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IN THIS ISSUE:

*REVOLUTION IN KYRGYZSTAN:
WHILE THE TRAIL IS STILL WARM*

- Zaynidin Kurmanov.** THE 2005 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS
IN KYRGYZSTAN AND COLLAPSE OF
THE AKAEV REGIME 7
- Zurab Todua.** KYRGYZSTAN AFTER AKAEV:
WHAT HAPPENED AND WHY, WHAT NEXT? 14

REGIONAL CONFLICTS

- Namig Aliiev.** NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT:
LEGAL ASPECTS OF A SETTLEMENT 23
- Laura Bagdasarian.** KARABAKH SETTLEMENT DISCOURSE:
ENEMY AND PARTNER IMAGES 31

RELIGION IN THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF CENTRAL ASIAN AND CAUCASIAN COUNTRIES

Ibrahim Marziev.	THE ISLAMIC FACTOR IN THE NORTHERN CAUCASUS	38
Kanatbek Murzakhalilov, Kanybek Mamataliev, Omurzak Mamaiusupov.	ISLAM IN THE DEMOCRATIC CONTEXT OF KYRGYZSTAN: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS	44
Gulbaat Rtskhilladze.	RELIGION AND CONFLICT POTENTIAL IN GEORGIA	54
Cholpon Chotaeva.	THE ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN KYRGYZSTAN	64
Teymuraz Panjikidze.	RELIGION IN GEORGIA'S SOCIOPOLITICAL LIFE	72
Ruslan Kurbanov.	INTERACTION BETWEEN POWER AND RELIGION IN DAGHESTAN: EXPERIENCE, ERRORS, AND LESSONS	77

ENERGY RESOURCES AND ENERGY POLICY

Daniel Linotte, Philip Reuchlin.	ADDRESSING GLOBAL ENERGY AND SECURITY CHALLENGES	89
Vladimir Saprykin.	IRAN AS AN EXPORTER OF NATURAL GAS TO THE SOUTH CAUCASIAN COUNTRIES	108
David Preyger, Vladimir Omelchenko.	CASPIAN DILEMMA: HOW TO DELIVER BLUE FUEL TO THE EUROPEAN MARKET	120

REGIONAL POLITICS

Rashid Abdullo.	TAJIKISTAN: THE 2005 ELECTIONS AND THE FUTURE OF STATEHOOD	129
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Pikria Asanishvili, Avtandil Tukvadze. GEORGIA: REGIONAL STABILITY
IN THE TRANSFORMED INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM 136

Sergey Minasian. THE SOCIOECONOMIC AND POLITICAL SITUATION
IN JAVAKHETIA 142

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

The Special Feature section in the next issue will discuss:

Central Asia and the Caucasus

- The Democratic Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine and their Impact on Central Asian and Caucasian Politics
- Border Delimitation and Separatism
- What Makes the Parliamentary and Presidential Elections in Central Asia and the Caucasus Specific

THE SOCIOECONOMIC AND POLITICAL SITUATION IN JAVAKHETIA

Sergey MINASIAN

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

On 10 March, 2005, the Georgian parliament adopted a resolution on the Russian military bases deployed in the country. It noted that if Moscow does not adopt a decision before 15 May on specific deadlines, acceptable to the Georgian side, for withdrawal of these troops,

official Tbilisi will demand that the Russian Federation withdraw them before 1 January, 2006. What is more, the Georgian side will spare no effort to ensure this is done. This document aroused an unequivocal reaction in Javakhetia (the Armenian name for Javakhk), where the 62nd Russian military base is stationed. As early as 13 March, a mass meeting of several thousand participants, unprecedented in the region's history, was held in the town of Akhalkalaki, the region's center, at which representatives of the local Armenian sociopolitical organizations protested the Georgian parliamentarians' decision. What is more, they demanded that the country's leadership take immediate measures to improve the socioeconomic and political situation in Javakhk and recognize the 1915 Armenian genocide that took place in Turkey.¹ This meeting, which became a catalyst for several further events, has attracted the keen interest of political scientists and journalists both in the Southern Caucasus and beyond it to Javakhk once more.

