

The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies

Numéro Issue 10 (2009)

The Integration of Non-Russian Servicemen in the Imperial, Soviet and Russian Army

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The Closure of the Russian Military Base at Akhalkalaki: Challenges for the Local Energy Elite, the Informal Economy and Stability

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Electronic reference

Indra Øverland, « The Closure of the Russian Military Base at Akhalkalaki: Challenges for the Local Energy Elite, the Informal Economy and Stability », *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* [Online], Issue 10 | 2009, Online since 07 décembre 2009. URL : <http://www.pipss.org/index3717.html>

DOI : en cours d'attribution

Éditeur : Centre d'études et de recherche sur les sociétés et les institutions post-soviétiques (CERSIPS)

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Document accessible en ligne à l'adresse suivante : <http://www.pipss.org/index3717.html>

Document généré automatiquement le 08 décembre 2009.

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The Closure of the Russian Military Base at Akhalkalaki: Challenges for the Local Energy Elite, the Informal Economy and Stability

This base looks like an economic body rather than a military one. Its current organisation – old and devastated buildings, officers preoccupied with their daily problems and outsiders freely hanging around on its territory – reminds one of a demoralised, aborigine-manned legion of the late Roman Empire.¹

Introduction

- 1 This paper deals with a special case of an ethnic minority in the Russian Army – the Javakheti Armenians – and the Russian military base at Akhalkalaki, Georgia. The case is special because it represents a rare circumstance in which the Russian Army maintained a military base composed largely of ethnic minority Javakheti Armenians, within a different country, in this case Georgia. The base was closed in 2007 raising questions about the future of the Javakheti Armenian community after the loss of what was, in practice, its greatest employer. This paper relates the closure of the base to the legacy of Russia's military presence in local informal economies and power structures among the Javakheti Armenians, in order to explain why the closure of the base has *not* resulted in major unrest among the local Javakheti Armenian population, which seemingly had depended on it for economic survival.
- 2 The Armenian minority in Georgia numbers approximately 249 000, of which 113 000 live in the province of Samtskhe-Javakheti². This province is located in the southern part of Georgia, and borders both Armenia and Turkey. Samtskhe-Javakheti, like several other Georgian provinces, is a recent administrative creation in which the minority area of Javakheti was merged with the larger ethnic Georgian populations of Samtskhe and Borjomi in the belief that this would preempt demands for autonomy from the ethnic Armenians. The vast majority of the 113 000 Armenians in the province – some 90 000 – live in Javakheti (which they call “Javakh”)³. Their principal language is Armenian, with most speaking Russian as a second language instead of Georgian. Armenian is an Indo-European language with its own alphabet and bears little relation to Georgian, which also has its own alphabet and is a non-Indo-European language of the South Caucasian family. For simplicity the author will primarily discuss “Javakheti” and refer to its ethnic Armenian population as “Javakheti Armenians”. Javakheti is an impoverished, barren, high-altitude area with a harsh climate during the winter months, when temperatures during this period can drop to - 40° Celsius⁴. The capital of Javakheti is Akhalkalaki, with neighbouring Ninotsminda representing the second most significant regional settlement.
- 3 This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Tbilisi and Akhalkalaki in 2001, 2002 and 2007. Additional study trips were also made to Ninotsminda and other locations in Samtskhe-Javakheti. In total, the author draws on unstructured interviews with sixty-two informants, and additional participant observation in Akhalkalaki. Due to the fact that some of this information may be sensitive, no detailed information concerning the informants will be provided here. Secondary data in the form of reports from various international organisations working in the area have also been used. The author would particularly like to thank the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) in Georgia for assistance in gathering information.

History

- 4 The closure of the military base at Akhalkalaki marks a significant development in over 200 years of history in the South Caucasus. Although there may have been Armenians in the area

prior to this, the first large-scale settlement of Armenians in Javakheti took place after the war between the Ottoman and Russian Empires in 1828–1829, when Javakheti came under the control of Russia's Imperial Army. Another wave of Armenians arrived after the expulsion of the Armenian population from the Ottoman Empire in 1915⁵. Throughout this period, the Russian Army maintained a presence in Akhalkalaki, with the facilities evacuated in 2007 built in 1910⁶. For the Russian empire it was a remote outpost against the Turks. For the Armenians the Russian presence provided a security guarantee against their Turkish neighbors.

