this respect resumes the strengthening of the reputation of the Armenians as dignified, able, and respected citizens of Georgia. I think that granting the Armenian language a status of a regional language, the registration of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and steps taken towards the protection of the Armenian monuments in Georgia will only serve to strengthen the Armenian-Georgian friendship and enhance the atmosphere of mutual trust between our countries. On these issues we must be considerate, but also consistent and principled [author's translation].⁷⁷

Overall, there has been little variation between previous Armenian presidential administrations' view of the status of the Armenian community in Georgia and that of the current administration. However, unlike Kocharyan, whose administration had relatively tighter control over such discussions, Sargsyan's administration has been reluctant to take on Armenian activist groups in an open confrontation, allowing them a freer hand in their approach to the Javakheti issue.

Recent Developments

While the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia captured the attention of the media, four other events, while not as widely reported, carry the potential of creating a new hotbed of conflict in the Caucasus. The events in question were the arrest in Akhalkalaki of local Armenian activist Vahagn Chakhalyan after an explosion in the regional police headquarters in the Javakheti region of Georgia; the attempt by a Georgian Orthodox priest to claim a defunct Armenian Church in Tbilisi in November 2008; the arrest of two Georgian Armenian activists in Akhalkalaki in late January 2009 on charges of espionage for an unspecified third country (presumably Russia); and the reports that Georgian border patrol had initiated a land-grab by moving deep into Armenian territory. While seemingly unrelated, the cumulative upshot of these incidents has created significant resonance in Armenia and throughout the large and influential Armenian diaspora communities as far afield as France,⁷⁸ Russia,⁷⁹ and the US. The Armenian media has devoted literally hundreds of reports to these developments, while radical nationalist elements are gearing up for a possible confrontation. The Georgian media, on the other hand, has remained surprisingly silent over these issues, mentioning these developments only in passing. Some local analysts, on the other hand, have argued that these tensions are only temporary, as Armenians and Georgians have always been able to smooth out their differences.⁸⁰

The Issue of Churches

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the question of the ownership of a number of churches and other religious buildings in Georgia has become a divisive issue, with the Georgian government and various Church officials on one side and the Armenian minority on the other. The issues concerning these churches, along with concerns about historic and cultural primacy, were first debated between Georgian and Armenian scientists and historians in the pages of obscure academic journals. These debates, though mild in comparison to the battles waged by Armenian and Azeri scholars, saw their beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁸¹ But by the mid-1990s, the tenor of the arguments was beginning to rise sharply. No longer satisfied with discussions over the

age of certain buildings or the lineage of certain noble families, these scholars began to attack one another's scholarship and academic credentials. Notable among these were Samvel Karapetyan from Armenia, who heads an NGO dealing with Armenian architectural monuments in the Caucasus called Research on Armenian Architecture (RAA),⁸² and Georgian historian Bondo Arveladze,⁸³ both of whom were collecting and publishing material criticizing one another's academic prowess and alleging falsification of data. Increasingly, scholarship was giving way to polemics. Arveladze, for instance—not shying from heated rhetoric of his own—began his book on the ownership of the churches in the Georgian territory with a quote from Chavchavadze that was part admonition, part threat: “It did not mater whether the times were good for us or bad, in a brotherly fashion did we receive you, made everything comfortable for you, so do not become an enemy of ours inside our home [author's translation].”⁸⁴

While the issue of Armenian churches and other cultural monuments in Georgia was a significant one, and remained so even with the commencement of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, its importance was, albeit temporarily, dislodged in favor of legitimizing the wars at hand. Armenian academics sought to establish Armenian claims of Nagorno-Karabakh on historical primacy, based on hundreds of Armenian architectural monuments, mainly medieval churches, ancient inscriptions, and so on.⁸⁵ Conversely, their Georgian counterparts shifted their focus from combating perceived Armenian encroachments on the Georgian historical record to a renewed effort to legitimize the conflict with Abkhazia and South Ossetia on similar grounds.⁸⁶ These and subsequent arguments were proffered in the spirit of what Volker Jacoby has called “*Wir-waren-vor-euch-da*” (We-were-there-before-you),⁸⁷ a paradigm that holds sway in any historical debate in the South Caucasus and has come to embody the argument over the ownership of the disputed churches in Georgia.

With the cessation of the active phase of these conflicts, the issue was again revisited with almost the same cast of actors. Contributing to the recent spark in debates over the ownership of churches and other architectural monuments was the relative stability established in the Southern Caucasus republics following the cessation of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the overall realignment of scholarly priorities. There have been occasional violations of the ceasefire, and in the case of South Ossetia a war, but arguments regarding those territories and the ownership or the origins of architectural monuments have already been made *en extensio*. This is not entirely the case when dealing with Armenia and Georgia.

