

# Javakheti: The Temperature 2005

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## Preface

There have been a number of research projects covering Javakheti, and many international scholars who have analyzed the political situation and reported on social and economic development. These materials cast highly valuably light on the situation in Javakheti. However, as the first and so far only West European who has lived permanently in Javakheti for almost a year while functioning as Project Manager for ECMI's policy dialogue project in the region, I thought I should use the opportunity to carry out some more in-depth fieldwork and investigate the situation in greater detail. I was particularly interested in having a closer look at the villages of Javakheti. I also thought that when an outsider looks at the situation with fresh eyes, some ideas and proposals on ways to develop the region might come up.

It is a long way from the town of Akhalkalaki to Tbilisi, or as people in Javakheti often say – *We live on the other side of the moon*. But it might be said that sometimes the distance from Akhalkalaki to the villages in Javakheti is even longer, and I found it important to have a first hand knowledge of the villages and to record my observations in the hope that they can be of interest to others.

I managed to visit 19 villages<sup>1</sup> as well as the towns of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda with my friend, guide and driver Rafik Abajyan. During our visits we asked a series of questions based on an open-ended questionnaire that aimed to cover most aspects of village life. In each village we talked with school directors, village administrators, private entrepreneurs and farmers. Sometimes our interviews were conducted with one single person, but more often it was group interviews.

Rafik Abajyan performed a much greater task during this project than merely driving the car. He had a detailed knowledge of the region and usually also personal friends in most villages. He worked for many years at the electrical grid in Javakheti and knows the energy situation in the region very well. He introduced me to the people we visited. Very

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<sup>1</sup> The villages visited were: Apnia, Azavret, Baraleti, Bezhano, Chemdura, Eshtia, Gaurma, Gogasheni, Gorelovka, Karzakh, Khando, Khavet, Kirovakan, Olaverd, Myasinkyan-Kommuna, Sul'da, Varchan, Varevan and Zhdanonakan.

often he gave me further explanations and sometimes translated from Armenian to Russian.

Wherever we went, we were welcomed with great hospitality, which is typical when receiving guests in the Caucasus. We were welcomed with openness and our numerous questions were answered patiently even though the aim and use of our undertaking were not always clear to the villagers we met. Usually one or two long interviews were followed by a walk around the village, and then normally we were invited for a meal, often the very best of Javakheti country cuisine – boiled mutton, lamb and beef, pure white cheese, fresh yogurt, home-baked bread, homemade wine and vodka (*samogon*), herbs, local honey etc. In the less formal part of our meetings it was very much our turn to answer questions about living conditions in Western Europe, Danish agriculture, Western and Eastern lifestyles, morality, traditions, etc. Questions also usually arose as to the purpose of ECMI activities in Javakheti. Inevitably we were asked whether ECMI would be able to provide any aid to the village and the region. We were trying, to the best of our abilities, to explain that the aim of ECMI's project was merely to promote social and political cohesion by supporting a dialogue process, stressing that in the short term it was unlikely that this process would have any impact on the situation in the villages. However, I expressed the hope that by collecting information about the region and making it available to donors and implementing agencies, we could be useful also to the villages. I want to thank all the people who welcomed us.

On my final day in Akhalkalaki, the regional centre of Javakheti, the Mayor of the town awarded me with the title of honourable citizen. I wish to take this chance to express my gratitude for that. It truly is a great honour. The beauty of Javakheti is breathtaking. If one wants to be surrounded by great expanses, to be able to see mountaintops 20-40 km away covered with snow, then Javakheti is the right place to be.

When I arrived in Akhalkalaki, my first impression was that very little functioned, and that life was very harsh in the little town at the foothills of the spectacular mountain of Didi Abuli (3301 meters). As I started to learn the region better and to know its people, I

understood that quite a lot in fact functioned, against all odds, and that the people of Javakheti had potential, knowledge and the will to do something to secure a wealthier and more stable future. Thank you, people of Javakheti – Armenians, Georgians, Greeks, Russians and Ukrainians - for your hospitality and friendship which never failed. I hope that you will find in this report something of use to take steps towards the development and integration of your region. If I interpreted certain issues in a clumsy way, please forgive an outsider who probably finds it difficult to grasp the situation. And if there are points with which you disagree, I would say that disagreement sometimes can also be useful in a discussion among friends.

I will always keep Javakheti in my heart. I consider this region to be my second home and I hope to return to the region in the years to come.

Kiev, March 2006, Mikael Hertoft

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## Introduction

Javakheti is an isolated and poor mountain region in South-western Georgia. Since the late 1990s it has attracted the attention of international researchers as well as various international non-governmental organizations and OSCE. There has been a considerable fear that the ethnic composition of the region (Armenians represent more than 90% of the population) combined with the sometimes volatile relations between the regional population and the central government could lead to a conflict with the Georgian state. The isolation is not only ethnic and linguistic but also physical since the roads leading to Javakheti are extremely bad and the railroad does not work regularly.

In the aftermath of the three civil wars that took place in Georgia<sup>2</sup> in the early nineties, it was feared that the situation in Javakheti could deteriorate into an armed conflict, too. However, today Georgia is far more stable state than a decade ago, and the risk of an armed conflict breaking out seems to be ruled out.

However, in 2005, there was undeniably still some tension in the region, but it was being counterbalanced by a series of small but tangible steps towards a constructive dialogue between the Georgian government and the population in Javakheti<sup>3</sup>. International structures such as OSCE have been instrumental in developing media and language training as tools to increase the flow of information. ECMI has established a project to enhance the dialogue on policy issues between regional stakeholders and the government. With the prospect of the reconstruction of some vital interregional and international roads leading to and from Javakheti<sup>4</sup>, there is hope that the region can overcome its actual

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<sup>2</sup> There were two ethno-political civil wars, the first one between South Ossetians and Georgians, the second one between, Abkhazians and Georgians which led to a stalemate where Georgia still has no control over two of its provinces. Furthermore, there was a civil war between supporters of the ousted President of Georgia, Gamsakurdia, and the upcoming President Shevardnadze on the territory of the Mingrelian region in 1993.

<sup>3</sup> The population in Javakheti, as it is well known, is constituted mainly by a vast majority of ethnic Armenians but also by other minorities, such as Greeks and Russians (Dukhobors).

<sup>4</sup> The American Millennium Challenge Fund has agreed to implement a large reconstruction project covering the most important roads in Javakheti. While feasibility studies are currently on-going, implementation is scheduled to begin in 2007.

geographical isolation and move towards more ambitious goals of economic development and integration.

The economic, social, cultural and political turmoil following the collapse of the Soviet Union hit Javakheti harder than most other regions of the former Soviet Union – though the effects of this turmoil were felt everywhere. In Javakheti the economic decline has continued up to 2005, and the major problems concerning the replacement of the collapsed system by new and effective social and institutional structures have yet to be solved. The region and its population suffer from economic hardship, poverty, unemployment, collapse of state supply systems, massive emigration and isolation from Georgian political life. In short, Javakheti can be described today as a society characterized by regression back to survival on subsistence agriculture. Armenians working in Russia provide the main flow of cash income. Many Armenian men from Javakheti spend the summer period in Russia to build roads and houses. The second most important cash income is the meagre state pensions and teachers' wages.

Javakheti faces a dilemma that relates to it being located close to the border with a country that is seen as a threat to the local (Armenian) population: should the border with Turkey remain closed or almost closed, the region will continue to be very much a peripheral region and will stand last in the queue for investments and funding. However, potentially, Javakheti can be transformed into a transit hub not only between Georgia and Turkey but also between Georgia, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia.

Javakheti is not only poor, isolated and underdeveloped. The crisis in the region is a reflection of the simultaneous collapse of an economic system and a state. The Soviet Union collapsed and independent Georgia was created with new state borders and a new state language. The new status of its borders as state borders has led to new hardship for the Javakhetian population. The issue of the state language is a huge problem, too. The state language has shifted from Russian to Georgian. But the Armenians as a rule do not speak Georgian and they still use Russian language as a means of interethnic communication in Georgia as well as for their seasonal employment in Russia.

## **Javakheti: The Temperature 2005**



### **Physical conditions**

Javakheti is located on a high steppe in South-Western Georgia and because of the mountainous conditions the climate is very harsh and winters are long and cold.