This region, which includes the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts, is located in the extreme southeast of Georgia and borders directly on Turkey and Armenia. The demographic specifics of this territory (Armenians constitute more than 95 percent of its population) have always colored the traditional view expressed by a number of researchers, political scientists, journalists, and politicians of the region as a potential conflict zone. In so doing, Georgian researchers evaluate the region's conflict potential based on the possible separatist sentiments manifested by the local Armenian population. On the other hand, many other specialists, including Armenians, are primarily concerned about the situation in Javakhetia in light of the discrimination of the Armenian minority and protection of its rights to participate in sociopolitical, economic, and cultural life. At the same time, most foreign researchers view the region based on an analysis of the geopolitical problems associated with the Southern Caucasus.²

¹ See: V. Novikov, "Gruzinskie armiane ne otpustiat rossiiskie bazy," *Kommersant*, 14 March, 2005; "Armiane Dzhavakheti trebuiut ot gruzinskogo parlamenta priznat genotsid armian" [www.regnum.ru], 14 March, 2005.

² See: H. Kanbolat, N. Gul, *The Geopolitics and Quest for Autonomy of the Armenians of Javakheti (Geor-*

The diverging views of Armenian and Georgian researchers (which are frequently diametrically opposed) are also revealed when light is shed on Javakhetia's historical past. For example, Georgian scientists believe Samtskhe (Meskheti) to be one of the cradles of Georgian statehood, noting that the Armenian ethnic element did not appear here until the Russian-Turkish war of 1828-1829. However, Armenian historians claim that the region's indigenous population consisted of Armenians from time immemorial, because this territory has always been part of historical Armenia. The demographic changes of the first quarter of the 19th century only restored the real picture, which had undergone changes due to the many centuries of Turkish dominion in Javakhk.

As already noted, Javakhk is divided into two administrative districts, Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda (they compose 3.7 percent of Georgian territory), where approximately 2 percent of the country's population lives. Samtskhe (Meskheti), the borders of which correspond to the historical Armenian province of Lower Javakhk (the Gugark Region) and adjoin Javakhetia in the west, is divided into three districts: Akhaltsikhe, Adigeni, and Aspindza. In this area, the Armenians also comprise a significant percentage of the population. The Borzhomi District, which borders in the north on the Akhaltsikhe District, is separate. As a result of the administrative changes carried out by the Georgian authorities in the mid-1990s, all of these districts were joined into one administrative-territorial unit—the Samtskhe-Javakhetia Region (gubernia), which is governed by an authorized representative appointed by the country's president. As many people in Javakhk believe, the real purpose of creating this administrative-territorial unit was to reduce the percentage ratio of the local Armenian population, which no longer com-

gia) and Krasnodar (Russia) in the Caucasus, Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies (AVSAM), Ankara, 28 December, 2001 [www.avsam.org]; Amir-Reza Darabian, "The Role of Armenians Living in Georgia in the Regional Events in the Caucasus," *Amu-Daria* (Iranian journal for the study of Central Asia and the Caucasus), No. 13, Winter 2003.

prises an absolute majority. We will add that as a result of the targeted policy conducted by the Georgian authorities as early as the Soviet era, the migration of Armenians from Javakhk to Armenia, the Northern Caucasus, and other regions of the Soviet Union acquired significant proportions. As a result, by 1989, in the Akhalkalaki and neighboring Bogdanov (now Ninotsminda) districts, there were as many residents as there were in the Akhalkalaki uезд (which also included the terri-

tory of present-day Ninotsminda) in 1914—around 100,000.³

³ For more detail, see: S. Minasian, M. Agajanyan, *Javakhk (Javakhetia): Legal Aspects of Protection of Armenian National Minorities' Rights in Georgia on International Level. Political and Socioeconomic Situation in the Region in Modern Period*, Program for Political Monitoring of Samtskhe-Javakheti. Scientific Research Center for South Caucasus Security and Integration Studies, Research Paper No. 2, Erevan, 2005.