Despite the emotional pull of these debates, there appears to be some movement within Georgia to address the issue of the Armenian churches—which is not to say that the related emotions have been entirely disposed of. In 2008, the Office of the Public Defender of Georgia issued its annual report for the previous year. In the report, the ombudsman's office mentioned the problematic nature of the “questionable churches,” referring to the “churches taken away from Armenian Apostolic and Catholic churches during the Soviet rule.”⁸⁸ The report went on to call for a speedy solution to the problem by setting up an appropriate committee to revisit the issue of the church ownership and “make impartial decisions with consideration of the reconstruction of the historical truth and other factors.”⁸⁹ On the issue of the churches, the report cited instances of xenophobia and social intolerance in the media. The presentation of the report in the parliament caused consternation among its members, some of whom accused Public Defender Sozar Subari of “political bias” and

“incompetence.” The opposition Kartuli Desi party member Jondi Baghaturia noted that “[Subari’s] stance on disputed churches, “erased everything positive” in the report.”⁹⁰ While Georgian parliamentarians saw the public defender’s report as a concession to Armenian demands, their Armenian counterparts were inclined to think otherwise, dismissing the proposed commission as a ploy to stifle the issue.⁹¹ Not to be left out of the church debate, some Georgian activists in turn called for the return of “10 churches in the north of Armenia ... to the Georgian Orthodox Church” during an anti-Armenian rally in front of Armenia’s diplomatic mission in Tbilisi.⁹²

Shortly after the report was published, a Georgian clergyman, Father Tariel Sikinchelashvili (whose history of attempts to appropriate the Armenian church of St. Norashen in central Tbilisi stretches back to the mid-1990s), brought in heavy machinery in order to remove the tombstones of wealthy 19th-century Armenian industrialist Mikhail Tamamshev and his wife, buried in the church courtyard amid the protests of the local Armenian community.⁹³ The video of the desecration soon ended up on the popular video-sharing website YouTube,⁹⁴ (at the time of this writing, the clip in question was still available), and made its way through the Armenian television channels. Several Armenian NGOs, activist think-tanks, blogs and Internet chat forums led the charge in staging protests against the Georgian priest’s actions. The response from both Armenian Church authorities and government officials, in contrast, was slow, and, in many cases, muted for fear of escalating the situation and agitating Georgia, which serves as a vital transport route for Armenia. However, the ensuing protest rallies—which attracted hundreds of participants—continued in earnest.⁹⁵ After the Armenian Church authorities were criticized for their “lackadaisical attitude” toward the issue, both Church and state officials were compelled to act.⁹⁶ Soon after, the head of the Armenian Church Catholicos Garegin II put out a statement condemning the “encroachments on the Armenian churches in Georgia,” promising that Holy Echmiadzin (the seat of the Armenian Apostolic Church, or AAC) would do everything in its power to bring the problem of the AAC Georgian Diocese “to the attention of the international community, hoping for a solution” and calling for an all-Armenian mobilization and solidarity with their Armenian brethren in Georgia in their struggle to reclaim and protect the Armenian churches.⁹⁷ Subsequently, while on an official visit to Tbilisi, Armenian Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan, accompanied by Bishop of the Georgian Diocese of the AAC Vazgen Mirzakhanyan, visited the church and lit a candle inside.⁹⁸ During the same visit, the prime minister would repeatedly raise the issue of the Norashen Church with his then-Georgian counterpart Grigol Mgaloblishvili, who cautioned that the “political exploit[ation]” of the row meant to undermine centuries-old Armenian–Georgian relations.⁹⁹ The fact that Armenian officials raised the issue of the churches with their Georgian counterparts immediately after Georgia’s ill-fated war with Russia was not a coincidence. A member of the Armenian parliament, Stepan Safaryan, was more direct: “After Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Georgian side should be wiser and shun attempts to misappropriate elements of other peoples’ identities.”¹⁰⁰

Social Networks and Social Mobilization

Both Armenian and Georgian societies have undergone tremendous structural changes in terms of information dissemination. This has been spurred in large part by the diversification of the media landscape through the rise of alternative sources of information, the proliferation of NGOs, and the presence of the Internet and mobile communication

devices. While the dissemination of information during the 1990s was tedious, in many cases cost-prohibitive, and largely under state control, the Internet has provided these various groups and organizations an easy, cheap, and increasingly efficient ways to distribute their views and opinions, and to organize social networks of like-minded groups that could be utilized for future political action.¹⁰¹