Most villages in the region are located 1700-2000 meters above sea level. In the lower areas it is possible to grow potatoes, vegetables and even cereals. There is, however, a scarcity of fertile land for farming. In the higher regions there is an abundance of land suitable for pasture, but it is sometimes of rather poor quality. The soil in the Javakheti region is “black soil” and thus considered to be of high quality. The main factor limiting farming is the harsh climate. The villages can be divided according to their altitude above sea level. In the relatively lower-lying areas land is scarce and the main activity is potato growing combined with cattle breeding and gardening for domestic use. In the higher areas, on the contrary, the main activity is animal breeding, combined with potatoes and some modest gardening for domestic use. The local roads in the region that connect the villages are in very poor condition and are often closed in winter.

There are almost no natural forests in the Javakheti region, except at the northern border near Bakuriani. However, a considerable expanse of pine forests was planted in the 1950s and 1960s. This was done with extensive participation on the part of the population, among them school children. It is still common to meet people who recall how they participated in the planting of these forests in their childhood. These slow growing forests were protected against non-sustainable exploitation by the “*les-kolkhoz*” (forestry collectives). In the early nineties, however, much of the wood from these forests was exploited as the economy collapsed with the demise of the Soviet Union and it was the only source of heating for the local population. The forests have not been able to meet the region’s needs for firewood for a considerable period of time and the rather small trees are not particularly suitable for timber anyway. Nevertheless, some vulnerable segments of the population are allowed to utilize limited amounts of firewood from these local sources.



*The road to Sulda and Karsakh (Turkish border) 3 May 2005*

### **Ethnic composition**

The majority of the villages in Javakheti were founded around 1830 by ethnic Armenians re-settled from Erzurum-Villayet<sup>5</sup> in Eastern Turkey<sup>6</sup> following the Russian conquest of the area in 1829. In several cases the Armenians settled in places where there are signs of former inhabitants. Most of the villages have enjoyed ethnic stability since their foundation. Most are almost purely Armenian and can be further subdivided in terms of confession into Gregorian Armenian and Catholic Armenian. In addition, there are several Russian Dukhobor villages, also founded around the 1830s. Finally, the Georgian

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<sup>5</sup> “Villayet” is an old Turkish word for a regional administrative unit.

<sup>6</sup> Eastern Turkey is often called Western Armenia by local Armenians in Javakheti.

population lives in several mixed Georgian-Armenian villages, although there are also a few exclusively Georgian villages.

There have been significant changes in the ethnic composition of the region. During the nineteenth century the regions on both sides of the border accommodated a similar mix of nationalities of Armenians, Turks (Muslims), Greek and Georgians. From Akhalkalaki Turks left, some when the Ottoman empire lost control of Akhalkalaki and some as late as 1944 when the Meskhetian Turks were deported by Stalin to Central Asia. Armenians arrived in big numbers in the 19. Century emigrating from Turkey. The Russian Dukhobors (which literally means “fighters for the spirit”, a religious sect) were forced to leave central Russia and go into exile in Javakheti or, as it was written in the order by Russian Czarina Catharine II, “The Wed Mountains”.

Finally there were significant demographic changes following the collapse of the USSR as the Dukhobors began leaving the region in large numbers, while Georgians from Adjara<sup>7</sup> and to a lesser degree Georgians from elsewhere began to move in. One entirely new village was founded for Georgians from Adjara resettled after a massive landslide in 1989.

The ethnic composition has also changed over time at village level. Thus, the population of the village of Khavet originally consisted of Meskhetian Turks who were deported in 1944 along with their ethnic kin throughout Samtskhe-Javakheti. Subsequently, Armenians from the neighbouring village of Mrakval settled in the village. Meskhetian Turks were also deported from the village of Varevan in 1944, and the village’s many Greeks left in the years following the Second World War. To this day ethnic Greeks are leaving to Greece which admit them if they can prove their Greek roots.. Following the collapse of the USSR, the Dukhobor villages<sup>8</sup>, previously virtually ethnically

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<sup>7</sup> The Georgians from Adjara in western Georgia are often Muslims, a result of that region’s occupation by the Ottomans. Most of the Adjarans arrived in the 1980s and early 1990s as “eco-migrants” following natural disasters (landslides) in Adjara.

<sup>8</sup> The Dukhobors live in Ninotsminda itself and further in a series of villages, founded by them with Russian names among them Gorelovka, Orlovka, Zdanova and Tambovka.

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homogenous, rapidly became depleted and Georgians from Adjara began to move in. Today only the village of Orelovka has a majority of Dukhobor inhabitants.

The regional centre of Javakheti, Akhalkalaki, is primarily populated by Armenians, with a small Georgian community, a small Greek community and some Russians in addition to those living at the Russian military base.<sup>9</sup> Some ethnic Armenians living in Javakheti received Russian citizenship when working or serving at the military base. Ninotsminda is also mainly Armenian but has a small Dukhobor community.

### **Household structure**

The household normally consists of 5-10 persons. Often three generations live under the same roof. The number of officially registered households certainly supersedes the real number of functioning households. Village dwellers who left the country as migrant workers are often still registered as living in their abandoned housing. In other cases households that in reality live together register as more than one household in order to gain rights to state owned farming land.

It should be added that family solidarity is rather strong and extended since it includes cousins, aunts and uncles, etc. As villages are small, most of the people in a village are somehow family-related. Thus, in spite of the fact that almost all formal collective structures from the Soviet times collapsed, and that, in effect, there is hardly any formal state authority supporting disabled persons, there is a strong sense of community, and there is always help coming from neighbours and family members. The number of children, both of school age and pre-school age, can be considered relatively low due to

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<sup>9</sup> Russia has had military presence in Javakheti since 1828 when the area was conquered from Turkey. In the Soviet time the military presence was massive and Russia inherited the Soviet Base facilities after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia made a temporary agreement with Shevardnadze, the second Georgian President allowing them to keep this and other base facilities in Georgia. However the Georgian government under President Saakashvili demands that the Russians end their military presence and in spring 2005 the agreement was made that Russia will close down their base in Akhalkalaki by 2008. At the present moment the base has much less personal and equipment than before and the presence is largely symbolic.

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the economic hardship facing the rural economy. The number of families with many children is low, one or two children being the most common number. On the other hand, there are no signs of the villages becoming totally depopulated. Children amount to at least 10% of the population.

Most villages show a considerable ability to sustain hardship, while others, mainly in the most peripheral and mountainous geographical areas, seem to be on the verge of collapse.

### **Temporary and permanent migration**

10-20% of the population of the villages goes abroad, predominantly to the Russian Federation to find temporary work in the summer period. All the migrant workers are men. This temporary labour migration was greater before. It has been decreasing in the last few years following the introduction in 2000 of costly visa requirements for citizens of Georgia travelling to the Russian Federation. The income, which the migrant workers save and return to the region is the biggest cash inflow into Javakheti and thus it, is of vital importance for the region, for the survival of the migrant workers' families and for any private economic development, which demands even small investments.

Before 1990 the Javakheti region experienced emigration to both Russia and Armenia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, only Russia has attracted permanent migrants from Javakheti. Approximately 10% of the population has left for Russia in the post-Soviet period<sup>10</sup>. The Armenians in the last ten years have left for Russia, not for Armenia, which is too poor to attract immigrants, or for other regions of Georgia.

The majority of the Russian Dukhobors have already left Javakheti for Russia and the future existence of the Dukhobor community in Javakheti is in jeopardy. Ethnic Georgians mainly leave for other parts of Georgia.

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<sup>10</sup> According to the Akhalkalaki Business Centre until early 2004 more than 8000 people have left the region, 5950 from Akhalkalaki and 2200 from Ninotsminda. The migrants mainly leave for Russia. The trend is confirmed by information from the villages.

## Religion

Religious activities differ considerably from village to village. The Armenian Catholic villages are very active. Priests, who conduct services in them, regularly visit the local Catholic churches. Most of the Catholic population is baptized, while the number of baptized persons in Armenian Gregorian villages is limited. The Dukhobor community is also rather active in its religious observance<sup>11</sup>, especially the older generation. In one Georgian-populated village that was visited in the course of this research, religious activity was also rather high; almost all inhabitants are baptized and the village is visited by priests from Vardzia several times a year. The resettled population from Adjara in the village of Apnia was originally Muslim, but there is no organized religious life or tradition of Islam in the village. There are even signs that some of the younger inhabitants are beginning to consider themselves Christian as their neighbouring Georgians. For the Armenian Gregorian population the picture is more mixed. The Gregorian church is very much present in the region with its main regional church located in Akhalkalaki, and is very active thanks to its priest, Father Babken. However, in many Gregorian Armenian villages the churches are only rarely attended by priests and religious activities are limited. The socio-economic influence of different ethnic and religious patterns in the region leads to differences in the religious communities' access to foreign aid. Thus, Armenian Catholic villages receive aid from international Catholic institutions. There have even been some foreign Catholic priests in the area and currently there are two Armenian nuns from Lebanon in the village of Eshtia. Similarly, the region's Georgian minority seems to receive some extra support from Georgian sources, and the Dukhobors receive some school textbooks from Russia as well as some assistance from the Dukhobor emigrant community in Canada.

