

ECMI

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Excerpts on the Caucasus

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ECMI ANNUAL REPORT 2004

I. Action-Oriented Projects

A. Caucasus

In 2004, the European Centre for Minority Issues accelerated its activities in Georgia with a complex programme aimed at enhancing the integration of two regions with large concentrations of ethnic minorities: the predominantly Armenian region of Javakheti in the south of the country (constituting the eastern part of the Samtskhe-Javakheti Province) and the Azeri dominated Kvemo Kartli province in the southeast. The issue of minority rights is closely connected with and runs alongside the distinctive regional make up of Georgia. Since independence 15 years ago, development in the country has tended to be restricted to the capital Tbilisi and other major cities. In contrast, rural areas have descended into extreme poverty. From a political standpoint, the previous administration of President Shevardnadze, partly due to the need to attain a certain degree of stability, developed extensive patronage systems in which powerful local interest groups were allowed significant economic power in return for retaining stability in their particular area and delivering votes for the incumbent government during elections. A key measure of how effectively Georgia develops from here, therefore, will be how minorities and regions are integrated. This concerns not only matters of civil integration but also issues affecting broad based economic growth. It is difficult to conceive a peaceful, stable and prosperous Georgia without a process whereby the different regions of the country become more integrated. There are critical matters of importance with respect to areas of the country where densely concentrated minorities reside.

In addition to the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which broke away from Georgia after bloody civil wars in the early 1990s, the provinces of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli remain largely populated with minorities. These two regions have remained isolated from the rest of Georgia since independence, prompting fears that unless sensitive integration policies are pursued, the latent threat of conflict remains. The Georgian government has yet to devise policy regarding minority rights even though approximately one fifth of the population is made up of ethnic minorities.

II. Engaging Local Communities in Minority Regions

ECMI's programme seeks to promote regional integration and defuse inter-ethnic tension in the minority regions. In the initial stages of ECMI's programme in Georgia, the focus of attention has been to foster a dialogue within the predominantly Armenian Javakheti region on matters that concern local residents and, in early 2004, ECMI established a presence in the region's principal town, Akhalkalaki. By establishing a network of civil society actors that include representatives of most religious-ethnic groups as well as government officials, the project is helping to seek improvements in inter-ethnic relations and broaden the level of the consultative process in decision making. The programme promotes regional integration and engages provincial and state level policy makers in the process, thus creating firmer links between regional actors and central levels of authority. Running parallel to this process is a system whereby training is provided to build the capacity for mobilization efforts in order to broaden public participation in the consultative mechanisms. Moreover, a number of community mobilization grants are provided for local initiatives, which serves to further regional integration. The programme is jointly funded by the Governments of Denmark, Norway and Germany.

Following an in-depth assessment of socio-political and economic obstacles for the integration of Javakheti conducted by ECMI Non-Resident Senior Research Associate, Dr. Jonathan Wheatley (published as ECMI Working Paper #22, see <http://www.ecmi.de/>

download/working_paper_22.pdf), ECMI held an initial, preparatory meeting in Akhalkalaki on 23 April. The meeting convened a small group of key stakeholders from the region and served to ensure that the project design was confirmed in consultation with the local stakeholders and to ensure early local ownership of the activities. Based on the assessment and consultative meetings, a number of priority areas were identified. Among the key concerns of local community representatives were: economic development, especially in the field of agriculture; the complicated language question in a region where the majority of the population does not speak the state language; the lack of access to adequate health care; and the poorly developed road infrastructure in a region topographically isolated from the rest of the country. In addition, the lack of appropriate communication channels between Tbilisi and the region was emphasized as a major obstacle for constructive dialogue to address the needs of the region. Discussions at the preliminary meeting served as a platform for a subsequent inaugural meeting to establish a network of citizens, a “Javakheti Citizens Forum”. In early September, the project was further strengthened by the deployment of an international project manager in Akhalkalaki, the principal town in Javakheti. The project manager, Mikael Hertoft (Denmark) has broad experience in similar activities working for the OSCE in Chechnya, the Russian Federation, and as an OSCE election observer over the past 10 years. Mikael Hertoft is the only international representative of an international agency based permanently in Javakheti.