The strongest evidence yet of effective social mobilization in Armenia regarding Armenian–Georgian tensions became apparent when in January 2009, a duo of Georgian–Armenian activists from unrelated NGOs Grigor Minasyan and Sargis Hakobjanian were arrested in Javakheti on suspicion of espionage. Local Armenian community activists alerted the development to their contacts in Armenia, and the arrests were immediately interpreted as “bullying”¹⁰² and “intimidation”¹⁰³ directed against the larger Armenian community in Georgia. Although the government in Yerevan responded to the arrests by way of protests delivered to Tbilisi officials through formal and diplomatic channels, the response from the Georgian government was largely inconsequential. What followed was a powerful reminder of the increasing influence of these informal and Internet-based networks. Soon after the arrests, Armenian bloggers and NGOs with a loyal base of readers and activists (comprised mostly of university students) were able to successfully mobilize hundreds of people and assemble them at a mass rally in front of the Georgian embassy in Yerevan.¹⁰⁴ Some of the most visible organizers were the Mitk (Thought) Analytical Center, the Javakhk Patriotic Union and the Yerkir (Land) Union. Not only were these groups successful in attracting demonstrators, they were also able to gain audience with outgoing Georgian ambassador Revaz Gachechiladze and hand-deliver a note of protest with a list of demands that called for the immediate release of the arrested activists. All three organizations, in coordination with local bloggers, utilized the Internet and informal networks as well as traditional media well before the day of the actual demonstration to build interest. By harnessing the news cycle, these groups were able to push politicians and the Yerevan government into action; the politicians, in turn, lobbied the government in Tbilisi for the release of the arrested activists. After little more than a month of detention they were released on bail and given light sentences, which were commuted in court by the order of the presiding judge.¹⁰⁵

The case of another Javakheti Armenian activist, Vahagn Chakhalyan, attracted as much, if not more, attention, especially following his conviction and sentencing to 10 years in prison for the illegal possession of firearms. However, despite continual protests, Chakhalyan is serving his sentence, while the Georgian government is showing no signs of relenting. The Armenian government also seems to have no inclination to interfere on Chakhalyan’s behalf, as they did with Minasyan and Hakobjanyan, although there have been individual Armenian MPs (such as Shirak Torosyan), who have taken up the case. These have yet to succeed in securing Chakhalyan’s release. He and his supporters have alleged multiple instances of prisoner abuse by the Georgian authorities.¹⁰⁶

The Issue of Borders

The issue of demarcating the Armenian–Georgian border, which has yet to be carried out nearly two decades after both countries gained independence from the USSR, is also becoming a focal point for grievances. Should the issue become politicized (and indications are that it is), it could turn into yet another pressure-point for third-party

countries to exploit. In late August 2009, the Armenian media began reporting on the incidents on the countries' border and alleged a land-grab by Georgian border patrol, who, according to these reports, had moved deep inside Armenian territory and set up observation posts near the small agricultural village of Bavra (in the Shirak Marz¹⁰⁷ of Armenia). The local farmers, whose work had been obstructed, had contacted the media only after their efforts to bring the issue to the attention of the Armenian Foreign Ministry had failed. According to a PanARMENIAN.net news service report, the ministry had notified the villagers that they were aware of the situation and were in contact with their colleagues in Georgia.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, the Armenian National Security Service (NSS) publicized an interview with General Armen Abramyan, the commander of the border patrol forces of the NSS who, while acknowledging the incidents, blamed the aggravation of the situation on the "so-called experts" and the media and called for restraint.¹⁰⁹

Again, as in the case of the arrests of the Armenian activists in Javakheti, the state-sponsored media outlets proved to be slow, if more than a little reluctant, to discuss these developments. The presence of alternative media, on the other hand, has been influential in providing critical information—and, in many instances, has forced government agencies and various regional and international news organizations to react.¹¹⁰ What makes this development all the more interesting is that these blogs and forums are also helping to draw international attention to the region by conducting discussions in languages other than Armenian or Georgian; they are increasingly conducted in Russian and English.

Conclusion

There have been a number of books published that deal with the issues in Javakheti and the Armenian cultural monuments in Georgia; these have been generally disseminated through academic circles and are less accessible for mass consumption, while the non-traditional media has been able to popularize the debates and attract diverse groups of constituents. Much of the tone of these discussions is emotive, the language increasingly resembles the polemics leading up to the Armenian-Azeri conflagration over Nagorno-Karabakh during the 1980s and 1990s. Examples of the increasing vitriol in many of the debates are plentiful, and space does not permit listing even a fraction of them here. Statements such as "In Falsifying History, Georgians and Caucasian Tatars are Unrivalled"¹¹¹ and "Armenians are genetically predisposed to theft and brazen appropriation of foreign land [author's translation]"¹¹² are not at all uncommon.

