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## Georgia attempts to ease Armenian discontent.

By Florence Mardirossian for Eurasianet  
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Language discrimination, the lack of cultural privileges and scarce economic opportunities are plaguing the Armenian minority in Georgia. Georgian government officials and civic activists are taking the initiative to address the growing discontent among the Armenian minority and prevent the potential escalation of the growing tensions.

Officials, academics and nongovernmental organization representatives are pondering ways to defuse a potential crisis in the Georgian region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, where discontent is brewing among the area's Armenian community.

Some local leaders and civic activists warn of socio-political trouble if no action is taken to address the demands of the local Armenian community for expanded language rights and other cultural privileges. Discontent has already reached the point where one local Armenian cultural organization - United Javakhk - reportedly adopted a statement in early July calling on the Georgian government to grant the region autonomy status.

The language issue is intertwined with other issues, namely a lack of economic opportunity in the region. Most Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti don't speak Georgian, and they say the Georgian government should do more to protect their cultural traditions. Georgian officials, meanwhile, want Armenians living in the region to learn Georgian. Some quietly question the sincerity of the Armenian community's desire to integrate.

The compulsory use of the Georgian language for education is the chief source of discontent among Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti. Ethnic Armenian demands also include an acknowledgment of the Armenian genocide of 1915, a removal of the ban on teaching Armenian history, the adoption of new laws covering minority rights and self-governance.

A recent roundtable discussion, held in the regional center of Akhalkalaki, sought to bring all sides together to discuss problems and explore possible solutions. Participants - including local politicians, experts and NGO representatives from Georgia and Armenia, generally agreed that giving the region autonomous status was not a viable option, especially given Tbilisi's experience with separatism in Abkhazia, Ajara and South Ossetia over the past 15 years.

At the same time, attendees suggested that Tbilisi couldn't ignore the complaints of local Armenians. One of the event's chief organizers, Sevak Artsruni, head of the Armenian union of NGOs for repatriation and settlement cautioned that cultural issues, left unaddressed, could develop into a major headache for Tbilisi.

Samtskhe-Javakheti sits along a trade corridor that is growing in geopolitical importance. In particular, the recently inaugurated Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline runs through the territory. As a result, international development funds have been earmarked for local infrastructure improvement, including over US\$100 million in US assistance made available under the Millennium Challenge program

for local road construction and renovation. The region also figures prominently in plans to build a rail link connecting the Turkish city of Kars and the Azerbaijani capital of Baku.

"Socio-economic projects could bring stability if the cultural and linguistic rights of the Armenian minority were respected," he said. "But if ethnic Armenians do not take part in these projects, the cultural problem could turn political and Javakheti could definitely [encounter] a crisis."

Meanwhile, another conference participant, Georgian political scientist Ghia Nodia, said tension in Samtskhe-Javakheti is a reflection of poor local governance in Georgia. "Many people are calling for autonomy because local democracy [...] is weak or does not work," Nodia said.

Mutual suspicion marks relations between ethnic Armenians and Tbilisi. Last March, tension boiled over and resulted in a prolonged period of rioting, ignited by the killing of an ethnic Armenian in a brawl.

The political atmosphere became charged following the Rose Revolution in November 2003 and has been exacerbated by the decision to withdraw Russian troops from a permanent base in Akhalkalaki by the end of 2007.

The base was a major source of employment for the Armenian community, providing well-paying jobs for roughly 10,000 civilians. The Georgian government has promised to implement programs that diminish the economic impact of the Russians' departure, but Armenians remain skeptical. Many view President Mikheil Saakashvili's administration as focused mainly on nationalist concerns, namely reestablishing Tbilisi's authority over Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Speaking at the Akhalkalaki roundtable in early June, Meka Elbakidze, an analyst with the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Development and Democracy (CIPDD), provided a road map for a Georgian conflict-prevention strategy. Tbilisi should focus on the linguistic issue and ethnic Armenian's disenfranchisement from local and national politics, he suggested.

Georgian officials seem interested in exploring solutions to Javakheti dilemmas. During a mid-July meeting, Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Noghaideli discussed with his Armenian counterpart Andranik Markarian the feasibility of opening an Armenian-Georgian university in Tbilisi, according to news accounts of the meeting. In addition, Markarian said the Armenian government was prepared to assist in efforts to improve Samtskhe-Javakheti's infrastructure.

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