5 During the Cold War, the Soviet Union expanded the base so that it could maintain a garrison of 15 000 troops⁷. Turkey became a NATO member in 1952, and during the remainder of the Cold War the Turco-Soviet border near Akhalkalaki was only one of two very short direct borders between the USSR and NATO⁸. This ensured that the Russian-Armenian constellation of shared interests lived on in a Soviet format: the USSR protected the Armenians against the Turks while the Armenians served in the Soviet military. The proximity to the Turkish border also meant that Javakheti was a closed zone during the Soviet period: foreigners were barred from entering the area, and Soviet citizens needed a special permit to do so. This situation allowed relations between the Javakheti Armenian population and the military base to evolve absent much external interference.

Closure

6 During the fifteen years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Georgian authorities regularly requested the closure of Russia's four main military bases in the country: Akhalkalaki, Batumi, Gaudauta and Vaziani. Between 1991 and 1999, Russia elected to stonewall such requests⁹. The 1999 Istanbul summit of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) marked a turning point in events, with Russia agreeing to shut down the bases. In the following years Russia continued to drag its feet on implementation of this agreement, although Vaziani was handed over to the Georgian military in 2001 and some personnel and equipment were transferred out of Akhalkalaki. For example, in October 2000, 76 armoured vehicles were taken from Akhalkalaki to Armenia, where Russia occupied another base at Gyumri, though this had little impact on the operations of the Akhalkalaki base¹⁰. It was only from 2004 onwards that Russia started shutting down the Akhalkalaki base in earnest. That year a small number of soldiers were moved out of the base, but this trickle became a flow by 2006, culminating with the formal handover to the Georgian authorities on 27 June 2007¹¹.

7 When closure procedures commenced during 2007 they were handled quietly and relatively swiftly. In fact the turnover was completed several months ahead of the schedule renegotiated by Georgia and Russia. Unlike the closure of similar bases in Moldova, the OSCE was not allowed to observe the procedures or the transportation of military equipment closely¹². However, from a distance, heavy military equipment was observed being transported from Akhalkalaki to Tsalka, where it was removed by rail. Ammunition and support equipment like radars were sent to the Russian military base at Gyumri¹³. Informants reported that blasts were heard emanating from a nearby firing range, possibly as a result of the detonation of base ammunition stores, though no external agencies were able to observe the events.

Intermeshing formal and informal economies

8 The Russian military base at Akhalkalaki was the main socio-economic pillar of the Javakheti Armenian community. According to Oksana Antonenko, “[...] the base in Akhalkalaki *de facto* fulfilled many of the traditional state functions such as providing security, employment opportunities, education and social security to the local inhabitants”¹⁴. In this respect it could be seen as reminiscent of Caroline Humphrey's use of the term “icebergs” to describe institutions left over from the Soviet era: “Soviet institutions of different sizes, perhaps melting a little at top and bottom, or maybe growing imperceptibly, floating and jostling one another in an unfriendly

9 sea”¹⁵. Moreover, the part of them that protrudes into the open air is only a fraction of the whole. They are “total institutions” that penetrate much deeper than their nominal economic activities¹⁶. As in much of the former Soviet Union, many of the primary enterprises in Javakheti were shut down from 1991 onwards including the meat factory, dairy plant, clothes factory, furniture works, cement works, shoemakers and chicken battery. Parts of the railway were stolen and sold as scrap¹⁷. The military base was the only part of the old Soviet economic infrastructure that remained active with both formal and informal economic functions.

Employment, services and purchases

10 The most important formal contribution of the base to the local economy was through employment and wages. Base-related employment included military staff itself, support staff within the base and auxiliary employers such as the Russian school and hospital. Around 1999, there were 3 000 people working on the base itself, 80 per cent of whom were locals. Typical monthly wages were around 300 USD. Total annual inputs into the local economy through wages for Javakheti Armenians could thus be estimated at approximately 720 000 USD. Additionally, the Russian staff at the base would spend some of their income locally¹⁸. Auxiliary employers including the Russian school and hospital also contributed to the local economy. These auxiliary functions created further employment opportunities, while also providing services for the community – such as education and healthcare – above the standard otherwise expected in a rural minority area of Georgia¹⁹.

11 The base also provided a stable market for local produce, including potatoes, meat, onions, cabbage, beetroot, cheese, butter and milk²⁰. This ensured that the economic influence of the base extended well beyond the town of Akhalkalaki with even remote subsistence based villages in Javakheti engaging in economic exchanges with the base.