Negative Potential: The Socioeconomic and Political Situation

Even back in Soviet times, Javakhk was one of the most underdeveloped parts of Georgia. There are not enough roads and railways in the region, and those it has are in an extremely neglected state. And the level of urban development is also very low. Not until the second half of the 1980s, when the unrest began in Nagorny Karabakh, did the Georgian S.S.R. government adopt a Program of Socioeconomic Development for the region's population. This was probably an attempt to insure itself against possible opposition from the local population against Tbilisi. But this Program only implemented measures for resettling victims of the natural disasters in the mountainous part of Ajaria in the southeast of the Akhalkalaki District. Incidentally, the serious climatic conditions and socioeconomic crisis which inflicted the country in the last years of the Soviet Union's existence led to the essential failure of this Program.⁴

It should be noted that despite the significant work potential in the region, during the Soviet era, the Georgian government deliberately did not develop industrial production in Javakhk, as a result of which the local Armenians had to go to other parts of the U.S.S.R. to find seasonal work. On the other hand, at that time Javakhk was one of Georgia's most important agricultural regions, where animal husbandry, potato growing, and the manufacture of cheese, butter, and other dairy products were among the leading branches. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the situation in the region took an abrupt downturn and all the economic indices dropped several-fold.

In 1997, the Georgian government approved a new Program of Socioeconomic Development for Samtskhe-Javakhetia. But it, like all the previous and subsequent projects, remained on paper. All of this only reinforced the firm conviction among the local population that official Tbilisi was deliberately against resolving the region's economic problems and in so doing was encouraging the Armenians living in Javakhk to migrate.

The outcome of the 1990s dealt a heavy blow to the economy of Javakhk, and not only against the background of the deterioration in the situation throughout Georgia. For example, according to the official data, by the end of 1999, the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts were behind even the neighboring districts of the new administrative entity of Samtskhe-Javakhetia in terms of industrial production volume (including in the key agricultural sphere for the region). What is more, when analyzing the quantitative indices it must be kept in mind that the size of the population in the Akhalkalaki District is much larger than the number of residents in all the other districts (see Table 1), while

⁴ See: V. Guretski, "The Question of Javakheti," *Caucasian Regional Studies*, Vol. III (1), 1998.

the level of industrial production is much lower. For example, in the Aspindza District, where 13,000 people live, industrial production amounting to 252,500 lari was manufactured in January-July 2001, whereas in the Akhalkalaki District (with a population of approximately 61,000 people), this index amounted to only 71,300 lari.

Table 1

**Size and Ethnic Composition of the Population of Samtskhe-Javakhetia
(according to the 2002 census)**

Districts	Armenians (thou. people)	Georgians (thou. people)	Total (thou. people)
Adigeni	0.7	19.8	20.7
Aspindza	2.3	10.7	13.1
Akhalkalaki	57.5	3.2	61.0
Akhaltzikhe	16.9	28.5	46.1
Borzhomi	3.1	27.3	32.4
Ninotsminda	32.9	0.5	34.3
Total	113.4	90.0	207.6

The extremely difficult situation in the Javakhk economy, which is related (as we have already mentioned), in addition to everything else, to the almost entire absence of infrastructure, mass migration, zero government support, and essential collapse of production, is also clearly manifested during an analysis of the quantitative indices of the budget of the Akhalkalaki District in recent years (see Table 2).

Table 2

Budget of the Akhalkalaki District and Distribution by Item in 2001—2004 (in thou. lari)

Year	Total budget	Including local revenue	Transfers from the Center	Spending on education and culture from this amount
2001	2,288.0	997.0	1,291.0	1,185.0
2002	2,893.0	852.0*	2,041.0	1,750.0
2003	3,022.2	886.0	2,156.2	1,856.2
2004	3,789.0	839.0	2,950.0	2,420.0

* After a reduction in and the removal of land tax.

Source: Data presented by the administration of the Akhalkalaki District.

As early as 1999, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze announced that a socioeconomic development project was about to be implemented in the region. But the local authorities and popula-

tion had no idea of its contents for a long time to come. What is more, when asked about its details and implementation deadlines, then governor of Samtskhe-Javakhetia Gigla Baramidze replied that the project “is classified as secret and not open to discussion.”⁵ Not until October 2002 was it published under the title “Program of Measures for Ensuring the Socioeconomic Development of Samtskhe-Javakhetia for 2002-2005.”⁶ It consisted of 15 sections, whereby each stipulated specific measures in specific areas. But their formulation, dimensions, and choice of priority tasks made it unequivocally clear that they were nothing more than another propaganda campaign aimed at giving semblance to the Georgian government’s “concern” for the needs of the people of Samtskhe-Javakhetia. Out of the more than 30 items in this program directly or indirectly related to the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts, only a few had been partially carried out by the end of 2004. A logical indication of the purely fictitious nature of all the above-mentioned documents is the fact that, in November 2004, former governor of the region N. Nikolozashvili (possibly as a result of the meeting in October between Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili and Armenian Leader Robert Kocharian) stated that another economic development program for Samtskhe-Javakhetia would begin.