The churches in the area vary a lot in age. The oldest functioning churches seem to be from the 11<sup>th</sup> century and there are ruins from even older churches. The churches are professionally built, most likely by travelling craftsmen. The oldest churches are built in

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<sup>11</sup> The Dukhobors have no church and no priest and they are not baptised. Their "holy book" is the "Book of Life", a collection of psalms compiled by the Dukhobors themselves and passed down from generation to generation. They have a religious house without any religious symbols where they meet regularly to pray and sing.

the irregular local natural stones, very precisely matched to each other. They have a rectangular choir and a side room to the left of the main building. They are similar to the churches built in Europe in the same period, i.e. the Romanesque Churches. The issue of whether old churches are originally Armenian or Georgian sometimes gives rise to heated debate at local level. Many more churches were built in the period from 1828-30 (i.e. during the period of the Armenians' resettlement from Eastern Turkey) to the end of 19<sup>th</sup> Century. These churches are normally made by cut stone blocks in regular sizes and fulfil professional standards. The newer churches are rectangular with high double-sided roofs. The churches often have written inscriptions indicating the date of construction. Armenian churches have a bell tower at the gable and in the tower a standing monument with an engraved cross. The podium raised for the priest is another characteristic of these churches. In Soviet times no churches were built, many existing ones were used as stores, while the remainder stood empty without any kind of maintenance or use. But the destruction of churches in the region seems to have been the exception rather than the rule. In many villages churches have been restored since the demise of the Soviet Union, or are in the process of being repaired. However, there are still many churches in a very bad condition, in some cases with collapsing roofs which cannot withstand the weather and which are threatened by further deterioration. The interior of the churches is usually more recent as the original interior was often destroyed during the Soviet period, when church buildings were either abandoned or used for storage or other purposes. In some churches, however, old stone crosses can be found. Churches are often surrounded by a low stone wall with an entrance gate, sometimes with an old churchyard. In many villages successful businessmen originating from the region have built new smaller chapels.

In the village of Khospio near Akhalkalaki there is a 17<sup>th</sup> century Mosque. It is professionally made with elegant details but in very bad condition, with a roof that might collapse in the nearest future. As there is no Muslim population in present-day Khospio, nobody takes care of the building. There is another Mosque in the old Turkish fortress of the town of Akhalkalaki.

Outside the villages both Georgians and Armenians built many small chapels on high places which are often difficult to access.

## Water supply



*Woman resting before collecting water, Eshtia*

Well over 50% of villages have some kind of water supply to individual houses. However, often only parts of the villages have water and there are frequently problems with supply, even where the necessary water pipe infrastructure exists. It should also be taken into account that water supply is of a much simpler type than is usual in European countries. Supply of water to individual houses is a very important gender issue because it is traditionally the responsibility of women to collect water and in villages in which

water is not supplied to each individual home it is often very hard work since the water has to be taken from wells and rivers far away from the houses<sup>12</sup>.

## **Electricity**

All the villages we visited in Javakheti are presently electrified, although we experienced several periods during which the supply was interrupted. These breakdowns were due to a combination of harsh weather conditions and bad maintenance. Some households in the villages established power back-up supply using generators fed by gasoline and diesel oil. In the village of Khando there are also several micro-hydropower generators. It has to be stressed that the electricity situation today has improved considerably compared to several years ago. In the 1990s many villages were left without power supply for prolonged periods of time. The situation has improved in recent years and a significant improvement was observed from April 2005 onwards. This improvement is due to an agreement between Armenia and Georgia under which Armenia supplies Javakheti with electricity from an Armenian nuclear power plant. The agreement is, however, temporary, and thus there is no guarantee for future stability in the power supply to Javakheti. The distribution of electricity can only be maintained if regular payments are made to the Armenian side by Georgian power distributors. The energy sector in Georgia is hampered by non-payment, an aging infrastructure and the embezzlement of funds. The viability of the aging nuclear power plant in Armenia, which provides the electricity, also raises concern. The fact that it dates from the Soviet period, is most likely badly maintained, and is located in an earthquake area, does not bode well. However, one must bear in mind that this plant is probably the main source of cash income for Armenia and is indispensable for delivery of electricity to Georgia. The question of this power plant is therefore crucial as the supply of electricity would probably not be sustainable in case of its closure or in case of an accident. Therefore, it is of vital importance for Javakheti to make greater use of the potential for hydro-energy in the region. With major rivers running down through the Javakheti plateau, especially around Akhalkalaki, there is a

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<sup>12</sup> In the following villages visited there was no or almost no water supply in individual houses: Eshtia, Gorelovka, Karzakh, Kirovakan, Myasinkyan/Kommuna, Varevan.

considerable potential which has already been partly exploited. A major project to develop a large-scale hydropower plant has been advanced, but so far it has not materialized. Nevertheless, research and development of this potential can be recommended as a pre-condition for a more sustainable electricity supply.

Samtskhe-Javakheti is on the international map of energy supply routes another way. Already now the Baku – Tbilisi – Ceyhan pipeline runs through the region, and there are further plans to build a gas supply line from Iran to Europe through Armenia and Georgia.

## **Agriculture**



The majority of the population in the region and the overwhelming majority of the population in the villages are involved in agriculture. In Soviet times, agriculture was organized collectively through kolkhozes (collective farms) and sovkhoses (state farms) and with smaller private plots for each household. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the collective sector also collapsed very rapidly. Therefore, most of the collective structures ceased to work around 1992; some of them continued to function a few years more and in one case – in the village of Gorelovka – the collective structure was transformed into a cooperative which still functions today as a cattle breeding unit. In 1992 there was a land reform in Georgia that granted each family 1.25 hectares, with the

remaining land being included in the state land reserve. Furthermore, in many villages there is access to pasture lands in the higher mountainous areas for a small fixed yearly price per head of cattle and sheep. Cereals are not grown on a large scale in the region. Wheat is only grown on some plots where the climate is favourable, and the region is not self-sufficient in flour for bread. Barley is grown in many villages, but mainly to feed animals with fodder. It is somehow surprising that rye, which should be able to adapt to the harsh conditions, is not grown in the region. Thus, most households in the villages are involved in subsistence farming producing potatoes, meat, milk products, eggs and vegetables for domestic consumption. The agricultural sector further produces potatoes, meat and milk-products for marketing outside the villages in the regional centres and in other parts of Georgia. Potatoes are the main crop in Javakheti, and substantial in feeding the population, but give little income to the region due to the low prices and high transport costs.

The population of domestic livestock in Javakheti declined dramatically between 1990 and 2004. The number of cattle in 2004 is roughly one third of that in 1990, and for sheep the decrease is even more dramatic, with today just over one fifth of heads of sheep as compared with 1990. The situation is similar with respect to poultry. This reflects both the collapse of the collective farming structure and of the purchasing and processing structures in Georgia.

The number of horses and donkeys has increased, which cannot, however, be considered a sign of economic health, but rather the opposite, since these animals are used for transport and agricultural work instead of tractors.

### **Technical equipment**

Most existing technical equipment in the villages – tractors, combines and trucks – date from the Soviet period. The equipment was more or less formally privatized after the collapse of the kolkhozes and sovkhoses. The machinery is privately owned, but only a minority of households in the villages possesses it. Sometimes a household without machinery hires tractors to cultivate its land, and sometimes it is done as a favour by neighbours or family members who only charge for the fuel.

In some villages, such as Baraleti, the local population has bought mini-tractors. However, they seem not to be used in all parts of Javakheti, either because of a lack of money to purchase them, or because they can only be used on land where the ground is not too stony.

### **Bee keeping**

A positive exception from this generally bleak picture of the local economy is the rather widespread tradition of bee keeping in the area. The honey from Javakheti is of a very high quality. Since the area is mountainous the honey is of alpine character and since the use of pesticides and fertilizers has been minimal in the region for the last 15-18 years the honey is also very clean. Most bee keepers have a limited amount of bee hives and thus a limited production (as a rule of thumb each bee hive can produce 5 kilograms). The bee keepers tend to use the honey for themselves and their families and only sell a limited quantity in the village, and sometimes even to external buyers. In some cases, however, bee keeping has developed into a more commercial activity in which the honey is sold in other parts of Georgia and Armenia. On occasions, honey is also sold at the farm gate to middlemen. There is a great potential to increase the production of honey and this provides a realistic opportunity to increase the cash income of the villages. The income for the region would undoubtedly increase if the production and marketing of honey became somehow better organized, for instance through a bee keepers' association. Such a local association has already been established in the western part of Samtskhe-Javakheti, in Adigeni district.