Petrol

12 There were fourteen petrol stations in Akhalkalaki. This breaks down statistically to one petrol station per 4 400 persons, this in an impoverished community in which few people could afford a car and where road infrastructure was primitive. By comparison, the United Kingdom, with a far wealthier population and much greater number of cars, had one petrol station per 6 600 persons²¹. The large number of petrol stations in Akhalkalaki struck visitors as a significant architectural and economic aspect of the town.

13 During fieldwork it was difficult to determine with any certainty where these petrol stations got their fuel from, and what their market was. It seemed obvious that the military base would be one source of inexpensive fuel, and several informants confirmed this supposition. Asked what the mechanisms for acquiring petrol might be, one informant conjectured as follows: the base could plan a large-scale military exercise, get extra fuel for this, then scale down the military exercise and sell the fuel on the local market. According to other informants, only small amounts of petrol from the base entered the local market, but during the author’s initial research these claims were disregarded, as it was difficult to explain the large number of petrol stations in any other way.

Smuggling

14 In addition to formal direct and indirect inputs from the military base, its presence offered opportunities to generate income in other ways. One important activity was smuggling. Russian military vehicles were not stopped at Georgian or Russian customs posts²². In addition, the isolation of Javakheti from the rest of Georgia made it difficult for the Georgian authorities to control the areas near the border. There was large-scale inbound smuggling of cigarettes, alcohol, sweets and food from Armenia. This was obvious, given that many of the products on sale in Akhalkalaki were of Armenian origin, whereas officially an average of only 2.5 cars passed Akhalkalaki’s nearest border post at Ninotsminda per day²³. Military convoys were

sometimes also used to export potatoes to Russia, although this practice seems to have declined during the final years that the base was in operation.

Migration

- 15 Despite the importance of these economic inputs to the local community, many informants argued that the base's most important function was to provide a migration gateway to Russia²⁴. One well-informed respondent claimed that fifty percent of the male Javakheti-Armenian population was working in Russia and that eighty percent of Javakheti Armenian families had at least one family member working in Russia²⁵. A more formal survey in the village of Eshtia in Ninotsminda found that out of a population of 4 000 individuals, 1 700 had left the village for seasonal work in Russia²⁶. According to two informants, each labour migrant in Russia would typically send back 3 000-4 000 USD per year²⁷.
- 16 Opportunities for migration were generated in a variety of ways. The presence of the base facilitated contacts between locals and the Russian staff, who could help to organise work in Russia. The military convoys that were used to transport potatoes were also used to transport people. Further, the many Javakheti Armenians who served on the base were permitted to travel to Russia. Military staff who had served for a requisite number of years or who had attained sufficiently senior rank were also eligible for Russian citizenship. In view of the restrictions periodically imposed on Georgian citizens travelling to Russia as a result of political tensions between the two countries, this freedom of movement could offer a considerable advantage.
- 17 The importance of the base to the local economy was well illustrated by the predominance of the Russian rouble as the principal currency of Javakheti, making the region a *de facto* part of the rouble zone. The second currency of Javakheti was the Armenian dram, whereas the Georgian lari was used so little that it could sometimes be difficult to get information about the rate of exchange²⁸.

The power brokers

- 18 Two major informal economic groups have dominated the economy and politics of Javakheti since 1995²⁹. The Georgian media often refer to these groups as "clans", but in practice they are more flexible economic groups entred on powerful local individuals, their families and many non-familial collaborators and clients³⁰. It would be incorrect to emphasise the illegal aspects of these groups. Although many of their activities are informal or part of the shadow economy, they are not criminal groups as such.
- 19 These groups derive their influence from multiple sources. Leading members may hold, or at some point have held, positions at the military base which enabled them to become involved in the various economic activities connected with the base. The majority of base officers were Russians or other Slavs, but some Armenians also attained high rank. Due to the important role of Armenians in the Russian Imperial, and later Soviet armed forces, it was easier for them to become officers than it was for local soldiers in, for example Tajikistan, where the divide between Russian officers and Tajik soldiers was more clearly defined³¹.
- 20 However, the power and economic position of these groups did not originate exclusively in military base. Rather, the base represented one of a number of power bases in the region. Another important source of influence was control over land and other agricultural assets. During privatisation, powerful local actors were able to gain control over the most expensive farm machinery and best agricultural land. In many villages, a few families came to control between 200 and 300 hectares of land each, while other families typically own between 1.25 and 5 hectares. Land was secured through access to the necessary capital or credit for purchase, nepotism or bribes to local officials³².
- 21 Another important source of income resulted from the control of heating supplies. Heating an average Akhalkalaki home for one winter costs between 700 and 1 000 USD³³. Therefore fuel