Monetary transfers from Russia and other CIS states comprise a significant percentage of the revenue of the local population. For example, in Akhalkalaki, the funds received from Russia through the local branches of two banks amount to a sum equivalent to approximately \$25,000 a day. For comparison’s sake, we will note that between January and July 2001, the industrial production of the entire Akhalkalaki District amounted to only \$35,000. At the same time, Russia’s introduction of a visa system with Georgia compelled many seasonal workers from Javakhk to resettle in Russia, since it was impossible for them to return home after completing their regular “work semester” due to the high cost of the trip, bureaucratic difficulties, and so on.

In Javakhk, there are essentially no realistic social security mechanisms for the population, while corruption reaches enormous proportions. The question of interrelations between the Armenian residents of the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts and officials of the gubernatorial structures located in Akhaltsikhe is particularly acute. In other words, discrimination on national grounds is added to the problems already created by the unsophisticated bureaucratic system and corruption. What is more, the energy problem is extremely urgent in the region, which is aggravated by the catastrophic situation regarding heating in Javakhk, the coldest part of Georgia (sometimes snow lies on the ground there from October until April). There are no elementary everyday and sanitary conditions in the region. Many villages of the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts do not have running water, people have to get their water from neighboring villages or pump it from wells. There are no out-patient clinics, qualified medical personnel, or medical equipment in the villages. People have to travel to the neighboring Ashotsi District of Armenia, 50 km from Akhalkalaki, to receive even elementary medical assistance.

At one time, the residents of Javakhk placed certain hopes on the laying of the Baku- Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline through the region. It was believed that a large number of jobs would be created during the construction and subsequent servicing of the route, which would have a positive effect on the region’s socioeconomic situation. But the decision made at the political level (under pressure from the Georgian government) to change the direction of this section of the oil pipeline (according to the initial project, it was to cross the Akhalkalaki District and reach the Turkish border through the Armenian village of Karzakh), that is, it is now to be laid through the Borzhomi and Akhaltsikhe districts, again excluded Javakhk from large-scale investment projects. And all the indirect multi-million economic aid programs being carried out within the framework of the pipeline construction also bypassed it. What is more, Javakhk has one of the highest levels of migration and unemployment in the country.

⁵ From a conversation with administration representative of the Akhalkalaki District.

⁶ *Vrastan*, 26 October, 2002 (in Armenian).

This is manifested both in absolute values, as well as in comparison with the two districts of Samtskhe-Javakhetia, Akhalkalaki and Akhaltsikhe. For example, in the Akhalkalaki District, unemployment reaches approximately 51.3 percent, whereas in the Akhaltsikhe District (at the end of 2002, before the beginning of construction work on the BTC oil pipeline) it was around 33.4 percent.⁷

In recent years, Georgia has received a large number of grants for implementing socioeconomic projects in direct aid from many international sponsor organizations. But Western experts stress that the population of Javakhk gains little benefit from this, even compared with the Akhaltsikhe District or with other districts of Samtskhe-Javakhetia. Admittedly, representative offices of several international organizations have opened in Javakhk. But according to the leaders of local NGOs and the administration of the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda District, their extremely meager sponsor programs (apart from information projects) are not yielding any tangible results.⁸

After the Istanbul OSCE summit in 1999, at which an agreement was entered regarding the Russian bases located in Georgia, some Western analytical organizations conducted several studies on the influence of the likely withdrawal of these bases on the situation in the region, including in the socioeconomic sphere. There results only confirmed the opinion that the 62nd Russian military base is a major economic factor for Javakhk. Its hasty elimination might have a serious negative impact on the situation in the region, despite the possible implementation of large-scale programs for its economic rehabilitation planned by international sponsors. As senior researcher and director of Russian and Eurasian programs at the London International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) Oksana Antonenko notes, more than 10.4 percent of the Javakhk population (6-7,000 people) depends directly on this base for its livelihood. However the number of people who indirectly depend on it in one way or another is several times higher. This base has a perceptible influence on the economy not only of Javakhk, but of the entire Samtskhe-Javakhetia Region. As the largest consumer of local production, primarily agricultural, it promotes the development of trade and business. What is more, the indirect influence of the base on the socioeconomic situation and on the standard of living of the local population is extremely tangible. For example, it provides the people with benefits when traveling to Russia and Armenia, supplies the residential areas in its vicinity with light and heat, educates the local children in the garrison school, offers the local population medical services at the military field hospital, and so on.⁹