The war between Russia and Georgia in 2008 and the dramatic new page in Armenian-Turkish relations have each changed the political dynamic in the South Caucasus. There are new opportunities for the region's economic and political development, but there are also dangers to the stability of the region that are as much the result of external manipulations as of simmering ethnopolitical grievances that have yet to be dealt with meaningfully. In these developments, an important destabilizing factor is fear. For Armenians in Georgia, and more specifically in Javakheti, it is the fear of complete cultural assimilation; this prospect inevitably reminds the Armenian minority of the genocide of their kin during the rule of the Ottoman Empire in 1915. For Georgians, it is the fear of Russian imperial designs on their land and the very real possibility of Russia exploiting the Armenian card in its new Caucasus project. Given these developments, Armenians in Javakheti and throughout the diaspora are urged to mobilize, organize and resist the "policy aimed at ousting the Armenian ethnocultural element from Georgia."¹¹³ The Georgian news media, meanwhile, is awash

with news stories of impending Russian actions meant to destabilize the country and possibly partition it by offering Javakheti to Armenia and Ajaria to Turkey.¹¹⁴ At present, the situation is still manageable. But given its volatility, it is of paramount importance for the political leadership of both countries to deal with the issues at hand before it is too late.

NOTES

1. Vicken Cheterian, *War and Peace in the Caucasus: Ethnic Conflict and the New Geopolitics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009): 173.

2. See, for instance, Cyril Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1963); and Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

3. See, for instance, Silvia Serrano, *Géorgie: Sortie d'empire* (Paris, CNRS Editions, 2007): 131, 146–148; and Richard Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia, Vol. 2* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 140–167.

4. Andrew E. Kramer, “Russia claims its sphere of influence in the world,” *The New York Times*, September 1, 2009; and Helene Cooper and Nicholas Kulish, “U.S. Rejects ‘Sphere of Influence’ for Russia,” *The New York Times*, February 7, 2009.

5. Alexander Aksenyonok, “The Paradigm Change in Russian Foreign Policy: The Five-Day War as a Watershed,” *Russia in Global Affairs* 4 (2008): 75.

6. See John Measheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001).

7. Although Russian government-controlled Gazprom is still the major supplier of natural gas to Georgia, Tbilisi is increasingly attempting to diversify its energy sources buying growing quantities of oil, gas, and electricity from its immediate neighbors such as Azerbaijan (from the developing Shah Deniz natural gas field) and Armenia. In the future Georgia is hoping to buy natural gas also from Iran through pipelines now deployed in Armenia thus hoping to avoid a Russian initiated energy crisis force majeure similar to Ukraine, although the Armenian segment of the pipeline is controlled by Gazprom’s Armenian subsidiary ArmRosGazprom. For more on Georgian state strategy regarding natural gas supplies and consumption please consult “Georgia’s State Energy Policy in the Natural Gas Sector,” Transparency International Georgia, February 29, 2008, available at <http://transparency.ge/en/content/georgia's-state-energy-policy-natural-gas-sector> (accessed December 20, 2009).

8. Bertil Nygren, *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin's Foreign Policy Towards the CIS Countries* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008): 154.

9. “Prezident Gruzii Mikhail Saakashvili: “Ya ne agent TsRU, eto ne Pravda,” *Izvestia*, May 12, 2008, available at <http://www.izvestia.ru/world/article3116111/> (accessed February 20, 2010).

10. Michael E. Brown, “The Causes and Regional Dimensions of Internal Conflict,” in Michael E. Brown, ed., *The International Dimensions of Internal Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996): 580.

11. Brown, “Causes and Regional Dimensions,” 580.

12. See Gaïdz Minassian, “L’Arménie, avant-poste russe au Caucase?,” *Russie.NEI.Visions*, no. 27, (2008), for an extensive overview of Russo-Armenian military cooperation.

13. See Nikolai Sokov, “The Withdrawal of Russian Military Bases from Georgia: Not Solving Anything,” PONARS Policy Memo, no. 363, 1–8.

14. The process of the Russian military withdrawal was not initiated by Mikheil Saakashvili however, but rather by his predecessor Eduard Shevardnadze. The process gained an international legal grounding after the 1999 Istanbul Summit where the Adapted Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) was signed. Among other things Russia agreed to further reduce its troop levels in Georgia with an eye toward eventual and total withdrawal. See NATO, Questions and Answers on CFE, available at http://www.nato.int/issues/arms_control/cfe_qa_factsheet.pdf, (accessed September 30, 2010).

15. Pavel Felgenhauer, "Russian Soldiers Leave South Georgia, Others Deployed in the North," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 4, no. 212 (2007).