for heating was perhaps the single greatest expense for many Armenian families. Since there is no coal and little wood in Javakheti, fuel had to be imported, and control over this trade was lucrative. Coal was brought from Ukraine and wood from the region around Borzhomi in Georgia. Unlike many parts of the former Soviet Union, few homes are attached to district heating utilities, so the financial and technical burden of heating has remained largely a private matter³⁴.

22 Income could also be gained from other activities, like facilitating jobs in Russia and skimming the income of labour migrants. One person could use his position at the military base to go to Russia and develop contacts there. Others would then come and work under his umbrella, providing him with further income. Transportation and accommodation might also form part of this arrangement.

23 Finally, control over the community's many petrol stations served as the most important single source of power. Jonathan Wheatleyrites:

“Since 1995, the deputies elected to parliament from Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda on the first-past-the-post basis have also wielded a very significant influence. These individuals and their families are believed to have controlled many of the economic resources of the region, especially the trade in oil and gas... Whoever controls the border posts and the trade in gas and oil products automatically becomes a major player in the politics of the region. This has led to power at local level being concentrated in the hands of a few powerful economic groups”.³⁵

24 The dominant role of a few families in the web of formal and informal relations surrounding the military base and the local community logically meant that there were powerful people in the community who might have an interest in resisting the closure of the base and the ensuing reconfiguration of power relations. In the period prior to the closure of the base there were clashes between these informal groups, which could be interpreted as the result of jostling for positions in a post-base scenario and omens of possible trouble to come. The most serious event occurred after the local elections in 2006, when the defeated group staged a demonstration and called for the newly elected *gamgebeli* [*head of the municipal administration*] to step down. The police chief, who was associated with the victorious group, tried to stop the demonstrators and was beaten up³⁶. His son intervened by firing shots into the air.

Ethnic divide and potential for separatism

25 Although Georgian–Armenian ethnic relations have often been relatively amicable and many ethnic Armenians have been prominent in Georgia over the past few centuries, there is also distrust between the two groups. A 2006 report from the International Crisis Group showed in great detail how the Armenian minority is still excluded from Georgian politics and discriminated against in many ways³⁷.

26 Abkhazia had and continues to have a large Armenian population which passively and actively supports Abkhaz separatism. In the Abkhaz War of 1992–1993, an ethnic Armenian unit called the “Bagramian Battalion” fought on the Abkhaz side. Armenian separatism in Nagorno-Karabakh also illustrates to the Georgians the risk of Armenian separatism. According to several informants in Akhalkalaki, some Javakheti Armenians fought in the Karabakh War. These informants also noted that one reason why Armenia did not fight an irredentist war over Javakheti similar to that in Nagorno-Karabakh was that it was already embroiled in the war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and wanted to avoid a two-front war³⁸. In addition to the general disadvantage of a two-front conflict, due to geography Armenia is heavily dependent on Georgia as a transit route to Russia, Armenia's closest military ally. This would help to explain why the Armenian authorities have gone out of their way to avoid fanning ethnic Armenian sentiments in Javakheti.

27 Serious separatist ambitions have never been pronounced among a major section of the Javakheti Armenian community, though in 1997 the ethnic Armenian movement “Javakh” gathered signatures demanding the abolition of the province of Samtskhe-Javakheti and the setting up

of a separate Javakheti province³⁹. The Javakheti Armenians remained isolated from Tbilisi, and largely excluded from Georgian politics and the Georgian economy. Even small houses in Javakheti often have large satellite dishes, for receiving Russian and Armenian television broadcasts. Few watch Georgian channels⁴⁰.

28 In addition to being isolated from the Georgian mainstream, the Javakheti Armenians remain concerned about perceived threats from the Turks across the border in Turkey, and the tens of thousands of Meskhetian Turks who were expelled from Samtskhe by Stalin and whom the international community would like the Georgian authorities to allow to return to their ancestral lands.

29 When Anatol Lieven visited the area in 2001, he found that Georgian officials feared that the departure of the Russians could actually increase the risk of violent clashes with the Armenians. Guns could be handed out and militias established which would be answerable to no one. Lieven argued that with the Russian military presence, at least it was clear who was responsible for any use of arms in Javakheti⁴¹.