On 22 September, the inaugural “Javakheti Citizen’s Forum” convened. The event took place in a conference format and was attended by some 80 representatives from civil society structures and local authorities for the region, as well as by representatives from central government agencies, policy institutes based in Tbilisi and the Georgian media. At the forum, the programme elements were officially launched and, in the ensuing discussion, the participants confirmed the need for improving dialogue between local and central actors. The event was widely covered by the local and national media. Two working groups were established as an outcome of the first conference: a) a Working Group on Language Questions, Information and Education; and b) a Working Group on Economic Development and Integration. These groups have subsequently met on a monthly basis to discuss current problems of regional integration in their respective thematic areas and to work on recommendations for the government for improvement of relevant state policies. The remote location of the Javakheti region (a five to seven hour drive from Tbilisi to Akhalkalaki), has hampered the participation of the Government officials from the central level and to overcome this problem, in 2005 ECMI will organize a series of meetings in Tbilisi, which will be attended by central government officials as well as by representatives from the Javakheti-based working groups. In November, the Working Group on Language Questions, Information and Education responded to a proposed draft law on primary education, currently being debated by the Georgian parliament, by providing critical comments and suggesting several amendments in a letter to the Georgian Minister of Education.

The representatives of the working group expressed concern that the Armenian and Russian languages might not be maintained under the new law as the languages of instruction in minority schools. The letter proposed that guarantees for maintaining the minority tongues as languages of instruction in the schools should be provided. At the same time, the letter emphasized that the Armenian population in Javakheti is not opposed to the introduction of the Georgian language in the region’s schools. However, it was suggested that Georgian should be taught as a second language. The letter also called for the deployment of more resources for teaching in Georgian, since there is currently a significant lack of Georgian language teachers and textbooks in the region. The letter was widely discussed in the Georgian media and at the second “Javakheti Citizens Forum” on 15 December, Deputy Minister for Education, Bela Tsipuria, as well as Tamara Tsikhistavi, representative of the Office of the State Minister for Conflict Resolution Issues, made their way to Akhalkalaki to allow for an open and transparent discussion on the implications of the proposed law. At the conference, Bela Tsipuria handed over a letter from

Minister of Education Alexander Lomaia. Though the minister and his deputy did not approve of the suggestions made by the working group members, he stressed that the parents and teachers at each individual school are entitled to make their own decisions on the language of instruction. The Ministry's reply has subsequently been discussed by the working group at a meeting in January 2005. While the working group members welcome the commitment by the Ministry, concerns remain that guarantees for instruction in minority languages are not clearly provided for in the draft law. The working group is now preparing an additional letter to the Ministry of Education. Regardless of the differences in positions, the visit by the deputy minister marked the first occasion in several years where a senior official from Tbilisi made the effort to travel the long distance to the remote region in order to take part in a direct dialogue with the local stakeholders. The appearance in Javakheti was highly appreciated by the local authorities and civil society actors as a sign of goodwill from the new government. Hence, the Citizens Forum event on education was a great success in terms of initiating direct dialogue and allowing for consultation with regional stakeholders.

Incidentally, Georgian President Mikeil Saakashvili visited Akhalkalaki shortly afterwards on a surprise visit on 29 December. The President made several commitments on behalf of the Georgian government with regard to the rehabilitation of transport infrastructure and made promises to construct a highway connecting Akhalkalaki with Tbilisi beginning in 2005. He also promised that stipends for university students from the region would be made available so as to allow for the attendance of Armenian youth at Tbilisi institutes of higher education. Saakashvili's visit seemed to highlight the government's growing interest in addressing the problems of the region.