16. Thornike Gordadze, "Georgian-Russian Relations in the 1990s," in Svante E. Cornell and Frederick Starr, eds., *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2009): 28.

17. Igor Torbakov, "Policy Makers in Russia Concerned About Possibility of "Losing" Azerbaijan and Georgia," Eurasianet.org, June 9, 2003, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav061003.shtml> (accessed October 4, 2010).

18. See Ksenia Fokina, Yuri Politov, "Genshtab obnaruzhil novye amerikanskije bazy," *Izvestia*, December 17, 2008; and General Ivashov: "Vokrug rossii razvorachivaetsya "petlya anakondy." Scenarii budushchego," *Parlamentskaya Gazeta*, April 5, 2002.

19. Mikhail Leontyev, "Soyuz mecha i orala," *Izvestia*, February 25, 2004.

20. Matthew Evangelista, "Historical Legacies and the Politics of Intervention in the Former Soviet Union," in Michael E. Brown, ed., *The International Dimensions of Internal Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996): 121.

21. At the outset of the hostilities, the narrative that emerged placed the blame solely on Russia. Since then, however, the narrative has undergone a tremendous adjustment, especially after an independent EU commission tasked with investigating the causes of the conflict as well as its conduct by Georgia and Russia issued a report noting that "There is the question of whether [the] use of force [by the Georgian military]... was justifiable under international law. It was not." See The Council of the European Union, Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, Report vol. 1 (September, 2009): 22.

22. Russia has also tried to court Azerbaijan in a show of its determination to return to the Caucasus. In July 2008 President Dmitri Medvedev traveled to Baku on the eve of the Russo-Georgian war with representatives of major Russian energy corporations and signed several lucrative deals with the leadership of Azerbaijan that would allow Russian capital investment and a considerable say in the energy sector of that country. See Shahin Abbasov, "Azerbaijan: Medvedev Makes Splash in Baku, But is it More Style Than Substance?" Eurasianet.org, July 3, 2008, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav070308.shtml> (accessed October 4, 2010).

23. Both the European Union as well as the United States condemned Russia's "disproportionate reaction" and warned Moscow to refrain from further "provocations."

24. See Sergei Markedonov, "Regional Conflicts Reloaded," *Russia in Global Affairs* 4 (2008): 161–176.

25. Ellen Barry and Olesya Vartanyan, "Georgian Opposition Members Held on Arms Charges," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2009.

26. Ahto Lobjakas, "Signs Could Point To New War Despite Russian, Georgian Step Toward Stability," RFE/RL February 20, 2009, available at http://www.rferl.org/content/Signs_Could_Point_To_New_War_Despite_Russian_Georgian_Step_Toward_Stability/1496660.html (accessed October 1, 2010).

27. Damien McIlroy, "Russia builds listening post sparking fears of Georgia strike," *The Daily Telegraph*, June 4, 2010, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/georgia/7803879/Russia-builds-listening-post-sparking-fears-of-Georgia-strike.html> (accessed June 4, 2010).

28. Shortly after the war, it was not only the Armenians of Javakheti that the official Tbilisi would be wary of as a possible new hotbed of separatism, but Ajara as well. *Kommersant*, a well respected Russian financial newspaper reported on Tbilisi's worries in the Ajarian direction. According to the paper the Russians had agreed to swap twelve Georgian soldiers held as POWs for the convicted Georgian renegade General Roman Dumbadze, a former Aslan Abashidze loyalist while the latter was the head of the semi-separatist Ajaran autonomous republic and had sided with him in Abashidze's dispute with Saakashvili over the republic's status. According to the *Kommersant* report, the Russian request was interpreted by authorities in Tbilisi to be an indication of an impending Russian plan to dismember Georgia. See Georgii Dvali, "Gruziya boitsia poteriat' adzhariyu," ["Georgia is Afraid of Losing Ajara"], *Kommersant* no. 154 (3971), August 29, 2008, available at <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1017503> (accessed October 1, 2010).

29. The term “tandemocracy,” or “*tandemokratiya*” in Russian, was a neologism coined by the Russian financial newspaper *Kommersant* to describe the Medvedev-Putin power-sharing arrangement. See Dmitrii Kamyshev, “Tandemokratiya,” *Zhurnal Vlast’* no. 9 (762), March 10 2008, available at <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc-rss.aspx?DocsID=864737> (accessed October 1, 2010).

30. Asbed Kotchikian, “The Dialectics of Smallness: State-Making in the South Caucasus,” *Armenian International Policy Research Group, Working Paper No. 06/13* (January 2006): 8.