30 These fears did not seem entirely unfounded. Throughout 1991, a highly unstable period in Georgia, the entire municipality of Akhalkalaki was controlled by local armed formations and a “Provisional Council of Representatives” not sanctioned by the Georgian authorities⁴². Even after the Provisional Council was disbanded, the Georgian authorities remained dependent on forging alliances with the local power brokers discussed above, in order to have any influence. When Georgian forces tried to carry out a military exercise in Javakheti in 1998, they found the road blocked by armed locals and had to turn back, in order to avoid bloodshed⁴³.

31 Several informants reported that various weapons had been hidden – mostly small arms, but also some heavier weapons. Some guns were likely acquired during the Soviet period, with more handed out during the unstable Gamsakhurdia period around 1991 and, as noted above, other weapons having possibly gone missing in connection with the closure of the base. Since the OSCE was unaware of the disposition of arms stored at the base, it would not have been able to tell with any certainty what happened to them when the base was closed, even if it had been allowed to observe the process properly. It is therefore difficult to know what happened to these weapons. Some were certainly removed to Russia, others to Armenia, some were seemingly destroyed and others may or may not have ended up in the hands of the local population.

Unexpected calm

32 To sum up the preceding section, prior to the closure of the military base the situation was as follows: the base was enmeshed in extensive formal and informal economies that penetrated deep into the Armenian community in Javakheti. Local power brokers had entrenched interests in these economies and in the status quo. There were significant precedents of tension between the ethnic Armenian population and the authorities in Tbilisi, and active resistance to government control; moreover, large amounts of arms may be cached by the local population. Thus many factors pointed to the possibility of upheaval and even armed conflict among the Armenian population once it lost the protection offered by the 62nd Base Division, as well as the economic lifeline it provided for the community.

33 In fact, so far things have progressed very smoothly. There were no major protests when the base shut down on 27 June 2007, and in the two years that have passed since then, the situation among the Javakheti Armenians has remained predominantly calm. The ethnic Armenian organisations Javakh and Virk, which have the support of the Armenian Diaspora and have previously been noted for their nationalist Armenian and anti-Georgian statements and activities, have refrained from actively pursuing their political agenda. There have been some unfounded rumours about the location of a Turkish-manned military base in Samtskhe-Javakheti and scepticism towards the new railway to Turkey, but the general public attitude has remained largely one of wait and see. At the turn of the millennium, Javakheti was virtually part of the Russian rouble zone⁴⁴.

The rouble continues to be used, but now the Georgian lari has gained ground, indicating that Javakheti is now better integrated into the Georgia economy. The deep informal economies and power relations that surrounded the military base appear to have easily given way to the Georgian state economy. How can this course of events be explained?

External efforts

34 One possible explanation might lie in the aid, conflict prevention and integrative measures carried out by the Georgian authorities and international organisations⁴⁵. Most of the aid effort was not targeted exclusively at the closure of the military base, but since the base was seen as the main impediment to integrating the Javakheti Armenians with the rest of Georgia, and the closure of the base was considered the most important potential trigger of instability, most of this aid was relevant for the population connected with the base, directly or indirectly.

International efforts

35 A detailed evaluation of these aid activities is beyond the scope of this paper, but the general impression based on previous research the author has carried out, fieldwork by students and other reports, is that they have had a limited impact. Hedvig Lohm writes of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which has done most work among the Javakheti Armenians, that “ [...] most respondents are not aware of what UNDP is actually doing”⁴⁶. That is a damning indictment for a large organisation that has implemented a broad range of measures to help the relatively small population of Javakheti, including numerous capacity-building activities.

36 The OSCE has also been a major actor – *inter alia* providing Georgian language teaching, increasing the accessibility of the Georgian-language media and promoting competence building within the Georgian legal system. The activities of the OSCE have had some positive effects, though the record at this point is mixed⁴⁷.

37 Many smaller organisations have carried out smaller projects, among them Care, Civic Initiatives, Mediaand Research,(CIMERA), Children's Hunger Fund (CHF), the European Center for Minorities Issues (ECMI), Mercy Corps and World Vision⁴⁸. These projects have been characterised by a lack of coordination as well as repeated and overlapping fact-finding missions⁴⁹. Most likely they have also had some positive impact on the situation in Javakheti, but it seems unlikely that this impact has been so great as to explain absence of trouble in connection with the closure of the base.