The ECMI project in Javakheti also supports the development and strengthening of civil society structures in the region. On 12 December, a resource centre was opened in Akhalkalaki at ECMI's premises. The centre is equipped for hosting seminars and other events for up to 30 participants and computers and other technical equipment is available for civil society organizations. In 2005, the resource centre will provide various training programmes for NGOs and community leaders and also host a variety of public events.

Finally, ECMI operates a grants facility for community mobilization projects in Javakheti and can support small projects aimed at supporting the self-organization of local communities and activities which can further inter-ethnic relations within or between actors in the region and in other parts of Georgia. In December, the first five grants were disbursed to support: a chess tournament covering six different locations in Samtskhe-Javakheti, with the aim of fostering closer inter-ethnic ties, especially between Armenians and Georgians; the provision of technical equipment for the Greek community in Akhalkalaki; the production of a series of TV programmes on regional integration; the development of a regional NGO association internet homepage displayed in the Georgian and Armenian languages; and a series of seminars focusing on current obstacles to the integration of the region's youth population. The grant facility is seen as a crucially important means of increasing the involvement of unrepresented local communities in the process of engaging the regional population in political decision making affecting society in Javakheti. At present, it is primarily in the urban district centres of Javakheti—the towns of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda—that embryonic civil society structures are taking shape. Rural communities, including the region's minority groups—Georgians, Greeks and Russian Dukhobors—a sect of Russian Old believers who fled to Georgia in the 1830s—remain largely disenfranchised from the political process.

In 2005, special efforts will be made to further the engagement of rural communities and ensure their participation in ECMI organized conferences and working groups through trainings and grants.

In December 2004, ECMI also took measures to initiate similar activities in Kvemo Kartli. A thorough assessment was conducted by Dr. Jonathan Wheatley in September (ECMI Working Paper #23, see http://www.ecmi.de/downloads/working_paper_23.pdf), which identified an urgent need for action in the Kvemo Kartli province to defuse inter-ethnic tension. As in Javakheti, some of the major problems in Kvemo Kartli relate to the lack of economic opportunities, the poor quality of roads, the perilous state of medical facilities, and lack of knowledge of the Georgian language. Moreover, distribution of land is a major problem with an ethnic dimension and in recent months, ethnic tensions in the province have been on the rise.

On 20 December, ECMI held an initial pre-stakeholder meeting in Marneuli, the principal town in the region and, in 2005 onwards, a comprehensive project covering five out of six districts in the region with a significant (mostly Azeri, but also Greek and Armenian) minority population will be implemented along similar lines to the projects in Javakheti. Tom Trier (Denmark), who in 2004 had been acting as ECMI Deputy Director and Senior Research Associate based in Flensburg, has in January 2005 been deployed permanently to Tbilisi as Regional Representative for the Caucasus. Tom Trier will head ECMI's operations in Georgia and also be directly in charge of the implementation of the Kvemo Kartli programme.

III. Cooperation with the Government

While the programme components described above direct attention towards engagement where minorities reside, ECMI also works with the Georgian government to strengthen its capacity to deal with minority issues and assist in the process of regional integration. Following the November 2003 "Rose Revolution", there has been substantial change in the structure and personnel within the senior and middle level civil service. However, as yet, there is little capacity in many areas to deal effectively with the formulation and implementation of policy. This creates problems for senior government decision makers in many areas, as they lack the resources and expertise to decide upon the cause and effect of policy.

2004 has seen a strengthening of the relationship between the central government and ECMI. The Centre has established a particularly fruitful collaboration with the Office of the State Minister for Conflict Resolution Issues. State Minister Giorgi Khaindrava and his staff were initially mandated to deal with the reintegration of the break-away republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, in the fall of 2004, the State Minister's office was additionally put in charge of the regional integration of Samtskhe- Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli. Hence, ECMI is closely coordinating its regional activities in Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli with the State Minister's Office.