The aforementioned facts unequivocally show that in terms of socioeconomic status, the region is close to a humanitarian disaster. The situation is complicated by the Javakhetia Armenians' political perception of the economic and social difficulties. Based on the grievous experience of post-Soviet Georgia, they believe politics are to blame for the socioeconomic and humanitarian problems. Correspondingly, these problems can only be resolved by granting the local Armenians broader rights in local self-government (in correspondence with European standards). But after the new leadership headed by Mikhail Saakashvili came to power in Georgia, the situation in the region became aggravated. For example, the mass changes that occurred in the country in the past year hardly affected Javakhk, which aroused a certain amount of concern among the local residents, who placed their hopes on the Rose Revolution. According to many residents of the region, deliberate discrimination of the local Armenians is continuing and even increasing. Information is appearing that in order to change the region's demographic situation, the governmental program aimed at settling migrants from Ajaria and other regions of Georgia in Javakhk has been revived.

⁷ See: *Economic Capacity Building Project Samtskhe-Javakheti. Mid-term Report*, IOM, Tbilisi, November 2002, pp. 6-9.

⁸ See: J. Wheatley, "Obstacles Impeding the Regional Integration of the Javakheti Region of Georgia," *ECMI Working Paper* # 22, Flensburg, September 2004, p. 28.

⁹ See: O. Antonenko, "Assessment of the Potential Implications of Akhalkalaki Base Closure for the Stability in Southern Georgia. EU Response Capacities," *CPN Briefing Paper*, August 2001, pp. 25-26.

What is more, the country's new leadership is not paying proper attention to the signing, ratification, or implementation of the obligations it assumed to European and other international organizations on the protection of national minorities, decentralization, and improvement of local self-government. In this respect, it is not very different from Eduard Shevardnadze's regime. The discussion going on in the republic's sociopolitical circles and the viewpoint of the Georgian political elite indicate the lack of desire to soften policy regarding the Armenian part of the Javakhk population, including on granting it minimal self-government.

Official Tbilisi frequently explains its policy by the poor integration of the Javakhk Armenians into the country's sociopolitical and cultural life, and, as a result, their poor knowledge of the state language (Georgian). In so doing, the true reason is naturally not mentioned—lack of encouragement to learn it. Actual examples of Georgia's cadre policy both in Soviet and in post-Soviet times are evidence of this. Armenians, who constitute according to different estimates between 6 and 10 percent of the country's population, are represented in the executive structures of its central power by only one deputy minister, and at the gubernatorial level, that is, in Samtskhe-Javakhetia, where more than 60 percent of the population are Armenians, by one deputy governor who carries out strictly formal functions. But official Tbilisi's putting this down to lack of knowledge of the Georgian language only applies to the Armenians of Javakhk (to the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts), and not to the other 70-80 percent of Armenians living in Georgia.

Mikhail Saakashvili first visited the region in his capacity as Georgian president on 29 December, 2004. He spent only a few hours in Akhalkalaki, talked before the people of Javakhk, but was essentially unable to answer the most important issues which concerned the local residents. Admittedly, the head of state promised to build a Ninotsminda-Tsalka highway, which was supposed to ensure the shortest route to the Georgian capital, but he did not say anything about restoring the short stretch of road linking the region with Armenia, or about resolving the region's other socioeconomic problems. What is more, Mikhail Saakashvili placed special emphasis on the fact that beginning in 2005, approximately 100 places for young Armenian graduates from Javakhk schools will be allotted annually in Tbilisi higher education institutions, where they will be able to study at the state's expense.