38 Finally, and involving far greater amounts of funding, the Millennium Challenge Georgia Fund was set up by the USA. Over 184 million USD of its funds were spent on the rehabilitation of roads connecting Javakheti Armenian communities with each other and with the rest of Georgia (mainly the Akhalkalaki-Ninotsminda-Tsalka-Tbilisi road)⁵⁰. These are the same roads that Lieven had referred to as “atrocious” in 2001⁵¹. By 2009, they had largely been repaired, vastly improving transportation times and ease of travel to the rest of Georgia. In addition, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia poured funds into the rehabilitation and extension of the Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi railway, a major regional integration project scheduled for completion in 2011.

39 Although this type of infrastructure investment is also compatible with other perspectives, in the context of the Saakashvili government it has been tied to the neo-liberal assumption that such investment will sooner or later provide a basis for increased economic activity, including small and medium-sized enterprises. The impact of the Millennium Challenge has yet to be felt among the Javakheti Armenians, but many remain hopeful. Whether such infrastructure investments represent the optimum approach to aid or not, it seems plausible that devoting such large sums to fixed infrastructure that will last for many decades should at some point have a positive impact on the economic development of Javakheti. If these infrastructure improvements are sufficient to replace the military base as the nexus of formal and informal economies remains in question, though the possibility cannot be excluded.

Georgian efforts

- 40 The Georgian authorities have also been active in efforts to improve the socio-economic plight of the Javakheti Armenians. To the Georgian government, Samtskhe-Javakheti may at times seem like a no-win situation. When the region was left to its own devices, the authorities were accused of marginalising the ethnic Armenian minority through economic impoverishment. Yet when attempts are made to integrate the region and invest heavily in its infrastructure, the Tbilisi government is accused of pursuing a policy of forced assimilation.
- 41 One of the main contributions of the Georgian authorities has been to improve the reliability of government salaries and pensions after the 2003 Rose Revolution. However, a typical pension is only roughly 50 USD per month (up from the previous level of 20 USD under former Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze and the early years of the Saakashvili government), which means that this type of input still cannot compete with that from the military base⁵².
- 42 The Georgian authorities several times proposed establishing a military base at the location of the former Russian base, with the intention of filling the vacuum created by the departure of the Russians. It would, however, be difficult for the Georgian military to replace the Russian presence in Akhalkalaki. One reason is the Soviet era record of Georgian soldiers stationed in Javakheti. In the 1970s, and to some extent until 1990, Georgians who had completed their higher education and thus were exempted from regular military service were sent to Akhalkalaki for a few months of compensatory military training. According to several informants, there were occasional drunken brawls between Georgian soldiers and locals⁵³. All informants in Akhalkalaki who were older than thirty-five recalled this, noting it as an important reason why Georgian soldiers would not be welcome – in addition to the Javakheti Armenian population's fear of military control by Tbilisi. It may seem strange that the locals should be concerned about disciplinary problems in the Georgian military, in view of the severe disciplinary problems noted in the Russian military – including hazing, drunkenness and disorderly conduct. This perception may be the result of prejudice among the ethnic Armenians towards ethnic Georgians, though there is no doubt that the ethnic Armenians do recall legitimate problems with the Georgians undergoing compensatory training in Armenian areas during the Soviet period and use this as an argument against the setting up of a Georgian military base.
- 43 There were also practical problems with a Georgian takeover. For example, the apartments in Akhalkalaki controlled by the base were given to locals when the base shut down. This could encumber any Georgian attempts to re-open the base under Georgian flag. Pensions and other benefits are perceived by the Armenians as better and more reliable in the Russian than in the Georgian army. It is not clear whether this is still the case after the infusion of Western funding and equipment into the Georgian military under the Saakashvili government, but certainly looking back over the past two decades the Georgian army has had major problems with the payment of wages and lack of food. Indeed, whole units have deserted due to such systemic problems. In addition many Javakheti Armenians have more than ten years invested in the Russian army, which would presumably not be credited as longevity of service in the Georgian army. Thus, local Armenians with military training would have little incentive to switch from the Russian to the new Georgian military.
- 44 It must be added that the Georgian authorities have attempted to engage with the economies surrounding the base in Akhalkalaki, in particular by creating alternative markets for local produce. Georgia's president Mikhail Saakashvili visited Samtskhe-Javakheti in September 2005 and announced that the Georgian army would purchase all the potatoes, meat and dairy products produced in Javakheti. Asked at a public meeting in Ninotsminda District exactly how much the Georgian military would buy, he replied: "Everything that is produced in Javakheti – and that will not be enough for the Georgian army". On a previous occasion he had stated that "not a single one of our citizens of Armenian nationality should fear that he will remain without an income"⁵⁴. The Georgian Ministry of Defence subsequently opened reception points