31. See Jonathan Aves, “the Rise and Fall of the Georgian Nationalist Movement, 1987–1991,” in Geoffrey A. Hosking, Jonathan Aves, and Peter J.S. Duncan, eds., *The Road to Post-Communism: Independent Political Movements in the Soviet Union 1985–1991* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1992): 157–179.

32. Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008): 15.

33. Bayram Balci and Raoul Motika, “Islam in Post-Soviet Georgia,” *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 3 (September 2007): 336.

34. The Constitution of Georgia, Art. I, Sec. 1. Available at http://www.parliament.ge/files/68_1944_951190_CONSTIT_27_12.06.pdf (accessed September 24, 2010). By contrast, the Constitution of neighboring Azerbaijan omits any mention of Islam from its constitution entirely, in many ways emulating Turkey’s example. The Armenian Church not unlike its Georgian counterpart, is also given preeminence as an institution with an “exclusive historical mission” (Armenian Constitution 2005, Article 8.1), unlike Georgia however, Armenia has since 1991 had a Law on Religion that has regulated the legislative field on church-state matters. See Ani Sarkissian, “Religion in Postsoviet Armenia: Pluralism and Identity Formation in Transition,” *Religion, State & Society* 36, no. 2 (2008): 168–169.

35. Ivlian Khaindrava, “Religiya v Gruzii: XXI vek,” in *Religiya i politika na kavkaze*, ed. Aleksandr Iskandaryan (Yerevan: KISMI, 2004): 54.

36. See Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 142–164.

37. Khaindrava, “Religiya v Gruzii,” 53.

38. The issue of sainthood of Chavchavadze is not one of simple rhetorical flourish. Chavchavadze was in fact canonized and named Ilia the Righteous by the Georgian Church in 1987. See Valentin Nikitine, “La canonization par le Patriarcat géorgien du poète Ilia Tchavtchavadze (1837–1907),” *Istina* 35, no. 3 (1990): 288–290.

39. Quoted in Gulbaat Rtskhiladze, “Religion and Conflict Potential in Georgia,” *Central Asia and Caucasus: Journal of Social and Political Studies* 3, no. 33 (2005), available at <http://www.ca-org/journal/2005-03-eng/07.rtsprimen.shtml> (accessed September 30, 2010).

40. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, *The Spiritual Mission of Georgia*, trans. Arrian Tchanturia; ed. William Safranek (Tbilisi: Ganatleba Publishers, 1991): 7–33.

41. Elizabeth Fuller, “Geopolitics and the Gamsakhurdia Factor,” Paper delivered at AAASS Convention, Phoenix, November 19, 1992, quoted in Suny, *Making of Georgian Nation*, 326.

42. Cheterian, *War and Peace*, 170.

43. Svetlana Chervonnaya, “The Problem of the Repatriation of the Meskhet-Turks: Appendix to the Fact-Finding Mission of the FUEN (Federal Union of European Nationalities) delegation to Georgia, November 1998,” *Minority Electronic Resources*, available at http://www.minelres.lv/min/meskh/FUEN_Meskh.htm (accessed September 30, 2010).

44. Gordadze, “Georgian-Russian Relations,” 33.

45. Robert H. Donaldson and Joseph L. Noguee, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, 4th edition (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2009): 182.

46. See Theodor Hanf and Ghia Nodia, *Georgia Lurching to Democracy: From Agnostic Tolerance to Pious Jacobinism* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000), 37–40; and Alexander Iskandaryan, “State Construction and the Search for Political Identity in the New Transcaucasian Countries,” *Central Asia and Caucasus: Journal of Social and Political Studies* 1, no. 4 (2000).

47. King, *The Ghost of Freedom*, 215–216.

48. Gordadze, “Georgian-Russian Relations,” 35.

49. Niklas Nilsson and Johanna Popjanevski, "State Building Dilemmas: The Process of National Integration in Post Revolutionary Georgia," in Niklass Nellson et al., "State Approaches to National Integration in Georgia: Two Perspectives," Silk Road Paper (February 2009): 12. See also Gordadze, "Georgian-Russian Relations," 37.

50. Robert English, "Georgia: The Ignored History," *The New York Review of Books* 5, no. 17 (November 6, 2008).

51. Armenians are by no means the only minority group feeling left out of the political discourse in Georgia. The reader may consult Mathijs Pelkmans, *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 121–141 for a detailed discussion on the contemporary Ajarian identity and the efforts of the Georgian Orthodox Church to 're-convert' Ajarians back to Christianity and the resultant mistrust these efforts have caused between Ajarians and Georgians.

52. Niklas Nilsson, "Obstacles to Building a Civic Nation: Georgia's Armenian Minority and Conflicting Threat Perceptions," *Ethnopolitics* 8, no. 2 (June 2009): 135–153.