At the beginning of March 2005, it became known that former authorized representative of the Georgian president in Mtskheta-Mtianeti, Georgy Khachidze, had been appointed to the same position in Samtskhe-Javakhetia.¹⁰ There is hope that in this position he will actively put into practice the "new approach" to the region declared by the country's current authorities. In particular, after several meetings with the leadership of the Akhalkalaki District, Georgian parliamentary deputy G. Movsisian, and other representatives of Armenian sociopolitical circles, who organized a meeting on 13 March, 2005, the president's authorized representative admitted that all the demands of the people of Javakhk are reasonable and promised to take measures to implement them. During the last meeting, the Javakhks talked in particular about the need to open a passport department in Akhalkalaki, about studying Armenian history in Georgia's Armenian schools, and about use of the Armenian language by the local authorities and in judicial practice. What is more, there was also talk about democratizing elections to the local self-government bodies, offering customs services in the village of Zhdanovka, which is located near the border with Armenia (goods imported from Armenia to Samtskhe-Javakhetia currently go through customs in the town of Akhaltsikhe, 100 km from the border), and repairing the Akhaltsikhe-Akhalkalaki-Ninotsminda-Zhdanovka highway.

The president's representative promised to find a positive solution to the question of the passport department and assist in the rapid approval by the Georgian Ministry of Education of a program for studying Armenian history in Armenian schools. What is more, referring to the fact that he has not

¹⁰ See: "Naznachen novy upolnomochenny prezidenta Gruzii v Samtskhe-Javakheti" [www.regnum.ru], 3 March, 2005.

been working in the region long, Georgy Khachidze was unable to give an exhaustive answer to the other questions. In the end, the participants in the meeting agreed to submit a proposal to the Georgian government on creating a group of specialists for preparing optimal versions of solutions to the indicated problems.

Problem of the Russian Base and Role of the Military Factor in the Political Situation Around Javakhetia

According to experts, the 62nd Russian base quartered in Javakhetia is of greater political and moral-psychological than military significance, since due to its small size and insufficient level of technical equipment, it is hardly up to performing its main (since as far back as Soviet times) function—defense against an invasion by Turkey. Of course, in the last years of the Soviet Union's existence, the 147th motorized rifle division, on which this base was subsequently created, was one of the strongest units of the then Transcaucasian Military District. But after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a significant part of its armaments and military hardware was officially handed over to the Georgian side or embezzled and sold. As a result, by 1998, it was left with 41 tanks, 118 armored vehicles, and 61 artillery systems. And by the beginning of 2004, the following subdivisions were part of the base: the 409th and 412th motorized rifle regiments, the 817th SP artillery regiment, the 899th separate signal battalion, the 65th separate antitank battalion, and the 176th separate repair and reconstruction battalion.¹¹ The number of staff did not reach 1,500 men. But in mid-2004, there were significant changes both in the organizational and staff structure of the 62nd base, and in its composition. By this time, it had fully transferred to a brigade structure, consisting of one tank and three motorized rifle battalions, an SP artillery battalion, and so on.

We will remind you that for many years neither the status of these bases, nor how long the Russian troops would remain in Georgia were defined. Not until the Istanbul OSCE summit at the end of 1999 did Georgia and Russia sign an agreement on withdrawal of the 137th Vaziani and 50th Gudauta bases by 31 December, 2000. What is more, the sides were obligated within the shortest time to begin talks on the withdrawal deadlines and the functioning regulations for the bases in Batumi and Akhalkalaki and other Russian military facilities in Georgia. But this was where disputes arose. Official Moscow is delaying their withdrawal, claiming that without the necessary infrastructure in Russia, troops cannot be withdrawn from Georgia. But it is political, and not economic, reasons which form the crux of the matter. In so doing, we will note that just at the end of 2004, Georgia was not so categorical in its demands (although it periodically made extremely loud statements). This was largely explained by the fact that official Tbilisi did not feel any real support regarding this problem from NATO and the U.S., as well as by Georgia's desire to receive more favorable conditions from the West in terms of an individual partnership program with NATO, and so on as reward for its tough stance against the Kremlin. What is more, Georgian experts recognized that the presence of Russian bases in the country, which at present have an essentially negligible effect on its domestic situation, allows Tbilisi to use them for political bargaining with Moscow. From this standpoint, it would be expedient to link the new approach put forward at the end of May 2004 by Georgia on this issue with the creation of joint "antiterrorist centers" based on the Russian bases to be withdrawn, which however did not bring it the desired results at the time.

¹¹ See: V. Soloviev, V. Ivanov, "Voенно-bazovaia udavka," *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 27 February, 2004.