for local produce in Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki and compiled lists of enthusiastic farmers who wanted to sell their produce. However, when the time came to carry out the actual purchases in November, it turned out that Javakheti had produced thirty times more potatoes and twenty-one times more milk than the Georgian army of 20 000 could consume, and most of the farmers were left disgruntled⁵⁵.

45 Another attempt took the form of the “potato train”, a two-carriage train to bring farmers with their potatoes from Ninotsminda to Tbilisi. The problem with this measure is that the rail tracks are blocked by snow during the winter months; moreover, the farmers are offered such low prices at the Navtlughi market in Tbilisi that the enterprise is not profitable for them⁵⁶.

46 In addition to being ineffectual, the Georgian attempts to help the Javakheti Armenians in connection with the closure of the military base coincided with several reforms that made it even more difficult for the Javakheti Armenians to integrate with the rest of Georgia. For example, national tests were introduced for all teachers in Georgia, in order to raise standards. According to informants, on one occasion, ninety per cent of the Armenian teachers who were subjected to these tests failed the Georgian language section⁵⁷. As part of its anti-corruption drive, the Saakashvili government introduced national entry exams for university. This helped to put an end to the extreme corruption in higher education, but the Georgian language component also made it more difficult for minorities such as the ethnic Armenians to get into university. Finally, with the Georgian municipal reform the number of top positions in municipalities was reduced, resulting in a scramble between various powerful individuals and groups in municipal and regional politics.

47 An alternative explanation is that what one might call Georgia’s “anti-federal” strategy – denying the Javakheti Armenians and other ethnic minorities autonomy, lumping Javakheti together with Samtskhe and Borjomi and limiting support for Armenian language and culture – has succeeded in undermining the development of a strong ethnic Armenian identity and political movement. This depends on one’s stance in the theoretical debate on federalism, and in any case cannot explain why there was such calm when the military base was shut down, compared to previous expressions of discontent and resistance among the Armenian population.

Discussion and conclusions: explaining the calm

48 In light of the ineffectual and possibly counter-productive nature of most of the efforts made by international and Georgian actors (with the possible exception of long-term infrastructure investments), how can the lack of upheaval among the Javakheti Armenians in connection with the closure of the base be explained? Three additional factors may help to explain this situation: the trilateral isolation of the Javakheti Armenians, in particular the weakening of their bonds to Russia; the possibility that the informal economies surrounding the petrol stations in Akhalkalaki may function differently than the author initially understood; the lack of leaders willing to lead protests and counter-measures.

Trilateral isolation

49 Informants working for NGOs operating in Samtskhe-Javakheti explained that the Javakheti Armenians feel isolated. Their Georgian language skills are poor, and many of them speak Russian with a noticeable South Caucasus accent. Even their grasp of the Armenian language and culture is not fully acknowledged in Armenia proper. They speak a West Armenian dialect that is quite different from that spoken by most of Armenia’s population, which sometimes views them as country bumpkins or rednecks from the hills. Some locals go to Armenia for their university studies, but there they may find it difficult to succeed in the Armenian university system, not having been educated in Armenian schools.

50 The relationship with Russia has also been disrupted and weakened. The repeated closures of the Georgian–Russian border in connection with various disagreements between Georgia and Russia have been a major problem for the Javakheti Armenians. Instead of travelling

economically overland to Russia, during such periods they have been forced to go to Armenia and fly from Yerevan, undermining the profitability of labour migration. This has created more distance between the Javakheti Armenians and Russia, not just in terms of travel but also psychologically since it is usually the Russian side that has taken the decision to close the border in order to put pressure on Georgia. Many Javakheti Armenians have also been killed in Russia, predominantly in work accidents due to lax safety standards on the construction sites where many of them work, though the spectre of racist attacks are also a concern.⁵⁸ Finally, the ethnic Armenian soldiers working for the military base were technically Russian servicemen: they could be, and often were, rotated to Russian military facilities elsewhere, giving rise to feelings of instability among the Javakheti Armenians⁵⁹.