53. Serrano, *Géorgie*, 129–130.

54. On political activism, see See "Rekommendatsii gruzino-armianskogo ekspertnogo foruma po samtskhe-dzhavakheti," Kavkazskii institut SMI i kavkazskii institut mira, demokratii i razvitiya (Yerevan and Tbilisi, May 2008), 6–7. On discriminatory language laws, see Nilsson and Popjanevski, "State Building Dilemmas," 18.

55. Johanna Popjanevski, "Minorities and the State in the South Caucasus: Assessing the protection of national Minorities in Georgia and Azerbaijan," Silk Road Paper (September 2006): 33–34.

56. Nilsson and Popjanevski, "State Building Dilemmas," 11.

57. Nilsson and Popjanevski, "State Building Dilemmas," 11.

58. Nilsson, "Obstacles to Building a Civic Nation," 136.

59. See Serrano, *Géorgie*, 138–155. See also Hasmik Harutyunyan, "Shirak Torosyan: Aveli vat, qan hima e, klini javakhki hayatapume," *Azg Daily (Yerevan)*, no. 65 (April 11, 2009).

60. Cheterian, *War and Peace*, 220.

61. Cheterian, *Rose Revolution*, 703.

62. Julie A. George, "Minority Political Inclusion in Mikheil Saakashvili's Georgia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, no. 7 (September 2008): 1165–1167.

63. George, "Minority Political Inclusion," 1167.

64. Aris Ghazinyan, "The Armenian Problem": Hayastantsis in Georgia Face Challenges Over Ethnicity," *Armenian General Benevolent Union* 18, no. 2 (November 2008): 11. Writes Ghazinyan: "With the realigning of administrative districts, discrimination reached large scale. For example, the gubernatorial board sitting in Akhaltsikhe that includes 30–35 officials practically has no Armenians or they are represented only formally (one or two engaged bureaucrats at best). The authorized representatives of Georgia's president in the province are solely Georgians, although 128,000 Armenians were among the total of 238,000 living there."

65. "Rekommendatsii gruzino-armianskogo ekspertnogo foruma," 6–7.

66. "Rekommendatsii gruzino-armianskogo ekspertnogo foruma," 6.

67. Hedvig Lohm has put the number of emigrants at 20–30 percent of the total of the Armenian population of Javakheti. See Hedvig Lohm, "Javakheti after the Rose Revolution: Progress and Regress in the Pursuit of National Unity in Georgia," European Center for Minority Issues, Working Paper No. 38 (April 2007): 6. See also "Javakhahayutyan krthakan himnakhndirneri shurj," *Taratsashrjan* 1 (February 2005): 71–82.

68. Nilsson, "Obstacles," 137.

69. "Turkey, Georgia Pledge Mutual Support," *Civil Georgia*, March 14, 2006.

70. See Michael Ochs, "Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia Today," *Religion, State & Society* 30, No. 3, (2002): 239–140. See also Ani Sarkissian, "Religious Competition in Armenia and Georgia: Shifting Power and Tradition in the Orthodox Christian World," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, PA, August 31, 2006, available at http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p152660_index.html (accessed September 24, 2010).

71. Tamaz Papuashvili, "On the Relationship Between the State and the Christian Orthodox Church of Georgia," *Central Asia and Caucasus* 3, no. 9 (2001).

72. Balci and Motika, "Islam in Post-Soviet Georgia," 341.

73. Serrano, *Géorgie*, 133.

74. Saidman and Ayres discuss the enormous emotional and political power of the "ethnic kin" referents in bringing about inter-ethnic conflicts in Stephen M. Saidman and R. William Ayres, *For Kin or Country: Xenophobia, Nationalism, and War* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008).

75. Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998): 24, 36.

76. "Kocharian Urges Armenians in Georgia to Learn Georgian," *Armenpress*, April 30, 2007.

77. The Statement of President Sargsyan at the Annual Gathering of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Senior Executive Staff and Heads of the Armenian Embassies and Consulates Abroad," September 1, 2009, available at <http://www.president.am/events/statements/arm/?id=47> (accessed September 28, 2010).

78. The lawyer contracted to represent one of the accused is French-Armenian legal expert and a member of the Paris Bar Patrick Arapian. The Georgian government however refused to allow Arapian to represent the defendants on the basis that "having studied the case and the validity of the submitted data," considered it "unwarranted" to register Patrick Arapian as an attorney at the trial." See "Georgian Authorities Refuse Admission of the French Lawyer P. Arapian to the Chakhalyan Trial," *YERKIR Union*, March 3, 2009, available at <http://www.yerkir.org/index.php?levelid=229&lang=eng> (accessed October 1, 2010).