Many experts expected some clarity regarding further functioning of the 62nd base and development of the military and political situation in Javakhk to be introduced by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov's visit to Georgia on 17-18 February, 2005. But a week before this, on 10-11 February, another round of Russian-Georgian negotiations on these bases was held in Tbilisi. Incidentally, like all the previous rounds, it ended in an impasse. Nor were the two-day talks between the Russian and Georgian government delegations on a framework agreement between the two countries crowned with success. Immediately before the beginning of Sergei Lavrov's visit to Tbilisi, a member of the Georgian parliament, Giga Bokeria, who took part in the talks on the bases on 10-11 February, said, "The time has come for our parliament to declare the Russian bases on Georgian territory illegal, since there is already international-legal practice for this."¹² The situation became even more fired up due to the head of the Russian Foreign Ministry's refusal to place a wreath at the memorial of those killed in battles for Georgia's territorial integrity, due to which the country's authorities changed the official nature of Lavrov's visit to a working one. All of this led to the fact that his visit on the whole and the meetings with the Georgian leadership in particular took place in a very highly strung atmosphere.

In this way, even before Lavrov flew to Tbilisi, it was clear there would be no significant breakthroughs in the negotiations. Nevertheless, after several talks between the Russian minister and the Georgian leadership, including with Head of State Mikhail Saakashvili, Parliament Speaker Nino Burjanadze, and Foreign Minister Salome Zurbishvili, the sides took a kind of time-out, but agreed to carry out intensive work in the next two months on the main problems in the current relations between the two countries. Both foreign ministers reported on this on 18 February at a joint press conference, and in particular named six main issues which needed to be discussed by the experts of both sides: the Framework Agreement, the deadlines for withdrawing the Russian military bases, the creation of a joint antiterrorist center, delimitation of the Russian-Georgian border, settlement of regional conflicts, and simplification of the visa conditions for Georgian citizens. "At the end of two months, we will report to our presidents on the work carried out. After that, on 9 May, Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili will visit Moscow and meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin, if, of course, the talks develop in a way acceptable to both sides," said Salome Zurbishvili.¹³

But soon Georgia made more specific demands about the deadlines for withdrawing the bases, which some people in Tbilisi related to the results of the meeting between George Bush and Vladimir Putin in February in Bratislava, where this problem was discussed among other things. And on 10 March, as we already noted, Georgian parliamentary deputies adopted a resolution on the Russian military bases. This document was an ultimatum to the Russian Federation, since its gist consisted of the following: official Tbilisi is prepared to go to extremes if its demands are not met. This implies stopping the issuance of entry visas to Russian servicemen and establishing special conditions for their movement around the country (under the control of the defense, interior, and social security ministries). The movement of military hardware, armaments, property, and so on will be placed under total control. The Ministry of Finance will define the debts incurred by the Russian military bases and facilities for land rental and present the Russian Federation with a bill by way of its government debt, the sum of which will amount to at least \$400 million. The Environmental Protection Ministry is calculating and estimating the economic damage inflicted by the activity of the military bases and intends to exact it from the Russian Federation. What is more, until 1 January, 2006, the military bases are only supposed to function under withdrawal conditions, which, according to Georgian parliamentary deputies, means tactical and command-staff exercises, as well as personnel rotation, are prohibited.

¹² T. Gularidze, "V sviazi s voennymi bazami Rossiia 'zatiagivaet vremia,'" *Civil. Ge*, 12 February, 2005.

¹³ T. Gularidze, "Tbilisi i Moskva soglasovali plan peregovorov," *Civil. Ge*, 12 February, 2005.

Executive power reacted quite cautiously to this initiative, nevertheless it tried to derive the maximum benefit from it in its opposition to Moscow. “The parliament has adopted a rather tough resolution regarding the Russian bases, but I am not losing hope that a civilized agreement can be achieved which will not infringe on Russia’s interests, but will also protect Georgia’s sovereignty,” noted Mikhail Saakashvili at a press conference in Tbilisi on 12 March. In so doing, he placed special emphasis on the 62nd base, which is deployed in Akhalkalaki. After noting that Javakhhk, in particular the area where the base is stationed, is mainly populated by Georgian citizens of Armenian nationality who work at this base and are worried that they will soon be deprived of their only source of income, the president said that he would guarantee the region’s residents jobs, including by means of re-deployment of the 11th Telavi battalion of the Georgian army in this area.¹⁴ Incidentally, this is extremely disputable, and the presence of Georgian troops in Javakhhk will not ensure stability: people in region well remember how cruelly the national Georgian formations of the Soviet Army (even under the command of Russian officers) redeployed at that time in Akhalkalaki treated the local Armenians in 1941—1945.