### **Marketing of agricultural products**

The marketing of products from the villages is not very developed. Sometimes the farmers or a group of farmers travel with a truck to Georgian towns such as Kutaisi or Tbilisi to market their products. But this is not very often the case. As the processing structures for sausage and cheese collapsed, farmers often produce these goods

themselves to sell. It also happens that middlemen fill their car with cheap goods such as soap, textiles, cigarettes, chocolate and vodka and sell them in villages where they know shops are badly provided or non-existent. They exchange these goods for farm products which they then sell in town centres.

The marketing of agricultural products is limited by several factors. First and foremost, the Soviet structures for processing and marketing agricultural products collapsed and so far other (private) structures are not yet sufficiently developed to take over. Therefore, even if there is a demand for milk and meat products in the towns and cities of Georgia there is no effective way to process these products and get them to the market. Secondly, the price for potatoes is so low that it is hardly profitable to produce them and to transport them to the nearest market. At the same time Georgia has been provided with cheap agricultural products, including potatoes, from Turkey. Finally it must be said that the prices of fertilizer and fuel have increased significantly. Agriculture has been in a deep crisis in Javakheti since the early nineties.

### **Social differentiation**

Social differentiation within the villages is rather limited. However, a few big farmers (maybe 1% of the rural population, having access to up to 100 hectares of land with herds of sheep and up to 100–200 cows) have appeared during the post-Soviet period. These farmers also often own small processing units for cheese and sausage production as well as technical and transport equipment. Sometimes bigger farmers also act as middlemen for the smaller farmers in the village, by engaging in buying milk and meat from their villages, and then processing and marketing it.

At the other end of the social scale are those who leased off their land. Some take care of cattle and sheep for a modest price per head and per season. Another very poor group are old people who live alone and are too frail to cultivate their land. These people often live in deep poverty and at the mercy of their relatives or fellow villagers. Pensioners receive a state pension and after the Rose revolution they actually receive this money regularly

which were not often the case in the nineties but it is too small to live on, even if it has been raised from 14 Lari before to 28 Lari after the Rose Revolution. One of the poorest strata is made of newcomers after the Land Reform were made, who do not get any land free from the state and who often have difficulties adapting to the area.

However, in general the social differentiation in the village is not very big. A typical family consists of 5 -10 members, accommodates three generations under the same roof, and cultivates 1.25 hectares of land. Sometimes families hire more land or cultivate the land of other family members or friends who left the area but are still registered in the region. Most of the land is used to grow potatoes. Houses are usually surrounded by a garden where vegetables are grown for domestic use. An average household may own from 1 to 10 heads of cattle, 5 to 15 sheep, 5 to 20 chickens, sometimes other fowl, and sometimes also a horse or a donkey. Donkeys and horse seem to be most common in villages where there is no running water since they are often used to transport water. Many households have a pig or two but this seems to be mainly seasonal. A piglet is usually bought in the spring and slaughtered around New Year. Many villagers complain that fodder for pigs has become so expensive that the number of pigs in the villages is rapidly declining. Thus, this village “middle class” lives from moderately wealthy to rather poor; however, generally they do not face the risk of hunger.

### **Lack of other economic activity than agriculture in the villages**

A remarkable feature of rural life in the region is that the artisan sector – i.e. a home-industry producing clothes, ceramics, or furniture – is almost non-existent. This makes village life even poorer and more insecure. One possible explanation for this might be that private economic activities were not encouraged during the Soviet period, but were instead perceived as speculation, and that a lot of industrial products such as clothes became accessible to the rural population, which led to a decline in peasant’s artisan work. In the post-Soviet period the economic climate has been too harsh to encourage development of artisan activities.

As far as machinery is concerned, there is only the most rudimentary support for agriculture. In many villages there are electrical mills that produce flour and crunched grain for animal fodder. Some villages have welding services to repair agricultural machinery. A few villages have house builders and masters repairing or even making doors and windows.

## **Tourism**

In general there is no tourism in Javakheti. Visitors to the region are usually representatives of international organizations, NGOs, diplomats and researchers.

There is an unfinished tourist complex in Khando village. The project is grandiose, beautiful and very surprising to find in such a location. It was built in the last years by a businessman from the village who made his money in Russia. The complex is built in the upper part of the village towards the canyon leading to the Akhaltsikhe – Akhalkalaki road. It has swimming pools, a restaurant, many rooms for overnight stays, fishing ponds, greenhouses for the production of vegetables and billiard rooms. Unfortunately, the complex is not finished yet, and though much money has undoubtedly already been invested, much more still needs to be done; thus, this project has, as yet, not brought in any income. Clearly the project reflects some grandiose vision but lacks a realistic business plan and, most probably, also money. It is also doubtful whether there would be a demand for a large luxurious tourist complex in this rather remote area. Nevertheless, the complex is an asset for the region, and its development should be supported. Any development of such a project would need a strict business plan and external cooperation partners. The tourist complex could be established as a small, luxury hotel with 5 to 8 rooms. This could give the complex some income as well as first-hand experience in the tourism sector. There is also much common sense in an idea that has already been proposed by some local inhabitants – that of using the complex as a sanatorium or as a place for children to relax. It would demand relatively little investment to make the complex usable for such purposes, and could probably be done in cooperation with the hospital in Baraleti. There would be no way to finance such a project with local means

alone and hardly with Georgian State money, but it would be a worthy project for an international donor.

### **Heating – Local resources of forests and dung**

All the villagers rely on individual means of heating, mainly stoves. The fuels for these stoves are firewood and dung. Firewood is the predominant fuel both in the towns and in the lower-lying areas. Only the relative well-off can afford to buy firewood, which is imported mostly from the neighbouring forest in Bakuriani. The small Javakheti plantations that mainly consist of pine trees cannot provide a sufficient amount of firewood. In the chaotic years following 1991 many trees from local forests were cut down, but today this non-sustainable practice has been stopped. Nowadays the wood from the forest is only used on a modest scale to provide heating to the socially vulnerable and sometimes also to schools. The maintenance of the forests has seemed to be the result both of the directives of the Forest Kolkhoz and of the internal discipline of the villagers who understood the importance of the forest in protecting against earth erosion. For the time being the small forests seem not to be of great economic importance for the region. Most of them were planted in the 1970s and 1980s. They are mainly pine tree forests but other trees and plants are now growing as well. In Turkey, just across the border, where the natural conditions are exactly the same as in Javakheti, there are similar forests, which were, however, planted earlier than in Georgia, and which have now reached such a size that they may soon begin to be used as construction timber.

Dung, however, is the main fuel for the poor and in the higher lands, which are characterized by widespread pastures and relatively many cows. Securing the heating in winter through collecting and drying dung is a highly demanding task which involves most family members a big part of the year from the snow leaves the ground and to deep into the autumn.

In the Soviet period, there were plans to connect the region to a supply of natural gas. Existing gas pipelines do not run very far from the region, but it would nevertheless be

highly expensive to extend the pipelines to the villages and it would therefore appear unlikely that such a project will be realized in the near future. Given the scarcity of fuel for heating in Javakheti, improving the insulation of houses and buildings, especially schools, should be a priority. For an outside observer it seems strange that wool is not used for the isolation of houses. The production of felt from wool is an old tradition in the Caucasus. A considerable volume of wool in the villages is simply thrown away, whereas it could be used to produce felt mats for the insulation of houses. It would be relatively simple to produce square felt mats that could be hung on the walls relatively easily, and used as curtains for badly isolated windows. Better information about insulation of houses and use of solar energy could improve the living conditions of the villagers in Javakheti.

## **Education, culture, media and communication**

### *Schools*

In every village of the region there is a functioning public primary school. As a rule, schools are divided along ethno-linguistic lines. The school buildings are generally in bad condition, poorly insulated and difficult to heat. With a few exceptions, the central heating systems in the schools are out of order and heating is provided by individual stoves. As the municipal supply of firewood for heating is insufficient, the pupils take turns in providing dung or firewood. The classroom temperature drops in the winter beyond sustainable levels, affecting the pupils' education and health, and during the coldest month it is not uncommon that classes are suspended because of the cold. Toilets are always primitive facilities located outside the school.