79. "Javahk Diaspora in Moscow Addressed Armenian and Georgian Authorities," PanARMENIAN.net, February 25, 2009.

80. See "Vizit v gruziyu prezidenta armenii imel simvolicheskoe znachenie – ekspert" (The visit of the Armenian president to Georgia had a symbolic meaning – expert), *Novosti-Armenia*, October 6, 2008, available at <http://www.newsarmenia.ru/arm1/20081006/41960928.html> (accessed October 4, 2010).

81. See, for instance, T. Kh. Hakobyan, *Hayastani patmakan ashkharagrutyun* (Erevan, 1968); D.L. Muskhelishvili, *Sakartvelos istoriuli geografiis ziritadi sakitxebi* (Tbilisi, 1977); and P.M. Muradyan, "Armyanskaia nadpis' khrama dzhvari," *Vestnik obshchestvennykh nauk AN ArmSSR*, no. 2 (1968): 55–80.

82. *Vrats` petakan k`aghak`akanut`yuné ev hay mshakuyt`i hushardzanneré, 1988–1998: divan vaveragreri ev lusankarneri*, ed. Samvel Karapetyan (Erevan: HH GAA "Gitut`yun" Hratarakch`ut`yun, 1998).

83. Bondo Arveladze, "Armianskié" ili gruzinskié tserkvi v gruzii? (Tbilisi, 1996).

84. Arveladze, *Tserkvi*, 3 (author's translation).

85. See Viktor Shnirelman, *Voiny pamiati: mify, identichnost' i politika v zakavkaz'e* (Moscow: Akademkniga, 2003), 194–241.

86. See Shnirelman, *Voiny pamiati*, 293–335, 461–470. See also Cheterian, *War and Peace*, 37–86.

87. Volker Jacoby, *Geopolitische Zwangslage und nationale Identität: Die Konturen der innenpolitischen Konflikte in Armenien* (Doktors der Philosophie Dissertation, Fachbereich Gesellschaftswissenschaften der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität zu Frankfurt am Main, 1998), 238.

88. "Human Rights in Georgia: Report of the Public Defender of Georgia. Second Half of 2007," *Public Defender of Georgia* (Tbilisi, 2008): 218.

89. "Human Rights in Georgia," 218.

90. "Public Defender Under Fire from Ruling Party," *Civil Georgia* (Tbilisi), July 5, 2008.

91. Aris Ghazinyan, "Controversy Under Cupola: Attempts to Defend Armenian Churches in Georgia Meet Protests in Tbilisi," *ArmeniaNow.com*, December 15, 2008, available at http://www.armenianow.com/news/9324/controversy_under_cupola_attempts (accessed October 4, 2010).

92. Ghazinyan, "Under Cupola."

93. Fati Mamiashvili and Sara Khojayan, "Tbilisi Witnesses Unholy Row," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, CRS No. 473, December 18, 2008.

94. See YouTube video “Attack on Tamamshev Graves (return of tombstones),” available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpD6qkdWDZc&feature=related> (accessed October 4, 2010).

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97. “Amenayn Hayots Kathoghikose datapartel e votndzgutuyunnere Vrastani haykakan ekeghet-sineri dem,” (Catholicos of All Armenians Condemns the Encroachment on Armenian Churches in Georgia), PanARMENIAN.net, November 29, 2008, available at <http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/world/news/27751/> (accessed October 4, 2010).

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100. Ghazinyan, “Under Cupola.”

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102. Olesya Vartanian et al., “Georgia Accused of Bullying Ethnic Armenians,” Institute for War and Peace Reporting, CRS No. 479, February 5, 2009.

103. Emil Sanamyan, “Georgian-Armenians Charge “Intimidation” by Tbilisi After Arrests, Calls for Restraint, Armenia’s Involvement,” *The Armenian Reporter*, January 29, 2009.

104. “Protest Action Against Tbilisi Policy in Javakheti Held in Yerevan,” PanARMENIAN.Net, February 25, 2009, available at <http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/politics/news/28812/> (accessed October 4, 2010).

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114. Levan Sulashvili, “Krugom vragi, ili druzya esche ostalis’?” Gruzija Online, available at <http://www.apsny.ge> (accessed October 1, 2010).

SIPRI maps the main conflict and security trends in the Caucasus and identifies ways to advance peacebuilding in the region.Â The Caucasus contains a set of protracted conflicts (Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan and the ongoing instability in Russiaâ€™s North Caucasus) which threaten regional stability and risk overspill beyond the region. High levels of military spending and of mutual hostility between countries of the region (Russia-Georgia, Armenia-Azerbaijan) as a result of the protracted conflicts means that the Caucasus is a heavily militarized region.