On 23 March, another round of talks on the bases began in Moscow. This time, the Russian side significantly played down its stance, it can even be said that it almost entirely conceded to Georgia’s proposals. Incidentally, official Tbilisi too demonstrated its willingness to make “minimal compromises.” Its representatives stated that Georgia is willing to agree to the withdrawal of the Russian troops within four years (before 1 January, 2009), but on the condition that during this time they will function under withdrawal conditions, that is, not carry out exercises, not equip themselves with new military hardware, and their staff will be cut back. What is more, the Georgian side stated that it is willing to give Russian officers apartments in the center of Tbilisi, which they can sell before they leave for Russia. It also intends to find 10-15 million dollars to transport personnel and hardware to the Russian Federation. Georgian Foreign Minister Salome Zurbishvili considered the sum of 300 million dollars, previously requested by the Russian Federation, to be “unrealistic.”¹⁵

In Lieu of a Conclusion: Non-Standard Withdrawal from an Impending Crisis?

Against the background of the continuing discrimination of the Armenian ethnic minority of Javakhetia, the impending humanitarian disaster, and in the context of the possible withdrawal of the 62nd Russian base from Akhalkalaki, ensuring the physical safety of the Armenian population of Javakhhk will be one of the main mid-term problems to be resolved. This will be necessary in order to prevent a possible conflict fraught with global consequences for the entire Southern Caucasus. Some analysts are already discussing the alternative solutions to this problem and putting forward rather non-standard presuppositions on the mechanisms for guaranteeing the safety of the region’s Armenian residents. One of them, which would suit Tbilisi and be positively perceived by the Armenian side, might be the temporary deployment in Javakhetia of a limited American military contingent.

Incidentally, this project has already attracted the attention of Washington. Recently, the region was visited by executives of the U.S. embassy in Georgia. The Americans’ interest in Javakhhk was aroused by several factors. First, the White House is concerned about the conflict potential building there, which could create a threat not only to the Saakashvili government, but also to the Armenian authorities, particularly in light of the fact that in the long run, the United States is looking at Erevan as a very serious partner in regional security. Second, the U.S.’s main geo-economic project in the

¹⁴ See: V. Litovkin, “Gotovnost—no!,” *Moskovskie novosti*, 18 March, 2005.

¹⁵ V. Novikov, “Gruzia meniaet bazy na kvartiry,” *Kommersant*, 24 March, 2005.

Southern Caucasus, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, is to pass through Javakhk, so naturally any destabilization along its route is undesirable for Washington. The fact that several prestigious U.S. institutions, including analytical institutes, are seriously studying this question shows the American administration's real interest in the situation surrounding Javakhetia. According to the available information, Washington demanded obligatory and priority implementation of projects aimed at Javakhetia's economic rehabilitation as one of the conditions necessary for Tbilisi joining the Challenges of the Millennium project. But the Georgian side suggested using these funds not so much for these purposes as for building a Ninotsminda-Tbilisi highway and Kars-Akhalkalaki railroad, which are of vital strategic and geo-economic significance for the country's leadership.

On the whole, it can be stated that the U.S.'s interest in Javakhk is aroused mainly by geo-economic considerations. In so doing, a less significant, but more declarative element of Washington's involvement in the problem might be the White House's striving to accelerate the withdrawal of the Russian bases and its lack of desire to allow a security vacuum to appear in the south of Georgia. What is more, the American administration also has to keep in mind the viewpoint of the extremely influential Armenian community in the U.S. As we believe, it is precisely this factor that may help Erevan and Tbilisi to come to terms on the Javakhk problem. According to repeated statements by the Armenian side, since Georgia is unable for objective reasons to implement socioeconomic projects in Javakhk, Erevan and the Armenian diaspora are willing to take responsibility for carrying out several top priority measures to alleviate the tension in the region (with parallel liberalization of official Tbilisi's political approaches). The ability of this diaspora to resolve these problems is shown by the multi-million funds it is allotting to the development of the Nagorny Karabakh economy.

But large-scale investment programs, including with the participation of international sponsors, can only be implemented if the safety of the Armenian residents of Javakhetia is ensured. What is more, the inflow of foreign investments will help to resolve an important political problem—providing the Javakhk population with at least elementary powers in local self-government, which would also meet Georgia's obligations to the international community.