Many of the schools in the villages were built in the Soviet period. These schools are all over-sized. Their big and poorly insulated windows, long lobbies and high ceilings tell of a time when energy was abundant, but nowadays these schools are very difficult to heat. They also appear over-sized because of the decline in the number of children in the villages. The schools are not adapted to the villages and often stand out in a very clumsy

way. Usually, central heating in the schools has not been functioning for many years and is difficult or impossible to repair.

There are also other types of schools. One sad example is the temporary buildings in the village of Apnia which is marked by humidity and is on the verge of collapse even though they are only 15 years old.



*School children outside School Zhdanovakan*

All schools of the region have been poorly maintained during the last 15 years. In some cases the conditions are unbearable (cold rooms, broken windows, furniture on the edge of collapse, old blackboards without chalk, maps dating from the Soviet period). The schools in Apnia and Kirovakan villages in particular need entirely new buildings while those in the villages of Khavet and Sulda need urgent repair.



*Typical school interior, Javakheti*

School buildings in those villages with more resources have been more or less repaired. These schools have decorated walls and new furniture. The teachers' collectives in the villages of Baraleti, Eshtia, Gogasheni and Zhdanonakan have managed, sometimes through external help, to produce a comparatively good educational environment for their pupils.

### ***Teachers and Teaching***

Generally, teachers are available and present but are poorly motivated because of extremely low salaries. The qualifications of teachers are sometimes poor, especially in the field of the main Western languages. A peculiarity is that German is taught as the main Western language while English is almost totally absent in the village schools<sup>13</sup>.

The supply of school textbooks is often insufficient, especially for certain subjects. The central Georgian government does not supply the required amount of educational

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<sup>13</sup> English is however taught at some schools in Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki towns.

materials to schools in which the language of instruction is Armenian or Russian. They do, however, provide Armenian Language textbooks on Georgian history, and Georgian language. Armenian textbooks are delivered free of charge from Armenia. The Russian embassy in Georgia distributes Russian textbooks to Russian-language schools in Javakheti. Despite that, parents often buy textbooks for their school-age children. Since there is a kind of a competition between different states (especially Georgia and Armenia) on the supply of school books, it seems to be a priority to deliver these from all parts.

<b>Educational language In Javakheti Schools</b>	Georgian	Armenian	Russian	Mixed
<b>Schools</b>	12	85	4	6

Source: *Samtskhe-Javakheti, Realities and Perspectives*, UNDP, Tbilisi 2004, pp 47

None of the schools in Javakheti are equipped with functioning computers. Teachers were even surprised to be asked questions about the availability of computers for school use. In one school, as a matter of fact, one computer had been donated in the mid-nineties, but the computer had never been installed or used. Curiously, in Eshtia the school had an educational computer system dating from the beginning of the 1980s. The fact that this computer system was still installed in a classroom, and that manuals and machines were maintained tells a lot about the pride and the will to maintain a good teaching environment for the children. However, the only operator who understood how to operate the system left several years ago.

### ***Libraries***

Most villages are equipped with public libraries, which, however, have not received any new books since the collapse of the Soviet Union. None of the libraries receive periodicals or newspapers. The state of the library buildings is very bad. Therefore, the only books the libraries can provide date from the Soviet period, and these books are in little demand and offer no guidance to the modern world. As the librarians only receive

symbolical salaries, it is not surprising that the libraries generally function irregularly or not at all. In some villages, however, the librarians are enthusiastic about their work and book collections and here the situation is not all that bad. Some village schools have their own libraries, and in some cases school and village libraries have been merged. The libraries could, if provided with financial resources, form a base for providing information to the villages.

### ***Cultural activities***

There is a depressing lack of cultural activities in Javakhetian villages. In most villages there are “houses of culture” but they were built in the Soviet period, very few are functioning today on a regular basis. In some cases, the roofs of these buildings have already collapsed and others have no windows, heating or furniture.

During the Soviet period, youth clubs, sport events and other cultural activities were organized regularly and on a permanent basis. These activities have, since then, almost completely ceased. However, some elements of cultural life persist in the villages. Usually “houses of culture” continue to be used for weddings and funerals – the two main social events of village life, which can also take place in other places such as the school or former kolkhoz buildings. Usually, there is also a field with goals for ball games.

On the occasion of the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian genocide, on April 24<sup>th</sup> 2005, several villages organized memorial events. Some village schools organized cultural events for the children.

Some church choirs are working, especially in the Catholic parishes. The Russian Dukhobors in the village of Gorelovka maintain a folkloristic choir, which is, however, only a mere shadow of the Gorelovka choir that existed in the Soviet period.

A few writers live and work in the Javakheti region. They do, however, experience considerable difficulty in getting their works published and in overcoming their isolation in this remote region. Hamlet Aroyan, who was educated at the Academy of Lviv,

Ukraine, is now living and working in the village of Eshtia. In the same village a private museum has been established to commemorate the late Armenian poet Viktor Ovsepien. Eshtia stands out for its well-restored Catholic church.

### *Media*

Most of the region is covered by television transmitters located in Batjiani village outside Akhalkalaki and in Ninotsminda. These two land-based transmitters broadcast multiple television channels to the region, including the national programs of Georgia, Russia and Armenia together with two regional programs. The regional channels ATV12 (Akhalkalaki) and Parvana TV (Ninotsminda) significantly increased their broadcasting in recent years due to the enthusiastic work of the directors and collectives at the two television stations. Financial and other support from the OSCE in particular has also been of the utmost importance. Thus, the regional channels daily rebroadcast programs from Georgian national channels with simultaneous translations into Armenian; this project is financed by OSCE. In June 2005 the two regional channels began to broadcast a daily regional news bulletin. OSCE has also helped the stations to raise their standards of professionalism through a two-year long training program with a regional television company from Tomsk in Russia as the implementing partner. The two regional television networks can be considered a valuable tool for regional information. They provide a forum of dialogue and a voice to the local civil society in the region. The regional broadcasting is both in Armenian and Russian.

Some parts of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts unfortunately cannot receive TV from regional sources due to the mountainous terrain. In parts of Ninotsminda district that border on Armenia the villagers can receive TV only from Armenia, which includes Russian but not Georgian or local channels. On the border with Turkey some villages can receive Turkish television. Some families have solved this problem with the help of satellite connections, but this is costly and does not transmit regional TV.

Daily and weekly newspapers are only distributed to the villages on a very limited scale. Municipal village administrations receive the Tbilisi-based Armenian monthly newspaper

*Vrastan*. In Ninotsminda district, the villages receive a monthly periodical with official information from the district administration. Village primary schools receive pupils' and teachers' periodicals. These publications have to be collected in the district centres by the villagers, as the postal service does not function.

In Samtskhe-Javakheti the weekly newspaper *Yuzhnaya Vorota* (Southern Gate) is published in Armenian and Georgian. However, *Yuzhnaya Vorota* mainly reaches the two districts centres of Javakheti (i.e. the towns of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda) and has limited circulation in the villages. National Georgian newspapers are not on sale on a permanent basis in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda but require subscription and can then be picked up, though with some difficulty, at a newspaper stand in one of the two towns.

### ***Communication infrastructure***

Telephone landline networks are in a poor condition and mainly useful for local communication. More reliable Tbilisi-based telephone numbers are available for extra fees, at least in the two district centres, Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda. GSM networks cover most of the region, which makes mobile phones a reliable source of communication. There are, however, large areas in very scarcely-populated parts of the mountains where mobile connections either do not get through at all, or only get through at certain locations, or only work when the signal has been amplified with the help of an extra stationary antenna. Postal services do not work properly in the Javakheti region, and the main task of those post offices that work is to pay out pensions. Distribution of regular mail does not extend to individual households, either in the villages or in the district centres. Internet services are available on a limited scale in the district centres and are scarcely used by the local population. UNDP has established internet connections to the municipal authorities in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda.

### **Health services**

In the Soviet period there was a rudimentary structure of health care in the region. This usually consisted of a medical unit supplied with the basic medical care equipment and

medicine. Normally the staff was made up of nurses and sometimes doctors. In Baraleti village there was even a complete hospital. This system has been declining for the past 15 years. The medical personnel have not been paid regularly or are badly qualified. Therefore, many positions were abandoned because the staff moved or retired. In most villages the medical units closed down, or no longer offer regular service. The remaining medical personnel usually offers services to fellow villagers on a private basis. In Baraleti some parts of the hospital continue to function with a few doctors, a midwife and a laboratory worker. The village also has a rather well-equipped drug store.