A governmental strand of ECMI's programme has now been designed to assist the State Minister's Office in building the capacity to address minority issues and integration. The programme component focuses on economic issues and the determination of government policy towards, initially, the regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli. In early 2004, the government established a state commission for regional integration. This commission, however, has never met formally, but is comprised of ministers and is chaired by the prime minister. ECMI's strategy is to assist this commission, by working through the Office of the State Minister for Conflict Resolution Issues, to develop an integrated economic development strategy and action plan for Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli. ECMI will provide significant inputs in the process in the form of advice, training and facilitation. Once the action plans and integrated strategies are developed, they are intended to become government policy. ECMI will then work with central and local governments towards the implementation of these action plans.

In October, John Wright, a British economist based in Tbilisi, was engaged as ECMI's Political Advisor. John Wright is responsible for the implementation of this programme element and will also provide advice on ECMI's other activities in Georgia. While ECMI has been occupied with the preparatory work for this programme element in the final months of 2004, implementation focusing on Samtskhe-Javakheti will take place in 2005 and action in Kvemo Kartli in 2006.

As a whole, the ECMI programme for Georgia was developed to create synergies and cross-fertilization across the programme components so as to foster an equal-opportunities approach to integration of the minority-populated regions of Georgia into mainstream society.

IV. Future Work

In 2005, ECMI will continue the implementation of the above programmes, and will also expand its ongoing research on majority–minority relations in Georgia. In 2005–7, ECMI will enter into closer cooperation with the Danish Refugee Council under a framework programme for the Caucasus through the Danish Foreign Ministry's Neighbourhood Programme Department. The Foreign Ministries of Norway and Germany will continue their support to individual components of the programme. In addition to the outlined activities, ECMI will also carry out an analysis of gaps in programming (GAP analysis) in the implementation of the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) in the wider South Caucasus region. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have signed and ratified the FCNM, but significant measures need to be taken, especially in Azerbaijan, to adhere to the Convention. Georgia has signed but not ratified the FCNM, and the Council of Europe has recently, in Resolution 1415 (2004) of its Parliamentary Assembly, set a deadline before September 2005 for Georgia to ratify the FCNM and to sign and ratify the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. It remains crucial that the gaps in the ratification or implementation in this process be thoroughly identified.

V. Project Activities in 2004

- Training Workshop for the Caucasus Region, Tbilisi, Georgia, In September 2004, ECMI and the Office of the Public Defender of Georgia hosted a workshop for the staff of the Georgian Public Defender, the Human Rights Defender of Armenia and the Ombudsman Office of Azerbaijan.
- Workshop and Study Tour, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, The third workshop was a follow-up meeting and border region study tour held at ECMI headquarters in Flensburg, Germany in November 2004. Staff of network institutions from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kosovo, Estonia, the Russian Federation and Macedonia joined together for three days to meet with representatives of the German Federal and Regional (Schleswig-Holstein) Commissioners for National Minorities, as well as minority representatives from the region. The group visited the parliament of the State of Schleswig-Holstein in Kiel, and participated in in-depth workshops led by experts on minority rights, human rights, and the role of the ombudsman, including from the Central European University (Budapest), DIHR, the Danish Ethnic Equal Treatment Complaints Committee and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.

VI. Meskhetian Turks

‘Between Integration and Resettlement: The Meskhetian Turks’

The project, which began in June 2004, aims to produce a comprehensive and comparative cross-border study of today’s Meskhetian Turk communities and strives to develop an alternative discourse to the framework maintained by international actors addressing the problems of the Meskhetian Turks, based on an *a priori* assumption that Meskhetian Turks desire to return to their region of origin. Through multidisciplinary research, the project seeks to grasp the complexity of the subject by obtaining a thorough understanding of Meskhetian Turkish identity, migration processes, concepts of ‘home’ and social organization. On this basis, new approaches to find durable solutions to the problems of the Meskhetian Turks may be developed.