51 As a result of these factors, the Javakheti Armenians, although they remain sceptical towards the Georgian authorities, are increasingly aware of their lack of connection with Russia and Armenia. This probably made it easier to adapt to the closure of the Russian 62nd Base, and also tempered potential Armenian irredentist activities.

Petrol stations as black boxes

52 At a late stage in this research, it occurred to the author that the informal economies surrounding the numerous petrol stations might well not function as they first had seemed. In any case, the petrol stations are black boxes. Their inner operations are difficult to ascertain and may also have changed over time. They have possibly been involved at some point in marketing petrol siphoned off from the military base, but equally important may be their role as a conduit for exporting petrol from Azerbaijan to the Armenian market, so conveniently located directly across a porous border. Due to the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan and Turkey have imposed a trade embargo on Armenia, barring direct trade between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

53 This can explain both the origin of the petrol and its market. (The author's previous assumption concerning the siphoning off of petrol from the base could explain where the petrol came from, but not its market.) This theory is supported by a source from 1998, which argues that the smuggling of products and petrol from Azerbaijan to Armenia represents the most important channel of goods to Javakheti⁶⁰. This explanation also fits with the lack of upheaval relating to the closure of the military base. The petrol stations *are* clearly a major part of the Javakheti Armenians' informal economy. The fact that the military base was allowed to shut down is an indication that the Javakheti Armenians were not really dependent on the base as such. It is plausible that as long as the Javakheti Armenians are allowed to continue to function as the conduit for the export of Azerbaijani petrol to Armenia, they can make do without the Russian military base.

Lack of rebellious leadership

54 Another reason for the non-resistance of the population to the closure may be that it has played out along the existing dividing lines between more and less powerful members of the Javakheti Armenian community. Those who had power gained it through control over the petrol business and their long-term and relatively central positions at the base. Therefore the operations of the petrol stations have probably not been affected by the closure of the facility. Through the base, many Javakheti Armenians also acquired Russian citizenship, which has meant that they are not affected so negatively by the closure as far as migration and other opportunities are concerned. Thus those individuals and groups who are most influential and resourceful in the community have least reason to protest. Those affected most negatively – having lost all opportunities to migrate to Russia and may have had the basis of their livelihoods undercut – also have the least influence to resist. This leaves the community without powerful leaders to lead protests.

55 The attitude of the Javakheti Armenian population to the closure of the base can be summed up as a combination of resignation, lack of rebellious leadership and a wait-and-see view as to how the various economic factors will play out. If that assessment is correct, the situation is most

accurately described not as “stable” but rather as a window of opportunity in which the wait-and-see attitude of the Armenian community means that it is amenable to change. If the new, foreign-funded roads and railway fail to generate the benefits envisaged and the Georgian authorities fail to improve inclusion measures for the Javakheti Armenians in Georgia’s economy and politics, new leaders with different interests from the old could rise to the fore and seize the day. If the Georgian authorities are to avoid this, they must seize the day first. Judging from the current turmoil in Georgian politics and emerging Georgia-fatigue in the West, it seems far from certain that authorities in Tbilisi will be able to profit from this opportunity.

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* Pipss.org is grateful to Kevin Roberts who edited this article.

To quote this document

Electronic reference

Indra Øverland, « The Closure of the Russian Military Base at Akhalkalaki: Challenges for the Local Energy Elite, the Informal Economy and Stability », *The Journal of Power Institutions*

in *Post-Soviet Societies* [Online], Issue 10 | 2009, Online since 07 décembre 2009. URL : <http://www.pipss.org/index3717.html>

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Abstract

In 2007, the base of the Russian army's 62nd Division at Akhalkalaki, Georgia was shut down. After outlining the historical role of the base in Russian–Armenian–Turkish relations, this article examines how it was the linchpin of informal economies and power relations among the Javakheti Armenians. Vital to these relations was the control of the disproportionately large number of petrol stations in Akhalkalaki by key economic groups. The article then offers several reasons why, in light of the informal socio-economic structures and interests of local power brokers, one might have expected the closure of the base to result in upheaval among the Javakheti Armenians. Finally, the paper briefly considers Georgian and Western efforts to ameliorate the socio-economic situation, before concluding with reasons for the absence of major unrest following closure of the Akhalkalaki base.

Keywords : Russian Armed Forces, Minorities, Non-Russians, Javakheti Armenians

Research Fields : Political Science

Countries : Georgia, Russia

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