### **Commercial structures**

Most villages have some kind of private shops. There are, however, some small villages without any shop. In the poorest villages, shops have a very limited choice of goods, usually vodka, cigarettes, soft drinks, sweets, spaghetti and some preserves. In richer villages shops have clothes, paper and pens for schoolchildren, elementary agricultural instruments, oil, and basic spare parts for cars and elementary kitchen equipment.

There are almost no gasoline stations in any of the villages. However, in many villages private persons are selling gasoline and diesel fuel from canisters, and even in villages where this is usually not the case, a limited sale opens up during the harvest season.

### **The Towns of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda**

There are two towns in Javakheti, Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda, with some 10,000 and 6,000 inhabitants respectively<sup>14</sup>. The towns differ from the rural areas of Javakheti by their economic activity besides agriculture, and even some cultural life, including the church, a music and art school for children and “houses of culture”. Economic activity is, however, mainly service-oriented towards the population and the local agricultural sector,

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<sup>14</sup> The 2002 census gives the following figures: Akhalkalaki – 9,802, and Ninotsminda – 6,287. However these figures are probably overestimated as quite a few people have left the area without informing the authorities. It is also likely that the figure has further declined since the time of the census.

and only a very modest part is aimed at processing and marketing products for other parts of Georgia or abroad. It is also characteristic of both towns that the industrial activity of the Soviet era has completely collapsed, that the factories remain as ruins and as monuments of a bygone era. Today the only goods produced in the region for the outside market seem to be the cheese produced by workshops mainly in Ninotsminda.

In Akhalkalaki during the Soviet period, there were four large and some smaller industrial units in Akhalkalaki. The biggest and most important was the cheese and butter factory which had one main department and 3-4 smaller additional units in the region. The factory collected milk and processed it into cheese and butter. Through this factory the region provided Georgia and even other parts of the Soviet Union with substantial amounts of cheese and butter. The factory employed 500-700 people.

There was also a meat factory involved in the slaughtering and processing of cattle from the region and this production was also rather substantial. Furthermore, the region had a combined brewery and lemonade factory.

Finally there was a large metal factory in the outskirts of Akhalkalaki. It was constructed to produce cable-ways used for military purposes by the Soviet Army in Afghanistan. Later it produced cable-ways for sports facilities. Then it produced drills for mining operations, and finally in the last years of its functioning it produced stoves for the local market. The factory today stands as a scrap yard – a monument of past times. The building is too big and too poorly insulated to be heated and used for smaller scale production, and the roof is leaking. In some places water has soaked in and small forests of moss are already growing there. There are still the remains of many expensive and rather good, even electronically controlled turning and fraizing benches, but they can hardly be used any more because of many years of humidity, frost and neglect. Much of what was of value in the factory has been sold. Nevertheless, the factory area is still somehow an asset and the present owner, the former director of the factory, has several proposals and ideas of how to put the remaining resources back to use.

There were some other smaller factories producing mainly for the local market – a shoe factory and a textile factory, each of them employing around 100 women. Today there is a small shoe workshop with a few employees.

In Ninotsminda, there were 14 industrial units in the Soviet period, out of which 2 were so-called enterprises of ‘All Union Importance’: the jersey factory with a 77 million rouble turnover in 1990 and a sewing factory with a 25 million rouble turnover the same year. Furthermore, there was a cheese and butter processing unit, a meat factory producing 6,000 tons of meat a year, a factory cutting pumice-stone, a bread factory, a mechanical factory producing spare parts for aero planes, some cutting facilities, as well as some facilities to process local fish and to produce lemonade and sausages. Today only small workshops producing lemonade, sausage and cheese are left in Ninotsminda.

In the last years of the Soviet Union, another line of private production opened, due to the opportunities given by the *perestroika* policy of Gorbachev. The region is rich in stones, including pumice-stone. These stones were in high demand and 300-500 stone cutting units opened up and sold their products to Tbilisi and to the Russian market. The production of stone, however, collapsed in the early nineties. The access to the Russian market was hampered by the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the insecure roads combined with the sharp increase in transportation costs and the decline of demand during the early post-Soviet depression. In 2005, there is almost nothing left of the production units from the Soviet Union, except the buildings, which are often only ruins, with some smaller parts used for other purposes.



*Market in Akhalkalaki*

An example of small-scale production established recently is the combined bakery, lemonade and sausage factory established in Ninotsminda. It is able to process a few raw materials – flour to bread, meat to sausages and water and lemonade concentrate to lemonade. All these products are sold on the local market, and the production process is as simple as possible. Nevertheless this small factory provides work for around 20 people, which is significant in a region with huge unemployment.

The economy is almost exclusively oriented towards the local market. For selling outside Javakheti cheese is produced on a small but steadily growing scale in the region. Furthermore, some of the timber processing units buy raw materials in Bakuriani and export planks to Armenia. Finally, there is also some fish export to Armenia.

### **Roads and railroad**

Much has been said about the disastrous state of the roads to Javakheti and every word is true. Thus, the shortest route from Tbilisi to Akhalkalaki, via the town of Tsalka, is only around 170 kilometers long but can only be used by a four-wheeler and the journey takes more time than the journey along the 275 kilometer-long road through Akhaltsikhe and Borjomi. The internal roads are even worse, with the exception of the road between

Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda, which is in a good condition. Finally, the physical isolation of the region is also due to the fact that the railroad does not function regularly, the railway lines are in a bad condition and the stations stand in ruins. The improvement of the basic infrastructure is a precondition for any improvement in living standards in the region.

### **Javakheti - Between Kars and Tbilisi**

One of the main reasons for Javakheti's poverty is its close location to a border (to Turkey) which is in fact closed, since there are no functioning crossing points and thus its location at the periphery of Georgia. If a border post was to be opened, the situation in Javakheti would change significantly. There is an old road, the historical gate between Turkey and Russia at the village of Karsakhi between Akhalkalaki and Kars. If this border post could be opened it could potentially result in a big boost for the Javakheti economy.

The status of the border in the region around Akhalkalaki is connected with the international relationship between Turkey and Armenia as well as between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkey closed the border with Armenia during the Azerbaijan-Armenian conflict over Nagorny Karabakh and for that reason the railway line from Kars in Turkey to Guymri in Azerbaijan is also closed, even though, with minor repairs, it could be made fully workable.

An agreement has been made in principle between the governments of Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia to build a new railroad from Kars to Akhalkalaki. This is a costly project – estimated at about 350 million US dollars – and the construction has to be combined with the rehabilitation of the Akhalkalaki – Tbilisi line, which is also costly, since the railroad is in a very bad state<sup>15</sup>. Financing has not been found so far, which in

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<sup>15</sup> The Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi railroad does not operate regularly any more; only some trains transporting potatoes are running during the harvest season. The copper wires for electrification between Akhalkalaki and Tsalka were stolen, the stations are in ruins and the line has not been maintained for many years.

itself has put the agreement into question. But the plan creates worries among the Armenians. The Government of Armenia fears, and not without reason, that if this railway is built the country will be even more isolated and economic cooperation will develop between Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan, two of which - Turkey and Azerbaijan - having a political interest in further isolating Armenia. Armenian diaspora activists in the USA lobby to prevent US funding from realizing this project. In general the railroad project is met with hostility among Armenians, including the Armenians of Javakheti, which fear that such a development will be a threat to their position in the region.

The opening of the border at the village of Karsakhi should not be confused with the question of the railroad construction. Opening the border is technically simple and inexpensive since there are already buildings at the border and the road is ready at the Turkish side, which has also build a border cross terminal. It will cost some money to repair the road from Karsakhi to Akhalkalaki on the Georgian side, but the reconstruction of this section is envisaged as part of the Millennium Challenge Fund project. And what is politically very important is that it will not isolate Armenia, but on the contrary facilitate Armenia's trade. Opening the border post at Karsakhi will open an easy transit route between Turkey and Armenia, from which Armenia will certainly gain. It is interesting that while Armenia shows a strong resistance to the idea of building a railroad line from Kars to Akhalkalaki, the country exerts no resistance at all to the opening of the border post. It can be an indirect way to normalize trade relations between Turkey and Armenia without awaiting the troublesome end of long-running political hostilities. Both Javakheti and the neighbouring Kars area in Turkey would gain a lot from such cooperation. The areas on either side of the border have a similar climate and topography, but Kars is comparatively more developed and has an industrial base which is prepared and even eager to intensify its cooperation with the countries of the southern Caucasus. The Turkish region might not be very developed according to average Western standards, but it possesses a lot of technology and even commercial knowledge which would be very useful for Javakheti. There might even be a market in Turkey for goods from Javakheti's agricultural sector, especially goods which are today almost unused, namely wool and hides.

The relations between Turks and Armenians are very complex. The bitterness following the genocide and wars is still strong and internationally well known, but it is combined with a very strong sense of loss of the very long and close relations that used to exist between Turks and Armenians, a curiosity towards the neighbours and a wish to normalize economic relations. The two peoples have much in common. Economic cooperation has the potential to be the glue, which will secure peaceful development in the long run in this border region.

Akhalkalaki is located 35 km from Armenia and 30 km from Turkey, whereas Kars is at a 70 km distance from both Armenia and Georgia. The opening of the Karsakhi-Cildir/Aktas border-crossing simultaneously with the reconstruction of the road from Karzakhi to Akhalkalaki will place Javakheti's principal town at one hour's distance from Kars, placing the most remote regions of Turkey and Georgia in a central position. The issue has been on the agenda of the Turkish and Georgian governments for several years, and was discussed by the last Turkish-Georgian Joint Economic Commission. The Posof-Vale border post linking Ardahan and Akhaltsikhe has a limited economic impact: the Ilgar pass on the Turkish side and the poor condition of the road between Vale and Akhaltsikhe on the Georgian side act as a deterrent.

### ***Trade Potential of Javakheti in Relations with Turkey***

In Turkey, wool and hides are raw materials in strong demand for the textile industry and for leather products such as leather jackets. These raw materials are thrown away in the villages of Javakheti, or sold for pennies. It would be very good for the region and profitable for an investor to establish a unit which buys wool and leather in the villages, and partially processes it into fabric – washing the wool and maybe spinning it, and carrying out the preliminary processing of hides before their export to Turkey.

### ***An annual Caucasus Fair in Akhalkalaki***

It would be highly profitable for Akhalkalaki to host an annual fair (Jarmarka) for trade within the Caucasus. At such a fair (3-5 day long), businessmen from all over the region (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Russia, Turkey) could be invited to display their products and sell them; there could be a cultural program and conferences, seminars or business congresses. Such a fair could start rather modest and develop over the years.

### ***Tourism from Javakheti to Turkey***

There is a great interest in Javakheti to travel to Kars. Many Armenians are longing to see the historical Armenian homeland, including the old Armenian capital of Ani, Lake Van and Mt. Ararat. Furthermore, the people of Javakheti would be interested to go to Kars to trade. Such tours should be low-cost, two or three-day long tours from Javakheti to Ani and Kars. However, such trips in the reverse direction have less perspective; winter sports have little prospect as the climate in Kars is exactly the same as that in Javakheti. The only prospect would be for people from Kars to travel to Tbilisi and other parts of the Georgian lowland. This would undoubtedly be interesting for the population of Kars and there might be basis for operating a fleet of minibuses for the route Kars- Akhalkalaki – Ninotsminda- Tsalka – Tbilisi once the border has been opened.

### ***Opening up of a Department of Turkish language at the Akhalkalaki University***

As cross-border cooperation grows, there will be an increased demand for people in Javakheti who can use the Turkish language for work. In some villages – mainly catholic Armenian - the Turkish language has been preserved, and quite a few individuals speak Turkish. But these people do not have a professional knowledge of the language; they are often unable to write the language and would be unable to work as translators. Nevertheless, the preservation of the Turkish language in the region is an asset which should be used and could be developed. The University would be the natural place for the

development of the Turkish language, as there already is a philological department whose Dean is a specialist in Turkish philology.

If or when the border opens, Akhalkalaki will cease to be defined as a peripheral zone of Georgia and will become an important transit zone not only between Georgia and Turkey, but also between Turkey and the whole post-Soviet Caucasus. The opening of the border will create vast opportunities and will help strategically to secure peace and stability. But the opening of the so far isolated Javakheti to more global developments also entails risks and dangers which can be minimized by providing the region with access to information about the outside world and by promoting broader cooperation projects involving all of the main stakeholders of the big Caucasian puzzle.

## **Options for Economic development of Javakheti**

Based on the assessments in Javakheti, a number of business areas could be highlighted that might be used to improve the economic development of the area.

### **Wool**

Wool is in abundance in Javakheti, and there is a potential to produce even more. Surprisingly enough, this valuable raw material is neither sold nor used for producing clothes for domestic use in the region, or felt for the isolation of houses.<sup>16</sup> It would be a very big step forward for the region to begin to exploit the wool it possesses. To begin to produce jerseys or other knitted clothes would be a possible source of cash income, especially for women, and it would help to keep the families warm<sup>17</sup>.

As the houses in the region are badly isolated, production of felt mats for isolation would immediately and considerably improve living conditions. Felt mats for isolation can be produced without any special technical equipment from the outside.

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<sup>16</sup> The clothes people wear in Javakheti is almost totally imported to the region.

<sup>17</sup> Warm clothes are very much needed, not the least for the children who often have to spend a considerable period of time in cold schools.

Since there is a lot of wool in Javakheti, it would make sense also commercially to set up a mechanism to buy the wool from the farmers and process it. The immediate product could be half-manufactured – 100% woollen yarn, something which already has a rather high price on the world market.

## **Hides**

Another unused raw material which is abundant in the region is hides. “*We feed the dogs with it*” is a common remark from villagers when asked how the hides are used. Hides are either thrown out or sold at very low prices to middlemen, and it is most likely that some of those collected in Akhalkalaki are already exported to Turkey via Batumi. The region would gain by establishing a more effective collection and processing mechanism to produce half-manufactured leather for export.

## **Honey**

In several villages there are already beekeepers and some sale of honey. This business already gives some modest cash income to the region. There is further potential to increase the production of honey and a system of marketing could be developed. It would be a worthy project for donors to support the establishment of a marketing mechanism of honey, to provide equipment for tapping it into glasses and branding it.

The possibilities of establishing a beekeepers’ association to promote bee keeping should also be considered as a tool to secure ownership of such a development. There is a demand for honey on many markets. It can be sold in Armenia and Georgia and certainly also in Russia. There is also a demand for high quality, pure mountain honey in the European Union. But to get permission to export honey to the EU, the Georgian Ministry of Agriculture would have to produce a “Monitoring Residue Plan”, which would then have to be approved by the EU.

## **Fish**

Earlier there was some commercial fishing in the lakes of Javakheti, including Lake Parvani, the biggest in the country. However, over time the lakes were no longer

exploited. According to the local administration in Ninotsminda district, this is partly due to the fact that the economic administration of the lake is subordinated to Tbilisi, which has so far not been effective. The local administration thinks that if the administration of the lake is moved to the local level it will be possible to reactivate their economic activity and earn a potential profit of 2 million Georgian Lari a year. The local administration wants the lake to be transferred to municipal ownership and the fishing rights to be leased to private entrepreneurs.

The lakes can be used for commercial fish breeding. This has not been done for many years, and the quantity of fish is now declining. There are, however, at least two smaller commercial projects that are functioning and further plans to establish fish breeding exist in the region. Along the river, on the road to Akhaltsikhe, 5 kilometres downstream from Akhalkalaki, a system of ponds where trout is being cultivated has been established. The fish farm, which provides trout in big amounts to the local market, seems to be functioning well and seems to be a commercial success.

At the Zres Lake, some 10 kilometres from Akhalkalaki, a commercial structure consisting of a partnership with some employees has also been established. The commercial structure was founded 7 years ago and the lake was leased from the state for 50 years in exchange of a sum of 1800 dollars a year. Fish breeding (6-7 different kinds of fish and crabs) has been established in the lake. According to the partners, the project has not made any money from its investments yet, but in the last year some returns have begun to flow in to cover the expenses. The fish is sold on the local market in Akhalkalaki, although there are plans to extend the sale abroad. However, the owners of the Zres fishing company complain about the lack of freezing facilities and facilities to transport frozen fish.

Thus, there are some local fish breeding activities, and these could undoubtedly be increased. However, the potential is limited as the lakes are relatively small and are not deep. Furthermore, the harsh climate (the lakes are frozen half the year) limits the speed of fish growth. It should also be taken into consideration that large-scale fish breeding

can be a rather polluting activity. Finally the local idea of exporting fish to the European Union might not be realistic as the strict hygienic and bureaucratic demands from the EU might be difficult to overcome.

### **Rehabilitation of industry**

There seems to be very little potential in the short run for the reestablishment of industrial structures in Javakheti. Whatever existed before was adapted to the demands of a system that no longer exists. Furthermore, many of the workers have lost their qualifications, grown older or left.

### **Tourism**

There is absolutely no tourism in Javakheti for the moment. It would be naive to expect mass tourism in this remote and poor area characterized by its harsh climate. However, the region could potentially be attractive thanks to its beautiful nature, its grandiose Didi Abuli Mountain and Lake Parvani – the biggest lake in Georgia. The cool climate could even turn into an advantage in the summer when many people are trying to escape the unbearable heat of Tbilisi, and the winter weather is always perfect for skiing<sup>18</sup>. As a tourist area, Javakheti would undoubtedly have a greater chance once it is easier to access. There are no large-scale hotels in the region, but there are a considerable number of small hotels and restaurants in Akhalkalaki and if they are combined with some mountain stations for skiing and hiking, it might be a good starting point for some modest tourism.

### **Agro-scientific development**

It would undoubtedly pay off in the long run to begin to develop agriculture on a scientific level in Javakheti. One possibility would be for international donors, local actors and the Georgian state to join forces and establish an agricultural research farm to test and implement new agricultural methods in the region. For instance, it is somewhat puzzling why in such a harsh climate the northern corn rye is not used. It should also be noted that while Javakheti is very cold, the soil in some places is high quality black earth

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<sup>18</sup> It should be remembered that any development of tourism in Javakheti has to compete with the neighbouring mountainous tourist resort of Bakuriani, which is already developed for winter sports and summer recreation.

and sunshine is abundant, since the region is located rather far south. It could therefore be interesting to test some modern greenhouses adapted to the region for growing vegetables.

### **Isolation of buildings**

Houses are generally surprisingly badly insulated for such a harsh climate as that of Javakheti. This also applies to public buildings such as schools. Ways to better insulate houses must be introduced and information on isolation processes needs to be disseminated, including guidance on how to produce felt.

### **Risk evaluation**

It is the general view of the writer of this report that the general prospects for Javakheti are rather positive. The present situation is bad, as described above, but the negative situation is principally the result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the confused post-soviet period, rather than a consequence of the harsh climate. Once these specific problems have been solved and a way forward has been found, Javakheti will have the possibility to secure better living conditions for its inhabitants. However, no analysis would be responsible or complete if the possible risks were not mentioned.

### **Low economic surplus**

In general the economy in the region has a very low surplus. This will make it difficult to accumulate capital for economic development. Thus, there is a risk that such development will be delayed or will only reach a small part of the population, while the remainder of the population is left behind. In a situation where the region's own means of investments are very limited, eventual investment from outside can be positive but can also entail negative consequences. One risk would be that if the investments are given as credits or loans and the economic projects do not succeed, it could lead to unpayable debts.

Another risk is that investors from outside will have interests that differ considerably from the region's own interests; this could lead to conflicts of different kinds, from labour conflicts to pollution and conflicts in long-term planning.

### ***Electrical supply not sustainable***

The electricity supply to Akhalkalaki is highly insecure. The supply depends on a delivery agreement from Armenia to Georgia, based on short-term contracts and on ready payment for electricity delivered. This depends on two rather unreliable factors: the economic status of Georgian society and the establishment of a framework in which users pay for the amount of electricity they use. Of greater concern is the fact that the main source of electricity supply to Javakheti<sup>19</sup> is the Armenian nuclear power plant. This plant is of the Soviet type, is therefore already old and hardly fulfils international standards. It could be forced to close down or, even worse, an accident could take place, especially since Armenia lies in an earthquake area. It is beyond the scope of this report to make any judgment of the likeliness of such an accident or its consequences in terms of radioactive pollution. But it should be noted that an accident could, among other consequences, lead to an abrupt end of the electricity supply to Javakheti.

Alternative means of energy supply should therefore be considered. One alternative would be to use the region's potential for producing hydro-electricity. A major project already exists, but hydropower plants are expensive to install and, for the moment, the required investment is lacking.

### **Negative consequences of the opening of the border to Turkey**

There are considerable fears among the Armenians in Javakheti that the opening of the border with Turkey, combined with the closure of the Russian military base, will lead to

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<sup>19</sup> Also the delivery of electricity to Tbilisi originates from the Armenian nuclear power plant.

Turkish domination in the region and that this could ultimately lead to Turkish repression of the Armenians along the historical pattern seen 1878-1919.

The present Georgian-Turkish border was fixed by the Russian-Turkish agreement of 1921 and Armenians in the region broadly saw the Russian base as a guarantee that status quo would be upheld, even though the base has, over the last years, had little military significance and is largely of symbolic value. The fear of the Turkish threat in the region is real even if the threat itself is illusory; however, the fear and the historical memory of the Armenian people are serious factors that have to be dealt with very cautiously by the Georgian authorities.

The opening of cross-border trade might also lead to negative consequences that are well known from other border areas. Smuggling of goods, money and drugs, trafficking of persons and prostitution might develop around the border and prostitution in particular will not be welcome in the morally very strict Javakheti region.

### **Tension between Georgians and Armenians**

It must be stressed that the general development of relations between Georgians and Armenians in Georgia is positive. Since the 2003 “Rose Revolution”, which brought President Saakashvili to power, the Georgian government has shown openness and a desire to maintain and develop a dialogue with the Armenian minority and especially with the Javakheti Armenians. Several steps have been taken to overcome the isolation of the Armenians in the region in relation to Georgia as a whole. The Armenians in the region are also fully ready to cooperate and to integrate as citizens of Georgia, provided that their ethnic interests are respected. Such international organizations as OSCE and ECMI are instrumental in promoting this integration. Nevertheless, there are differences of interest between Tbilisi and Javakheti. A system of local self-governance, which could be a more permanent basis for cooperation between Tbilisi and Javakheti, has yet to be fully-established and a new Law on Self-Government passed by the Georgian Parliament is considered inadequate by some key stakeholders in Javakheti. This, of course, is a

problem not only in Javakheti but also in Georgia as a whole. Other potential sources of tension relate to the fact that the promised construction of roads has yet to materialize and to specific issues, such as schools and language problems for Armenians during service in the Georgian military.<sup>20</sup>

### **Difference in economic behaviour cultures**

The economic behaviour in Javakheti is neither more nor less honest than in the rest of the world. But the economic life is very informal and this leads to a risk of misunderstanding. A combination of the old Soviet economic patterns, informal economic activities and extreme poverty provides for an economic system that can be very difficult for outsiders to understand or adapt to. The backward and old-fashioned region of Javakheti also exhibits a lack of understanding of the demands of the modern economy and accounting, including documentation of economic transactions. Thus, it can be foreseen that if or when international development organizations or investors begin to work in the region on a larger scale there will be some cooperation problems relating to different economic cultures.

### **Conclusion**

This informal assessment has shown that the economic, cultural and living conditions are generally severe in Javakheti. There is a harsh climate, a very low level of technology, collapsed Soviet structures and very little surplus beyond the basic needs for daily survival. The region will certainly have to struggle if its ambition is to reach even moderate levels of wealth. But this assessment has also shown that there are human and economic resources in the region and they should not be underestimated. Javakheti has been a focus of interest for the international community for several years, both in terms of

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<sup>20</sup> In the spring 2005 14 young men from Javakheti escaped from the Georgian military garrison in Akhaltsikhe, returning home claiming to be harassed. Georgian authorities, the local (Armenian) authorities in Javakheti and the Javakheti population took a great interest in the question and made big efforts to find a compromise. Several leading officers were removed from their duties a majority of the young men, which left returned to the military, being promised not to receive heavy punishment.

research and more practically-oriented projects which are aimed at developing and integrating the region into Georgian state structures. Though the specific development activities on the part of international structures have so far been limited, they have already played a substantial role in the development of the region, and this role has the potential of growing in coming years.

Javakheti has the opportunity to move from a peripheral to a more central position in the Georgian and broader Caucasian contexts. This move will become a reality if the border post between Akhalkalaki and Kars is opened and the central roads to Tbilisi, Armenia and Turkey are reconstructed. A hundred years ago, the village of Karsakhi was called “the gateway of the Caucasus”. Today Akhalkalaki has the chance to be a modern gateway of the Caucasus. This opens up great perspectives, but also embraces some risks, especially if the region is not adequately prepared for this development. It is crucial to support the civil society in the region by strengthening its abilities to participate in, decide upon, and hold ownership of its own integration process. I hope that my work at ECMI and this report is a modest contribution in facilitating the continued democratic and economic development of Akhalkalaki.



*Hovannes Gilosyan and his mother, Village of Olaverd*